

"I fancy I have discovered all the secrets I shall ever discover in him. I like the boy, and shall cultivate his acquaintance; but, really, it will not pay you to rely upon me for anything. He is under Mr. Balfour's directions, and very loyal."

Mr. Belcher remembered his own interview with the lad, and recognized the truth of the statement. Then he bade her good-by, rejoined his wife, and rode home.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN WHICH MR. BELCHER BECOMES PRESIDENT OF THE CROOKED VALLEY RAILROAD, WITH LARGE "TERMINAL FACILITIES," AND MAKES AN ADVENTURE INTO A LONG-MEDITATED CRIME.

MR. BELCHER had never made money so rapidly as during the summer following his removal to New York. The tides of wealth rolled in faster than he could compute them. Twenty regiments in the field had been armed with the Belcher rifle, and the reports of its execution and its popularity among officers and men, gave promise of future golden harvests to the proprietor. Ten thousand of them had been ordered by the Prussian Government. His agents in France, Russia, Austria, and Italy, all reported encouragingly concerning their attempts to introduce the new arm into the military service of those countries. The civil war had advanced the price of, and the demand for, the products of his mills at Sevenoaks. The people of that village had never before received so good wages, or been so fully employed. It seemed as if there were work for every man, woman, and child, who had hands willing to work. Mr. Belcher bought stocks upon a rising market

and unloaded again and again, sweeping into his capacious coffers his crops of profits. Bonds that early in the war could be bought for a song, rose steadily up to par. Stocks that had been kicked about the market for years, took on value from day to day, and asserted themselves as fair investments. From these, again and again, he harvested the percentage of advance, until his greed was gorged.

That he enjoyed his winnings, is true; but the great trouble with him was that, beyond a certain point, he could show nothing for them. He lived in a palace, surrounded by every appointment of luxury that his wealth could buy. His stables held the choicest horse-flesh that could be picked out of the whole country, from Maine to Kentucky. His diamond shirt-studs were worth thousands. His clothes were of the most expensive fabrics, made at the top of the style. His wife and children had money lavished upon them without stint. In the direction of show, he could do no more. It was his glory to drive in the Park alone, with his servants in livery and his four horses, fancying that he was the observed of all observers, and the envied of all men.

Having money still to spend, it must find a market in other directions. He gave lavish entertainments at his club, at which wine flowed like water, and at which young and idle men were gathered in and debauched, night after night. He was surrounded by a group of flatterers who laughed at his jokes, repeated them to the public, humored his caprices, and lived upon his hospitalities. The plain "Colonel Belcher" of his first few months in New York, grew into "the General," so that Wall Street knew him, at last, by that title, without the speaking of his name. All made way for "the General" whenever he appeared. "The General" was "bulling" this stock, and "bearing" that. All this was honey to his palate, and he was enabled to forge.

something of his desire for show in his love of glory. Power was sweet, as well as display.

Of course, "the General" had forsaken, somewhat, his orderly habits of life—those which kept him sound and strong in his old country home. He spent few evenings with his family. There was so genuine a passion in his heart for Mrs. Dillingham, that he went into few excesses which compromised a fair degree of truthfulness to her; but he was in the theatres, in the resorts of fast men, among the clubs, and always late in his bed. Phipps had a hard time in looking after and waiting upon him, but had a kind of sympathetic enjoyment in it all, because he knew there was more or less of wickedness connected with it.

Mr. Belcher's nights began to tell upon his days. It became hard for him to rise at his old hours; so, after a while, he received the calls of his brokers in bed. From nine to ten, Mr. Belcher, in his embroidered dressing-gown, with his breakfast at his side, gave his orders for the operations of the day. The bedroom became the General's head-quarters, and there his staff gathered around him. Half a dozen cabs and carriages at his door in the morning became a daily recurring vision to residents and habitual passengers.

Mr. Talbot, not a regular visitor at this hour, sometimes mingled with the brokers, though he usually came late for the purpose of a private interview. He had managed to retain the General's favor, and to be of such use to him that that gentleman, in his remarkable prosperity, had given up the idea of reducing his factor's profits.

One morning, after the brokers and the General's lawyer were gone, Talbot entered, and found his principal still in bed.

"Toll, it's a big thing," said Mr. Belcher.

"I believe you."

"Toll, what did I tell you? I've always worked to a

programme, and exactly this was my programme when I came here. How's your wife?"

"Quite well."

"Why don't we see more of her?"

"Well, Mrs. Talbot is a quiet woman, and knows her place. She isn't quite at home in such splendors as yours, you know, and she naturally recognizes my relations to you."

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense, Toll! She mustn't feel that way. I like her. She is a devilish handsome woman."

"I shall tell her that you say so," said the obsequious Mr. Talbot.

"Toll, my boy, I've got an idea."

"Cherish it, General; you may never have another."

"Good for you. I owe you one."

"Not at all, General. I'm only paying off old debts."

"Toll, how are you doing now? Getting a living?"

"Thanks to you, General, I am thriving in a modest way. I don't aspire to any such profits as you seem to win so easily, so I have no fault to find."

"The General has been a godsend to you, hasn't he, eh? Happy day when you made his acquaintance, eh? Well, go ahead; it's all right. Pile it up while you can."

"But you haven't told me about your idea," Mr. Talbot suggested.

"Well, Toll, I'm pining for a railroad. I'm crying nights for a railroad. A fellow must have amusements you know. Health must be taken care of, eh? All the fellows have railroads. It's well enough to keep horses and go to the theatre. A steamship line isn't bad, but the trouble is, a man can't be captain of his own vessels. No, Toll; I need a railroad. I'm yearning for engines, and double tracks, and running over my own line."

"You might buy up a European kingdom or two, at a pinch, General."

"Yes; but, Toll, you don't know what terminal facilities I've got for a railroad."

"Your pocket will answer for one end," said Talbot, laughing.

"Right, the first time," responded the General, "and glory will answer for the other. Toll, do you know what I see at the other end?"

"No."

"I see a man of about the size of Robert Belcher in the chair of an alderman. I see him seated on a horse, riding down Broadway at the head of a regiment. I see him Mayor of the city of New York. I see him Governor of the State. I see him President of the United States. I see no reason why he cannot hold any one, or all these offices. All doors yield to a golden key. Toll, I haven't got to go as far as I have come, to reach the top. Do you know it? Big thing! Yes, Toll, I must have a railroad."

"Have you selected the toy you propose to purchase?" inquired Talbot.

"Well, I've looked about some; but the trouble is, that all the best of 'em are in hands that can hold them. I must buy a poor one and build it up, or make it build me up."

"That's a pity."

"I don't know about that. The big ones are hard to handle, and I'm not quite big enough for them yet. What do you say to the Crooked Valley?"

"Poor road, and wants connections."

"Those are exactly the points. I can buy it for a song, issue bonds, and build the connections—issue plenty of bonds, and build plenty of connections. Terminal facilities large—do you understand? Eh, Toll?"

Mr. Talbot laughed.

"I don't think you need any suggestions from me," he said.

"No; the General can manage this thing without help. He only wanted to open your eyes a little, and get you ready for your day's work. You fellows who fiddle around with a few goods need waking up occasionally. Now, Toll, go off and let the General get up. I must have a railroad before night, or I shall not be able to sleep a wink. By-by!"

Talbot turned to leave the room, when Mr. Belcher arrested him with the question:

"Toll, would you like an office in the Crooked Valley corporation?"

Talbot knew that the corporation would have a disgraceful history, and a disastrous end—that it would be used by the General for the purposes of stealing, and that the head of it would not be content to share the plunder with others. He had no wish to be his principal's cat's-paw, or to be identified with an enterprise in which, deprived of both will and voice, he should get neither profit nor credit. So he said:

"No, I thank you; I have all I can do to take care of your goods, and I am not ambitious."

"There'll be nothing for you to do, you know. I shall run the whole thing."

"I can serve you better, General, where I am."

"Well, by-by; I won't urge you."

After Talbot left, Mr. Belcher rose and carefully dressed himself. Phipps was already at the door with the carriage, and, half an hour afterward, the great proprietor, full of his vain and knavish projects, took his seat in it, and was whirled off down to Wall Street. His brokers had already been charged with his plans, and, before he reached the ground, every office where the Crooked Valley stock was held had been visited, and every considerable deposit of it ascertained, so that, before night, by one grand swoop, the General had absorbed a controlling interest in the corporation.

A few days afterward, the annual meeting was held, Mr. Belcher was elected President, and every other office was filled by his creatures and tools. His plans for the future of the road gradually became known, and the stock began to assume a better position on the list. Weak and inefficient corporations were already in existence for completing the various connections of the road, and of these he immediately, and for moderate sums, bought the franchises. Within two months, bonds were issued for building the roads, and the roads themselves were put under contract. The "terminal facilities" of one end of every contract were faithfully attended to by Mr. Belcher. His pockets were still capacious and absorbent. He parted with so much of his appreciated stock as he could spare without impairing his control, and so, at the end of a few months, found himself in the possession of still another harvest. Not only this, but he found his power increased. Men watched him, and followed him into other speculations. They hung around him, anxious to get indications of his next movement. They flattered him; they fawned upon him; and to those whom he could in any way use for his own purposes, he breathed little secrets of the market from which they won their rewards. People talked about what "the General" was doing, and proposed to do, as if he were a well-recognized factor in the financial situation.

Whenever he ran over his line, which he often did for information and amusement, and for the pleasure of exercising his power, he went in a special car, at break-neck speed, by telegraph, always accompanied by a body of friends and toadies, whom he feasted on the way. Everybody wanted to see him. He was as much a lion as if he had been an emperor or a murderer. To emerge upon a platform at a way-station, where there were hundreds of country people who had flocked in to witness

the exhibition, was his great delight. He spoke to them familiarly and good-naturedly; transacted his business with a rush; threw the whole village into tumult; waved his hand; and vanished in a cloud of dust. Such enterprise, such confidence, such strength, such interest in the local prosperities of the line, found their natural result in the absorption of the new bonds. They were purchased by individuals and municipal corporations. Freight was diverted from its legitimate channels, and drawn over the road at a loss; but it looked like business. Passes were scattered in every direction, and the passenger traffic seemed to double at once. All was bustle, drive, business. Under a single will, backed by a strong and orderly executive capacity, the dying road seemed to leap into life. It had not an *employé* who did not know and take off his hat to the General. He was a kind of god, to whom they all bowed down; and to be addressed or chaffed by him was an honor to be reported to friends, and borne home with self-gratulation to wives and children.

The General, of course, had moments of superlative happiness. He never had enjoyed anything more than he enjoyed his railroad. His notoriety with the common people along the line—the idea which they cherished that he could do anything he wished to do; that he had only to lift his hand to win gold to himself or to bear it to them—these were pleasant in themselves; but to have their obeisance witnessed by his city friends and associates, while they discussed his champagne and boned turkey from the abounding hampers which always furnished "the President's car"—this was the crown of his pleasure. He had a pleasure, too, in business. He never had enough to do, and the railroad which would have loaded down an ordinary man with an ordinary conscience, was only a pleasant diversion to him. Indeed, he was wont to reiterate,

when rallied upon his new enterprise : "The fact was, I had to do something for my health, you know."

Still, the General was not what could be called a thoroughly happy man. He knew the risks he ran on 'Change. He had been reminded, by two or three mortifying losses, that the sun did not always shine on Wall Street. He knew that his railroad was a bubble, and that sooner or later it would burst. Times would change, and, after all, there was nothing that would last like his manufactures. With a long foresight, he had ordered the funds received from the Prussian sales of the Belcher rifle to be deposited with a European banking house at interest, to be drawn against in his foreign purchases of material ; yet he never drew against this deposit. Self-confident as he was, glutted with success as he was, he had in his heart a premonition that some time he might want that money just where it was placed. So there it lay, accumulating interest. It was an anchor to windward, that would hold him if ever his bark should drift into shallow or dangerous waters.

The grand trouble was, that he did not own a single patent by which he was thriving in both branches of his manufactures. He had calculated upon worrying the inventor into a sale, and had brought his designs very nearly to realization, when he found, to his surprise and discomfiture, that he had driven him into a mad-house. Rich as he was, therefore, there was something very unsubstantial in his wealth, even to his own apprehension. Sometimes it all seemed like a bubble, which a sudden breath would wreck. Out of momentary despondencies, originating in visions like these, he always rose with determinations that nothing should come between him and his possessions and prosperities which his hand, by fair means or foul, could crush.

Mr. Balfour, a lawyer of faultless character and un-

doubted courage, held his secret. He could not bend him or buy him. He was the one man in all the world whom he was afraid of. He was the one man in New York who knew whether Benedict was alive or not. He had Benedict's heir in his house, and he knew that by him the law would lay its hand on him and his possessions. He only wondered that the action was delayed. Why was it delayed? Was he, Mr. Belcher, ready for it? He knew he was not, and he saw but one way by which he could become so. Over this he hesitated, hoping that some event would occur which would render his projected crime unnecessary.

Evening after evening, when every member of his family was in bed, he shut himself in his room, looked behind every article of furniture to make himself sure that he was alone, and then drew from its drawer the long unexecuted contract with Mr. Benedict, with the accompanying autograph letters, forwarded to him by Sam Yates. Whole quires of paper he traced with the names of "Nicholas Johnson" and "James Ramsey." After he had mastered the peculiarities of their signs-manual, he took up that of Mr. Benedict. Then he wrote the three names in the relations in which he wished them to appear on the document. Then he not only burned all the paper he had used, in the grate, but pulverized its ashes.

Not being able to ascertain whether Benedict were alive or dead, it would be necessary to produce a document which would answer his purpose in either case. Of course, it would be requisite that its date should anticipate the inventor's insanity. He would make one more effort to ascertain a fact that had so direct a relation to his future security.

Accordingly, one evening after his railroad scheme was fairly inaugurated, he called on Mrs. Dillingham, determined to obtain from her what she knew. He had

witnessed for months her fondness for Harry Benedict. The boy had, apparently with the consent of the Balfours, been frequently in her house. They had taken long drives together in the Park. Mr. Belcher felt that there was a peculiar intimacy between the two, yet not one satisfactory word had he ever heard from the lady about her new pet. He had become conscious, too, of a certain change in her. She had been less in society, was more quiet than formerly, and more reticent in his presence, though she had never repulsed him. He had caught fewer glimpses of that side of her nature and character which he had once believed was sympathetic with his own. Misled by his own vanity into the constant belief that she was seriously in love with himself, he was determined to utilize her passion for his own purposes. If she would not give kisses, she should give confidence.

"Mrs. Dillingham," he said, "I have been waiting to hear something about your pauper *protégé*, and I have come to-night to find out what you know about him and his father."

"If I knew of anything that would be of real advantage to you, I would tell you, but I do not," she replied.

"Well, that's an old story. Tell that to the marines. I'm sick of it."

Mrs. Dillingham's face flushed.

"I prefer to judge for myself, if it's all the same to you," pursued the proprietor. "You've had the boy in your hands for months, and you know him, through and through, or else you are not the woman I have taken you for."

"You have taken me for, Mr. Belcher?"

"Nothing offensive. Don't roll up your pretty eyes in that way."

Mrs. Dillingham was getting angry.

"Please don't address me in that way again," she said.

"Well, what the devil have you to do with the boy anyway, if you are not at work for me? That's what I'd like to know."

"I like him, and he is fond of me."

"I don't see how that helps me," responded Mr. Belcher.

"It is enough for me that I enjoy it."

"Oh, it is!"

"Yes, it is," with an emphatic nod of the head.

"Perhaps you think that will go down with me. Perhaps you are not acquainted with my way of doing business."

"Are you doing business with me, Mr. Belcher? Am I a partner of yours? If I am, perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me—business-like enough to tell me—why you wish me to worm secrets out of this boy."

It was Mr. Belcher's turn to color.

"No, I will not. I trust no woman with my affairs. I keep my own councils."

"Then do your own business," snappishly.

"Mrs. Dillingham, you and I are friends—destined, I trust, to be better friends—closer friends—than we have ever been. This boy is of no consequence to you, and you cannot afford to sacrifice a man who can serve you more than you seem to know, for him."

"Well," said the lady, "there is no use in acting under a mask any longer. I would not betray the confidence of a child to serve any man I ever saw. You have been kind to me, but you have not trusted me. The lad loves me, and trusts me, and I will never betray him. What I tell you is true. I have learned nothing from him that can be of any genuine advantage to you. That is all the answer you will ever get from me. If you choose to throw away our friendship, you can take the responsibility," and Mrs. Dillingham hid her face in her handkerchief.

Mr. Belcher had been trying an experiment, and he had not succeeded—could not succeed; and there sat the beautiful, magnanimous woman before him, her heart torn as he believed with love for him, yet loyal to her ideas of honor as they related to a confiding child! How beautiful she was! Vexed he certainly was, but there was a balm for his vexation in these charming revelations of her character.

“Well,” he said, rising, and in his old good-natured tone, “there’s no accounting for a woman. I’m not going to bother you.”

He seized her unresisting hand, pressed it to his lips, and went away. He did not hear the musical giggle that followed him into the street, but, absorbed by his purpose, went home and mounted to his room. Locking the door, and peering about among the furniture, according to his custom, he sat down at his desk, drew out the old contract, and started at his usual practice. “Sign it,” he said to himself, “and then you can use it or not—just as you please. It’s not the signing that will trouble you; it’s the using.”

He tried the names all over again, and then, his heart beating heavily against the desk, he spread the document and essayed his task. His heart jarred him. His hand trembled. What could he do to calm himself? He rose and walked to his mirror, and found that he was pale. “Are you afraid?” he said to himself. “Are you a coward? Ha! ha! ha! ha! Did I laugh? My God! how it sounded! Aren’t you a pretty King of Wall Street! Aren’t you a lovely President of the Crooked Valley Railroad! Aren’t you a sweet sort of a nabob! You *must* do it. Do you hear? You *must* do it! Eh? do you hear? Sit down, sir! Down with you, sir! and don’t you rise again until the thing is done.”

The heart-thumping passed away. The reaction, under the strong spur and steady push of will, brought

his nerves up to steadiness, and he sat down, took his pencils and pens that had been selected for the service, and wrote first the name of Paul Benedict, and then, as witnesses, the names of Nicholas Johnson and James Ramsey.

So the document was signed, and witnessed by men whom he believed to be dead. The witnesses whose names he had forged he knew to be dead. With this document he believed he could defend his possession of all the patent rights on which the permanence of his fortune depended. He permitted the ink to dry, then folded the paper, and put it back in its place. Then he shut and opened the drawer, and took it out again. It had a genuine look.

Then he rang his bell and called for Phipps. When Phipps appeared, he said:

“Well, Phipps, what do you want?”

“Nothing, sir,” and Phipps smiled.

“Very well; help yourself.”

“Thank you, sir,” and Phipps rubbed his hands.

“How are you getting along in New York, Phipps?”

“Very well, sir.”

“Big thing to be round with the General, isn’t it? It’s a touch above Sevenoaks, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get enough to eat down-stairs?”

“Plenty.”

“Good clothes to wear?”

“Very good,” and Phipps looked down upon his toilet with great satisfaction.

“Stolen mostly from the General, eh?”

Phipps giggled.

“That’s all; you can go. I only wanted to see if you were in the house, and well taken care of.”

Phipps started to go. “By the way, Phipps, have you a good memory?—first-rate memory?”

"Yes, sir."

"Can you remember everything that happened, a—say, six years ago?"

"I can try," said Phipps, with an intelligent glance into Mr. Belcher's eyes.

"Do you remember a day, about six years ago, when Paul Benedict came into my house at Sevenoaks, with Nicholas Johnson and James Ramsey, and they all signed a paper together?"

"Very well," replied Phipps.

"And do you remember that I said to you, after they were gone, that that paper gave me all of Benedict's patent rights?"

Phipps looked up at the ceiling, and then said:

"Yes, sir, and I remember that I said, 'It will make you very rich, won't it, Mr. Belcher?'"

"And what did I reply to you?"

"You said, 'That remains to be seen.'"

"All right. Do you suppose you should know that paper if you were to see it?"

"I think I should—after I'd seen it once."

"Well, there it is—suppose you take a look at it."

"I remember it by two blots in the corner, and the red lines down the side."

"You didn't write your own name, did you?"

"It seems to me I did."

"Suppose you examine the paper, under James Ramsey's name, and see whether yours is there."

Mr. Belcher walked to his glass, turning his back upon Phipps. The latter sat down, and wrote his name upon the spot thus blindly suggested.

"It is here, sir."

"Ah! So you have found it! You distinctly remember writing it on that occasion, and can swear to it, and to the signatures of the others?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"And all this was done in my library, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did you happen to be there when these other men were there?"

"You called me in, sir."

"All right! You never smoke, Phipps?"

"Never in the stable, sir."

"Well, lay these cigars away where you have laid the rest of 'em, and go to bed."

Phipps took the costly bundle of cigars that was handed to him, carried them by habit to his nose, said "Thank you, sir," and went off down the stairs, felicitating himself on the ease with which he had won so choice a treasure.

The effect of Phipps' signature on Mr. Belcher's mind was a curious illustration of the self-deceptions in which a human heart may indulge. Companionship in crime, the sharing of responsibility, the fact that the paper was to have been signed at the time it was drawn, and would have been signed but for the accident of Benedict's insanity; the fact that he had paid moneys with the expectation of securing a title to the inventions he was using—all these gave to the paper an air of genuineness which surprised even Mr. Belcher himself.

When known evil seems absolutely good to a man, and conscious falsehood takes on the semblance and the authority of truth, the Devil has him fast.