

The man's son is in the city, and the boy and the man left the Sevenoaks poor-house together. If the man is alive, he is likely to be near him. If he is dead, he probably died near him. Find out, too, if you can, when his boy came to live at Balfour's over the way, and where he came from. You may stumble upon what I want very soon, or it may take you all winter. If you should fail then, I shall want you to take the road from here to Sevenoaks, and even to Number Nine, looking into all the almshouses on the way. The great point is to find out whether he is alive or dead, and to know, if he is dead, where, and exactly when, he died. In the meantime, come to me every week with a written report of what you have done, and get your pay. Come always after dark, so that none of Balfour's people can see you. Begin the business and carry it on in your own way. You are old and sharp enough not to need any aid from me, and now be off."

The man took a roll of bills that Mr. Belcher handed him, and walked out of the door without a word. As he rose to the sidewalk, Mr. Balfour came out of the door opposite to him, with the evident intention of taking a passing stage. He nodded to Yates, whom he had not only known in other days, but had many times befriended, and the latter sneaked off down the street, while he, standing for a moment as if puzzled, turned, and with his latch-key re-entered his house. Yates saw the movement, and knew exactly what it meant. He only hoped that Mr. Belcher had not seen it, as, indeed, he had not, having been at the moment on his way upstairs.

Yates knew that, with his good clothes on, the keen lawyer would give but one interpretation to the change, and that any hope or direct plan he might have with regard to ascertaining when the boy was received into the family, and where he came from, was nugatory. He would not tell Mr. Belcher this.

Mr. Balfour called his wife to the window, pointed out the retreating form of Yates, gave utterance to his suspicions, and placed her upon her guard. Then he went to his office, as well satisfied that there was a mischievous scheme on foot as if he had overheard the conversation between Mr. Belcher and the man who had consented to be his tool.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHICH TELLS OF A GREAT PUBLIC MEETING IN SEVENOAKS, THE BURNING IN EFFIGY OF MR. BELCHER, AND THAT GENTLEMAN'S INTERVIEW WITH A REPORTER.

MR. BALFOUR, in his yearly journeys through Sevenoaks, had made several acquaintances among the citizens, and had impressed them as a man of ability and integrity; and, as he was the only New York lawyer of their acquaintance, they very naturally turned to him for information and advice. Without consulting each other, or informing each other of what they had done, at least half a dozen wrote to him the moment Mr. Belcher was out of the village, seeking information concerning the Continental Petroleum Company. They told him frankly about the enormous investments that they and their neighbors had made, and of their fears concerning the results. With a friendly feeling toward the people, he undertook, as far as possible, to get at the bottom of the matter, and sent a man to look up the property, and to find the men who nominally composed the company.

After a month had passed away and no dividend was announced, the people began to talk more freely among

themselves. They had hoped against hope, and fought their suspicions until they were tired, and then they sought in sympathy to assuage the pangs of their losses and disappointments.

It was not until the end of two months after Mr. Belcher's departure that a letter was received at Sevenoaks from Mr. Balfour, giving a history of the company, which confirmed their worst fears. This history is already in the possession of the reader, but to that which has been detailed was added the information that, practically, the operations of the company had been discontinued, and the men who formed it were scattered. Nothing had ever been earned, and the dividends which had been disbursed were taken out of the pockets of the principals, from moneys which they had received for stock. Mr. Belcher had absorbed half that had been received, at no cost to himself whatever, and had added the grand total to his already bulky fortune. It was undoubtedly a gross swindle, and was, from the first, intended to be such; but it was under the forms of law, and it was doubtful whether a penny could ever be recovered.

Then, of course, the citizens held a public meeting—the great panacea for all the ills of village life in America. Nothing but a set of more or less impassioned speeches and a string of resolutions could express the indignation of Sevenoaks. A notice was posted for several days, inviting all the resident stockholders in the Continental to meet in council, to see what was to be done for the security of their interests.

The little town-hall was full, and, scattered among the boisterous throng of men, were the pitiful faces and figures of poor women who had committed their little all to the grasp of the great scoundrel who had so recently despoiled and deserted them.

The Rev. Mr. Snow was there, as became the pastor

of a flock in which the wolf had made its ravages, and the meeting was opened with prayer, according to the usual custom. Considering the mood and temper of the people, a prayer for the spirit of forgiveness and fortitude would not have been out of place, but it is to be feared that it was wholly a matter of form. It is noticeable that at political conventions, on the eve of conflicts in which personal ambition and party chicanery play prominent parts; on the inauguration of great business enterprises in which local interests meet in the determined strifes of selfishness, and at a thousand gatherings whose objects leave God forgotten and right and justice out of consideration, the blessing of the Almighty is invoked, while men who are about to rend each other's reputations, and strive, without conscience, for personal and party masteries, bow reverent heads and mumble impatient "Amen."

But the people of Sevenoaks wanted their money back, and that, certainly, was worth praying for. They wanted, also, to find some way to wreak their indignation upon Robert Belcher; and the very men who bowed in prayer after reaching the hall walked under an effigy of that person on their way thither, hung by the neck and dangling from a tree, and had rare laughter and gratification in the repulsive vision. They were angry, they were indignant, they were exasperated, and the more so because they were more than half convinced of their impotence, while wholly conscious that they had been decoyed to their destruction, befooled and overreached by one who knew how to appeal to a greed which his own ill-won successes and prosperities had engendered in them.

After the prayer, the discussion began. Men rose, trying their best to achieve self-control, and to speak judiciously and judicially, but they were hurled, one after another, into the vortex of indignation, and cheer

upon cheer shook the hall as they gave vent to the real feeling that was uppermost in their hearts.

After the feeling of the meeting had somewhat expanded itself, Mr. Snow rose to speak. In the absence of the great shadow under which he had walked during all his pastorate, and under the blighting influence of which his manhood had shrivelled, he was once more independent. The sorrows and misfortunes of his people had greatly moved him. A sense of his long humiliation shamed him. He was poor, but he was once more his own; and he owed a duty to the mad multitude around him which he was bound to discharge. "My friends," said he, "I am with you, for better or for worse. You kindly permit me to share in your prosperity, and now, in the day of your trial and adversity, I will stand by you. There has gone out from among us an incarnate evil influence, a fact which calls for our profound gratitude. I confess with shame that I have not only felt it, but have shaped myself, though unconsciously, to it. It has vitiated our charities, corrupted our morals, and invaded even the house of God. We have worshipped the golden calf. We have bowed down to Moloch. We have consented to live under a will that was base and cruel, in all its motives and ends. We have been so dazzled by a great worldly success, that we have ceased to inquire into its sources. We have done daily obedience to one who neither feared God nor regarded man. We have become so pervaded with his spirit, so demoralized by his foul example, that when he held out even a false opportunity to realize something of his success, we made no inquisition of facts or processes, and were willing to share with him in gains that his whole history would have taught us were more likely to be unfairly than fairly won. I mourn for your losses, for you can poorly afford to suffer them; but to have that man forever removed from us; to be released from his debasing

influence; to be untrammelled in our action and in the development of our resources; to be free men and free women, and to become content with our lot and with such gains as we may win in a legitimate way, is worth all that it has cost us. We needed a severe lesson, and we have had it. It falls heavily upon some who are innocent. Let us, in kindness to these, find a balm for our own trials. And, now, let us not degrade ourselves by hot words and impotent resentments. They can do no good. Let us be men—Christian men, with detestation of the rascality from which we suffer, but with pity for the guilty man, who, sooner or later, will certainly meet the punishment he so richly deserves. 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay,' saith the Lord."

The people of Sevenoaks had never before heard Mr. Snow make such a speech as this. It was a manly confession, and a manly admonition. His attenuated form was straight and almost majestic, his pale face was flushed, his tones were deep and strong, and they saw that one man, at least, breathed more freely, now that the evil genius of the place was gone. It was a healthful speech. It was an appeal to their own conscious history, and to such remains of manhood as they possessed, and they were strengthened by it.

A series of the most objurgatory resolutions had been prepared for the occasion, yet the writer saw that it would be better to keep them in his pocket. The meeting was at a stand, when little Dr. Radcliffe, who was sore to his heart's core with his petty loss, jumped up and declared that he had a series of resolutions to offer. There was a world of unconscious humor in his freak—unconscious, because his resolutions were intended to express his spite, not only against Mr. Belcher, but against the villagers, including Mr. Snow. He began by reading in his piping voice the first resolution passed at the previous meeting which so pleasantly dismissed the

proprietor to the commercial metropolis of the country. The reading of this resolution was so sweet a sarcasm on the proceedings of that occasion, that it was received with peals of laughter and deafening cheers, and as he went bitterly on, from resolution to resolution, raising his voice to overtop the jargon, the scene became too ludicrous for description. The resolutions, which never had any sincerity in them, were such a confirmation of all that Mr. Snow had said, and such a comment on their own duplicity and moral debasement, that there was nothing left for them but to break up and go home.

The laugh did them good, and complemented the corrective which had been administered to them by the minister. Some of them still retained their anger, as a matter of course, and when they emerged upon the street and found Mr. Belcher's effigy standing upon the ground, surrounded by fagots ready to be lighted, they yelled: "Light him up, boys!" and stood to witness the sham *auto-da-fé* with a crowd of village urchins dancing around it.

Of course, Mr. Belcher had calculated upon indignation and anger, and rejoiced in their impotence. He knew that those who had lost so much would not care to risk more in a suit at law, and that his property at Sevenoaks was so identified with the life of the town—that so many were dependent upon its preservation for their daily bread—that they would not be foolhardy enough to burn it.

Forty-eight hours after the public meeting, Mr. Belcher, sitting comfortably in his city home, received from the postman a large handful of letters. He looked them over, and as they were all blazoned with the Sevenoaks post-mark, he selected that which bore the handwriting of his agent, and read it. The agent had not dared to attend the meeting, but he had had his spies there, who reported to him fully the authorship and drift of all the

speeches in the hall, and the unseemly proceedings of the street. Mr. Belcher did not laugh, for his vanity was wounded. The thought that a town in which he had ruled so long had dared to burn his effigy in the open street was a humiliation; particularly so, as he did not see how he could revenge himself upon the perpetrators of it without compromising his own interests. He blurted out his favorite expletive, lighted a new cigar, walked his room, and chafed like a caged tiger.

He was not in haste to break the other seals, but at last he sat down to the remainder of his task, and read a series of pitiful personal appeals that would have melted any heart but his own. They were from needy men and women whom he had despoiled. They were a detail of suffering and disappointment, and in some cases they were abject prayers for restitution. He read them all, to the last letter and the last word, and then quietly tore them into strips, and threw them into the fire.

His agent had informed him of the sources of the public information concerning the Continental Company, and he recognized James Balfour as an enemy. He had a premonition that the man was destined to stand in his way, and that he was located just where he could overlook his operations and his life. He would not have murdered him, but he would have been glad to hear that he was dead. He wondered whether he was incorruptible, and whether he, Robert Belcher, could afford to buy him—whether it would not pay to make his acquaintance—whether, indeed, the man were not endeavoring to force him to do so. Every bad motive which could exercise a man, he understood; but he was puzzled in endeavoring to make out what form of selfishness had moved Mr. Balfour to take such an interest in the people of Sevenoaks.

At last he sat down at his table and wrote a letter to his agent, simply ordering him to establish a more

thorough watch over his property, and directing him to visit all the newspaper offices of the region, and keep the reports of the meeting and its attendant personal indignities from publication.

Then, with an amused smile upon his broad face, he wrote the following letter :

“TO THE REVEREND SOLOMON SNOW—

“*Dear Sir* : I owe an apology to the people of Sevenoaks for never adequately acknowledging the handsome manner in which they endeavored to assuage the pangs of parting on the occasion of my removal. The resolutions passed at their public meeting are cherished among my choicest treasures, and the cheers of the people as I rode through their ranks on the morning of my departure, still ring in my ears more delightfully than any music I ever heard. Thank them, I pray you, for me, for their overwhelming friendliness. I now have a request to make of them, and I make it the more boldly because, during the past ten years, I have never been approached by any of them in vain when they have sought my benefactions. The Continental Petroleum Company is a failure, and all the stock I hold in it is valueless. Finding that my expenses in the city are very much greater than in the country, it has occurred to me that perhaps my friends there would be willing to make up a purse for my benefit. I assure you that it would be gratefully received ; and I apply to you because, from long experience, I know that you are accomplished in the art of begging. Your graceful manner in accepting gifts from me has given me all the hints I shall need in that respect, so that the transaction will not be accompanied by any clumsy details. My butcher's bill will be due in a few days, and despatch is desirable.

“With the most cordial compliments to Mrs. Snow, whom I profoundly esteem, and to your accomplished daughters, who have so long been spared to the protection of the paternal roof,

“I am your affectionate parishioner,

“ROBERT BELCHER.”

Mr. Belcher had done what he considered a very neat and brilliant thing. He sealed and directed the letter, rang his bell, and ordered it posted. Then he sat back

in his easy chair, and chuckled over it. Then he rose and paraded himself before his mirror.

“When you get ahead of Robert Belcher, drop us a line. Let it be brief and to the point. Any information thankfully received. Are you, sir, to be bothered by this pettifogger? Are you to sit tamely down and be undermined? Is that your custom? Then, sir, you are a base coward. Who said coward? Did you, sir? Let this right hand, which I now raise in air, and clench in awful menace, warn you not to repeat the damning accusation. Sevenoaks howls, and it is well. Let every man who stands in my path take warning. I button my coat ; I raise my arms ; I straighten my form, and they flee away—flee like the mists of the morning, and over yonder mountain-top, fade in the far blue sky. And now, my dear sir, don't make an ass of yourself, but sit down. Thank you, sir. I make you my obeisance. I retire.”

Mr. Belcher's addresses to himself were growing less frequent among the excitements of new society. He had enough to occupy his mind without them, and found sufficient competition in the matter of dress to modify in some degree his vanity of person ; but the present occasion was a stimulating one, and one whose excitements he could not share with another.

His missive went to its destination, and performed a thoroughly healthful work, because it destroyed all hope of any relief from his hands, and betrayed the cruel contempt with which he regarded his old townsmen and friends.

He slept as soundly that night as if he had been an innocent infant ; but on the following morning, sipping leisurely and luxuriously at his coffee, and glancing over the pages of his favorite newspaper, he discovered a letter with startling headings, which displayed his own name and bore the date of Sevenoaks. The “R” at its foot revealed Dr. Radcliffe as the writer, and the

peppery doctor had not miscalculated in deciding that *The New York Tattler* would be the paper most affected by Mr. Belcher—a paper with more enterprise than brains, more brains than candor, and with no conscience at all; a paper which manufactured hoaxes and vended them for news, bought and sold scandals by the sheet as if they were country ginger-bread, and damaged reputations one day for the privilege and profit of mending them the next.

He read anew, and with marvellous amplification, the story with which the letter of his agent had already made him familiar. This time he had received a genuine wound, with poison upon the barb of the arrow that had pierced him. He crushed the paper in his hand and ascended to his room. All Wall Street would see it, comment upon it, and laugh over it. Balfour would read it and smile. New York and all the country would gossip about it. Mrs. Dillingham would peruse it. Would it change her attitude toward him? This was a serious matter, and it touched him to the quick.

The good angel who had favored him all his life, and brought him safe and sound out of every dirty difficulty of his career, was already on his way with assistance, although he did not know it. Sometimes this angel had assumed the form of a lie, sometimes that of a charity, sometimes that of a palliating or deceptive circumstance; but it had always appeared at the right moment; and this time it came in the form of an interviewing reporter. His bell rang, and a servant appeared with the card of "Mr. Alphonse Tibbets, of *The New York Tattler*."

A moment before, he was cursing *The Tattler* for publishing the record of his shame, but he knew instinctively that the way out of his scrape had been opened to him.

"Show him up," said the proprietor at once. He had

hardly time to look into his mirror, and make sure that his hair and his toilet were all right, before a dapper little fellow, with a professional manner, and a portfolio under his arm, was ushered into the room. The air of easy good nature and good fellowship was one which Mr. Belcher could assume at will, and this was the air that he had determined upon as a matter of policy in dealing with a representative of *The Tattler* office. He expected to meet a man with a guilty look, and a deprecating, fawning smile. He was, therefore, very much surprised to find in Mr. Tibbets a young gentleman without the slightest embarrassment in his bearing, or the remotest consciousness that he was in the presence of a man who might possibly have cause of serious complaint against *The Tattler*. In brief, Mr. Tibbets seemed to be a man who was in the habit of dealing with rascals, and liked them. Would Mr. Tibbets have a cup of coffee sent up to him? Mr. Tibbets had breakfasted, and, therefore, declined the courtesy. Would Mr. Tibbets have a cigar? Mr. Tibbets would, and, on the assurance that they were nicer than he would be apt to find elsewhere, Mr. Tibbets consented to put a handful of cigars into his pocket. Mr. Tibbets then drew up to the table, whittled his pencil, straightened out his paper, and proceeded to business, looking much, as he faced the proprietor, like a Sunday-school teacher on a rainy day, with one pupil before him who had braved the storm because he had his lesson at his tongue's end.

As the substance of the questions and answers appeared in the next morning's *Tattler*, hereafter to be quoted, it is not necessary to recite them here. At the close of the interview, which was very friendly and familiar, Mr. Belcher rose, and with the remark: "You fellows must have a pretty rough time of it," handed the reporter a twenty-dollar bank-note, which that

gentleman pocketed without a scruple, and without any remarkable effusiveness of gratitude. Then Mr. Belcher wanted him to see the house, and so walked over it with him. Mr. Tibbets was delighted. Mr. Tibbets congratulated him. Mr. Tibbets went so far as to say that he did not believe there was another such mansion in New York. Mr. Tibbets did not remark that he had been kicked out of several of them, only less magnificent, because circumstances did not call for the statement. Then Mr. Tibbets went away, and walked off hurriedly down the street to write out his report.

The next morning Mr. Belcher was up early in order to get his *Tattler* as soon as it was dropped at his door. He soon found, on opening the reeking sheet, the column which held the precious document of Mr. Tibbets, and read:

- "The Riot at Sevenoaks!!!
- "An interesting Interview with Col. Belcher!
- "The original account grossly Exaggerated!
- "The whole matter an outburst of Personal Envy!
- "The Palgrave Mansion in a fume!
- "Tar, feathers and fagots!
- "A Tempest in a Teapot!
- "Petroleum in a blaze, and a thousand fingers burnt!!!
- "Stand out from under!!!"

The headings came near taking Mr. Belcher's breath away. He gasped, shuddered, and wondered what was coming. Then he went on and read the report of the interview:

"A *Tattler* reporter visited yesterday the great proprietor of Sevenoaks, Colonel Robert Belcher, at his splendid mansion on Fifth Avenue. That gentleman had evidently just swallowed his breakfast, and was comforting himself over the report he had read in the *Tattler* of that morning, by inhaling the fragrance of one of his choice Havanas. He is evidently a devotee of the seductive weed, and knows a good article when he sees it

A copy of the *Tattler* lay on the table, which bore unmistakable evidences of having been spitefully crushed in the hand. The iron had evidently entered the Colonel's righteous soul, and the reporter, having first declined the cup of coffee hospitably tendered to him and accepted (as he always does when he gets a chance) a cigar, proceeded at once to business.

"*Reporter*: Col. Belcher, have you seen the report in this morning's *Tattler* of the riot at Sevenoaks, which nominally had your dealings with the people for its occasion?"

"*Answer*: I have, and a pretty mess was made of it.

"*Reporter*: Do you declare the report to be incorrect?"

"*Answer*: I know nothing about the correctness or the incorrectness of the report, for I was not there.

"*Reporter*: Were the accusations made against yourself correct, presuming that they were fairly and truthfully reported?"

"*Answer*: They were so far from being correct that nothing could be more untruthful or more malicious.

"*Reporter*: Have you any objection to telling me the true state of the case in detail.

"*Answer*: None at all. Indeed, I have been so foully misrepresented, that I am glad of an opportunity to place myself right before a people with whom I have taken up my residence. In the first place, I made Sevenoaks. I have fed the people of Sevenoaks for more than ten years. I have carried the burden of their charities; kept their dirty ministers from starving; furnished employment for their women and children, and run the town. I had no society there, and of course, got tired of my humdrum life. I had worked hard, been successful, and felt that I owed it to myself and my family to go somewhere and enjoy the privileges, social and educational, which I had the means to command. I came to New York without consulting anybody, and bought this house. The people protested, but ended by holding a public meeting, and passing a series of resolutions complimentary to me, of which I very naturally felt proud; and when I came away, they assembled at the roadside and gave me the friendliest cheers.

"*Reporter*: How about the petroleum?"

"*Answer*: Well, that is an unaccountable thing. I went into the Continental Company, and nothing would do for the people but to go in with me. I warned them—every man of them—but they would go in; so I acted as their agent in procuring stock for them. There was not a share of stock sold on any persuasion of

mine. They were mad, they were wild, for oil. You wouldn't have supposed there was half so much money in the town as they dug out of their old stockings to invest in oil. I was surprised, I assure you: Well, the Continental went up, and they had to be angry with somebody; and although I held more stock than any of them, they took a fancy that I had defrauded them, and so they came together to wreak their impotent spite on me. That's the sum and substance of the whole matter.

"Reporter: And that is all you have to say?"

"Answer: Well, it covers the ground. Whether I shall proceed in law against these scoundrels for maligning me, I have not determined. I shall probably do nothing about it. The men are poor, and even if they were rich, what good would it do me to get their money? I've got money enough, and money with me can never offset a damage to character. When they get cool and learn the facts, if they ever do learn them, they will be sorry. They are not a bad people at heart, though I am ashamed, as their old fellow-townsmen, to say that they have acted like children in this matter. There's a half-crazy, half-silly old doctor there by the name of Radcliffe, and an old parson by the name of Snow, whom I have helped to feed for years, who lead them into difficulty. But they're not a bad people, now, and I am sorry for their sake that this thing has got into the papers. It'll hurt the town. They have been badly led, inflamed over false information, and they have disgraced themselves.

"This closed the interview, and then Col. Belcher politely showed the *Tattler* reporter over his palatial abode. 'Taken for all in all,' he does not expect 'to look upon its like again.'

"None see it but to love it,
None name it but to praise."

"It was 'linked sweetness long drawn out,' and must have cost the gallant Colonel a pile of stamps. Declining an invitation to visit the stables—for our new millionaire is a lover of horse-flesh, as well as the narcotic weed—and leaving that gentleman to 'witch the world with wondrous horsemanship,' the *Tattler* reporter withdrew, 'pierced through with Envy's venomous darts,' and satisfied that his courtly entertainer had been 'more sinned against than sinning.'"

Col. Belcher read the report with genuine pleasure, and then, turning over the leaf, read upon the editorial page the following:

"COL. BELCHER ALL RIGHT.—We are satisfied that the letter from Sevenoaks, published in yesterday's *Tattler*, in regard to our highly respected fellow-citizen, Colonel Robert Belcher, was a gross libel upon that gentleman, and intended, by the malicious writer, to injure an honorable and innocent man. It is only another instance of the ingratitude of rural communities toward their benefactors. We congratulate the redoubtable Colonel on his removal from so pestilent a neighborhood to a city where his sterling qualities will find 'ample scope and verge enough,' and where those who suffer 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' will not lay them to the charge of one who can, with truthfulness, declare 'Thou canst not say I did it.'"

When Mr. Belcher concluded, he muttered to himself, "Twenty dollars!—cheap enough." He had remained at home the day before; now, he could go upon 'Change with a face cleared of all suspicion. A cloud of truth had overshadowed him, but it had been dissipated by the genial sunlight of falsehood. His self-complacency was fully restored when he received a note, in the daintiest text on the daintiest paper, congratulating him on the triumphant establishment of his innocence before the New York public, and bearing as its signature a name so precious to him that he took it to his own room before destroying it and kissed it.

CHAPTER XV.

WHICH TELLS ABOUT MRS. DILLINGHAM'S CHRISTMAS
AND THE NEW YEAR'S RECEPTION AT THE PAL-
GRAVE MANSION.

A BRILLIANT Christmas morning shone in at Mrs. Dillingham's window, where she sat quietly sunning the better side of her nature. Her parlor was a little paradise, and all things around her were in tasteful keeping with her beautiful self. The Christmas chimes were del-