

## CHAPTER XXIII.

IN WHICH MR. BELCHER EXPRESSES HIS DETERMINATION TO BECOME A "FOUNDER," BUT DROPS HIS NOUN IN FEAR OF A LITTLE VERB OF THE SAME NAME.

MRS. DILLINGHAM had a difficult rôle to play. She could not break with Mr. Belcher without exposing her motives and bringing herself under unpleasant suspicion and surveillance. She felt that the safety of her protégé and his father would be best consulted by keeping peace with their enemy; yet every approach of the great scoundrel disgusted and humiliated her. That side of her nature which had attracted and encouraged him was sleeping, and, under the new motives which were at work within her, she hoped that it would never wake. She looked down the devious track of her past, counted over its unworthy and most unwomanly satisfactions, and wondered. She looked back to a great wrong which she had once inflicted on an innocent man, with a self-condemnation so deep that all the womanhood within her rose into the purpose of reparation.

The boy whom she had called to her side, and fastened by an impassioned tenderness more powerful even than her wonderful art, had become to her a fountain of pure motives. She had a right to love this child. She owed a duty to him beyond any woman living. Grasping her right, and acknowledging her duty—a right and duty accorded to her by his nominal protector—she would not have forfeited them for the world. They soon became all that gave significance to her existence, and to them she determined that her life should be devoted. To stand well with this boy, to be loved, admired and respected by him, to be to him all that a mother could

be, to be guided by his pure and tender conscience toward her own reformation, to waken into something like life and nourish into something like strength the starved motherhood within her—these became her dominant motives.

Mr. Belcher saw the change in her, but was too gross in his nature, too blind in his passion, and too vain in his imagined power, to comprehend it. She was a woman, and had her whims, he thought. Whims were evanescent, and this particular whim would pass away. He was vexed by seeing the boy so constantly with her. He met them walking together in the street, or straying in the park, hand in hand, or caught the lad looking at him from her window. He could not doubt that all this intimacy was approved by Mr. Balfour. Was she playing a deep game? Could she play it for anybody but himself—the man who had taken her heart by storm? Her actions, however, even when interpreted by his self-conceit, gave him uneasiness. She had grown to be very kind and considerate toward Mrs. Belcher. Had this friendship moved her to crush the passion for her husband? Ah! if she could only know how true he was to her in his untruthfulness!—how faithful he was to her in his perjury!—how he had saved himself for the ever-vanishing opportunity!

Many a time the old self-pity came back to the successful scoundrel. Many a time he wondered why the fate which had been so kind to him in other things would not open the door to his wishes in this. With this unrewarded passion gnawing at his heart, and with the necessity of treating the wife of his youth with constantly increasing consideration, in order to cover it from her sight, the General was anything but a satisfied and happy man. The more he thought upon it, the more morbid he grew, until it seemed to him that his wife must look through his hypocritical eyes into his guilty heart. He

grew more and more guarded in his speech. If he mentioned Mrs. Dillingham's name, he always did it incidentally, and then only for the purpose of showing that he had no reason to avoid the mention of it.

There was another thought that preyed upon him. He was consciously a forger. He had not used the document he had forged, but he had determined to do so. Law had not laid its finger upon him, but its finger was over him. He had not yet crossed the line that made him legally a criminal, but the line was drawn before him, and only another step would be necessary to place him beyond it. A brood of fears was gathering around him. They stood back, glaring upon him from the distance; but they only waited another act in his career of dishonor to crowd in and surround him with menace. Sometimes he shrank from his purpose, but the shame of being impoverished and beaten spurred him renewedly to determination. He became conscious that what there was of bravery in him was sinking into bravado. His self-conceit, and what little he possessed of self-respect, were suffering. He dimly apprehended the fact that he was a rascal, and it made him uncomfortable. It ceased to be enough for him to assure himself that he was no more a rascal than those around him. He reached out on every side for means to maintain his self-respect. What good thing could he do to counterbalance his bad deeds? How could he shore himself up by public praise, by respectable associations, by the obligations of the public for deeds of beneficence? It is the most natural thing in the world for the dishonest steward, who cheats his lord, to undertake to win consideration against contingencies with his lord's money.

On the same evening in which the gathering at the Sevenoaks tavern occurred, preceding Jim's wedding, Mr. Belcher sat in his library, looking over the document which nominally conveyed to him the right and

title of Paul Benedict to his inventions. He had done this many times since he had forged three of the signatures, and secured a fraudulent addition to the number from the hand of Phipps. He had brought himself to believe, to a certain extent, in their genuineness, and was wholly sure that they were employed on behalf of justice. The inventions had cost Benedict little or no money, and he, Mr. Belcher, had developed them at his own risk. Without his money and his enterprise they would have amounted to nothing. If Benedict had not lost his reason, the document would have been legally signed. The cause of Benedict's lapse from sanity did not occur to him. He only knew that if the inventor had not become insane, he should have secured his signature at some wretched price, and out of this conviction he reared his self-justification.

"It's right!" said Mr. Belcher. "The State prison may be in it, but it's right!"

And then, confirming his foul determination by an oath, he added:

"I'll stand by it."

Then he rang his bell, and called for Phipps.

"Phipps," said he, as his faithful and plastic servitor appeared, "come in, and close the door."

When Phipps, with a question in his face, walked up to where Mr. Belcher was sitting at his desk, with the forged document before him, the latter said:

"Phipps, did you ever see this paper before?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, think hard—don't be in a hurry—and tell me when you saw it before. Take it in your hand, and look it all over, and be sure."

"I can't tell, exactly," responded Phipps, scratching his head; "but I should think it might have been six years ago, or more. It was a long time before we came from Sevenoaks."

"Very well; is that your signature?"

"It is, sir."

"Did you see Benedict write his name? Did you see Johnson and Ramsey write their names?"

"I did, sir."

"Do you remember all the circumstances—what I said to you, and what you said to me—why you were in the room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Phipps, do you know that if it is ever found out that you have signed that paper within a few weeks, you are as good as a dead man?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir," replied Phipps, in evident alarm.

"Do you know that that signature is enough to send you to the State prison?"

"No, sir."

"Well, Phipps, it is just that, provided it isn't stuck to. You will have to swear to it, and stand by it. I know the thing is coming. I can feel it in my bones. Why it hasn't come before, the Lord only knows."

Phipps had great faith in the might of money, and entire faith in Mr. Belcher's power to save him from any calamity. His master, during all his residence with and devotion to him, had shown himself able to secure every end he had sought, and he believed in him, or believed in his power, wholly.

"Couldn't you save me, sir, if I were to get into trouble?" he inquired, anxiously.

"That depends upon whether you stand by me, Phipps. It's just here, my boy. If you swear, through thick and thin, that you saw these men sign this paper, six years ago or more, that you signed it at the same time, and stand by your own signature, you will sail through all right, and do me a devilish good turn. If you balk, or get twisted up in your own reins, or throw

off your seat, down goes your house. If you stand by me, I shall stand by you. The thing is all right, and just as it ought to be, but it's a little irregular. It gives me what belongs to me, but the law happens to be against it."

Phipps hesitated, and glanced suspiciously, and even menacingly, at the paper. Mr. Belcher knew that he would like to tear it in pieces, and so, without unseemly haste, he picked it up, placed it in its drawer, locked it in, and put the key in his pocket.

"I don't want to get into trouble," said Phipps.

"Phipps," said Mr. Belcher, in a conciliatory tone, "I don't intend that you shall get into trouble."

Then, rising, and patting his servant on the shoulder, he added:

"But it all depends on your standing by me, and standing by yourself. You know that you will lose nothing by standing by the General, Phipps; you know me."

Phipps was not afraid of crime; he was only afraid of its possible consequences; and Mr. Belcher's assurance of safety, provided he should remember his story and adhere to it, was all that he needed to confirm him in the determination to do what Mr. Belcher wished him to do.

After Phipps retired, Mr. Belcher took out his document again, and looked it over for the hundredth time. He recompared the signatures which he had forged with their originals. Consciously a villain, he regarded himself still as a man who was struggling for his rights. But something of his old, self-reliant courage was gone. He recognized the fact that there was one thing in the world more powerful than himself. The law was against him. Single-handed, he could meet men; but the great power which embodied the justice and strength of the State awed him, and compelled him into a realization of his weakness.

The next morning Mr. Belcher received his brokers and operators in bed in accordance with his custom. He was not good-natured. His operations in Wall Street had not been prosperous for several weeks. In some way, impossible to be foreseen by himself or his agents, everything had worked against him. He knew that if he did not rally from this passage of ill-luck, he would, in addition to his loss of money, lose something of his prestige. He had a stormy time with his advisers and tools, swore a great deal, and sent them off in any-thing but a pleasant frame of mind.

Talbot was waiting in the drawing-room when the brokers retired, and followed his card upstairs, where he found his principal with an ugly frown upon his face.

"Toll," he whimpered, "I'm glad to see you. You're the best of 'em all, and in the long run, you bring me the most money."

"Thank you," responded the factor, showing his white teeth in a gratified smile.

"Toll, I'm not exactly ill, but I'm not quite myself. How long it will last I don't know, but just this minute the General is devilish unhappy, and would sell himself cheap. Things are not going right. I don't sleep well."

"You've got too much money," suggested Mr. Talbot.

"Well, what shall I do with it?"

"Give it to me."

"No, I thank you; I can do better. Besides, you are getting more than your share of it now."

"Well, I don't ask it of you," said Talbot, "but if you wish to get rid of it, I could manage a little more of it without trouble."

"Toll, look here! The General wants to place a little money where it will bring him some reputation with the highly respectable old dons—our spiritual fathers, you know—and the brethren. Understand?"

"General, you are deep; you'll have to explain."

"Well, all our sort of fellows patronize something or other. They cheat a man out of his eye-teeth one day, and the next, you hear of them endowing something or other, or making a speech to a band of old women, or figuring on a top-lofty list of directors. That's the kind of thing I want."

"You can get any amount of it, General, by paying for it. All they want is money; they don't care where it comes from."

"Toll, shut up. I behold a vision. Close your eyes now, and let me paint it for you. I see the General—General Robert Belcher, the millionaire—in the aspect of a great public benefactor. He is dressed in black, and sits upon a platform, in the midst of a lot of seedy men in white chokers. They hand him a programme. There is speech-making going on, and every speech makes an allusion to 'our benefactor,' and the brethren and sisters cheer. The General bows. High old doctors of divinity press up to be introduced. They are all after more. They flatter the General; they coddle him. They give him the highest seat. They pretend to respect him. They defend him from all slanders. They are proud of the General. He is their man. I look into the religious newspapers, and in one column I behold a curse on the stock-jobbing of Wall Street, and in the next, the praise of the beneficence of General Robert Belcher. I see the General passing down Wall Street the next day. I see him laughing out of the corner of his left eye, while his friends punch him in the ribs. Oh, Toll! it's delicious! Where are your feelings, my boy? Why don't you cry?"

"Charming picture, General! Charming! but my handkerchief is fresh, and I must save it. I may have a cold before night."

"Well, now, Toll, what's the thing to be done?"

"What do you say to soup-kitchens for the poor? They don't cost so very much, and you get your name in the papers."

"Soup-kitchens be hanged! That's Mrs. Belcher's job. Besides, I don't want to get up a reputation for helping the poor. They're a troublesome lot and full of bother; I don't believe in 'em. They don't associate you with anybody but themselves. What I want is to be in the right sort of a crowd."

"Have you thought of a hospital?"

"Yes, I've thought of a hospital, but I don't seem to hanker after it. To tell the truth, the hospitals are pretty well taken up already. I might work into a board of directors by paying enough, I suppose, but it is too much the regular thing. What I want is ministers—something religious, you know."

"You might run a church-choir," suggested Talbot, "or, better than that, buy a church, and turn the crank."

"Yes, but they are not quite large enough. I tell you what it is, Toll, I believe I'm pining for a theological seminary. Ah, my heart! my heart! If I could only tell you, Toll, how it yearns over the American people! Can't you see, my boy, that the hope of the nation is in educated and devoted young men? Don't you see that we are going to the devil with our thirst for filthy lucre? Don't you understand how noble a thing it would be for one of fortune's favorites to found an institution with his wealth, that would bear down its blessings to unborn millions? What if that institution should also bear his name? What if that name should be forever associated with that which is most hallowed in our national history? Wouldn't it pay? Eh, Toll?"

Mr. Talbot laughed.

"General, your imagination will be the death of you, but there is really nothing impracticable in your

plan. All these fellows want is your money. They will give you everything you want for it in the way of glory."

"I believe you; and wouldn't it be fun for the General? I vow I must indulge. I'm getting tired of horses; and these confounded suppers don't agree with me. It's a theological seminary or nothing. The tides of my destiny, Toll—you understand—the tides of my destiny tend in that direction, and I resign my bark to their sway. I'm going to be a founder, and I feel better already."

It was well that he did, for at this moment a dispatch was handed in which gave him a shock, and compelled him to ask Talbot to retire while he dressed.

"Don't go away, Toll," he said; "I want to see you again."

The dispatch that roused the General from his dream of beneficence was from his agent at Sevenoaks, and read thus: "Jim Fenton's wedding occurred this morning. He was accompanied by a man whom several old citizens firmly believe to be Paul Benedict, though he passed under another name. Balfour and Benedict's boy were here, and all are gone up to Number Nine. Will write particulars."

The theological seminary passed at once into the realm of dimly remembered dreams, to be recalled or forgotten as circumstances should determine. At present, there was something else to occupy the General's mind.

Before he had completed his toilet, he called for Talbot.

"Toll," said he, "if you were in need of legal advice of the best kind, and wanted to be put through a thing straight, whether it were right or not, to whom would you apply? Now mind, I don't want any milksops."

"I know two or three lawyers here who have been

through a theological seminary," Talbot responded, with a knowing smile.

"Oh, get out! There's no joke about this. I mean business now."

"Well, I took pains to show you your man, at my house, once. Don't you remember him?"

"Cavendish?"

"Yes."

"I don't like him."

"Nor do I. He'll bleed you; but he's your man."

"All right; I want to see him."

"Get into my coupé, and I'll take you to his office."

Mr. Belcher went to the drawer that contained his forged document. Then he went back to Talbot, and said:

"Would Cavendish come here?"

"Not he! If you want to see him, you must go where he is. He wouldn't walk into your door to accommodate you if he knew it."

Mr. Belcher was afraid of Cavendish, as far as he could be afraid of any man. The lawyer had bluffed everybody at the dinner-party, and, in his way, scoffed at everybody. He had felt in the lawyer's presence the contact of a nature which possessed more self-assertion and self-assurance than his own. He had felt that Cavendish could read him, could handle him, could see through his schemes. He shrank from exposing himself, even to the scrutiny of this sharp man, whom he could hire for any service. But he went again to the drawer, and, with an excited and trembling hand, drew forth the accursed document. With this he took the autographs on which his forgeries were based. Then he sat down by himself, and thought the matter all over, while Talbot waited in another room. It was only by a desperate determination that he started at last, called Talbot downstairs, put on his hat, and went out.

It seemed to the proprietor, as he emerged from his house, that there was something weird in the morning light. He looked up, and saw that the sky was clear. He looked down, and the street was veiled in a strange shadow. The boys looked at him as if they were half startled. Inquisitive faces peered at him from a passing omnibus. A beggar laughed as he held out his greasy hand. Passengers paused to observe him. All this attention, which he once courted and accepted as flattery and fame, was disagreeable to him.

"Good God! Toll, what has happened since last night?" he said, as he sank back upon the satin cushions of the coupé.

"General, I don't think you're quite well. Don't die now. We can't spare you yet."

"Die? Do I look like it?" exclaimed Mr. Belcher, slapping his broad chest. "Don't talk to me about dying. I haven't thought about that yet."

"I beg your pardon. You know I didn't mean to distress you."

Then the conversation dropped, and the carriage wheeled on. The roll of vehicles, the shouting of drivers, the panoramic scenes, the flags swaying in the morning sky, the busy throngs that went up and down Broadway, were but the sights and sounds of a dimly apprehended dream. He was journeying toward guilt. What would be its end? Would he not be detected in it at the first step? How could he sit before the hawk-eyed man whom he was about to meet without in some way betraying his secret?

When the coupé stopped, Talbot roused his companion with difficulty.

"This can't be the place, Toll. We haven't come half a mile."

"On the contrary, we have come three miles."

"It can't be possible, Toll. I must look at your horse. I'd no idea you had such an animal."

Then Mr. Belcher got out, and looked the horse over. He was a connoisseur, and he stood five minutes on the curbstone, expatiating upon those points of the animal that pleased him.

"I believe you came to see Mr. Cavendish," suggested Talbot with a laugh.

"Yes, I suppose I must go up. I hate lawyers, anyway."

They climbed the stairway. They knocked at Mr. Cavendish's door. A boy opened it, and took in their cards. Mr. Cavendish was busy, but would see them in fifteen minutes. Mr. Belcher sat down in the ante-room, took a newspaper from his pocket, and began to read. Then he took a pen and scribbled, writing his own name with three other names, across which he nervously drew his pen. Then he drew forth his knife, and tremblingly dressed his finger-nails. Having completed this task, he took out a large pocket-book, withdrew a blank check, filled and signed it, and put it back. Realizing, at last, that Talbot was waiting to go in with him, he said :

"By the way, Toll, this business of mine is private."

"Oh, I understand," said Talbot; "I'm only going in to make sure that Cavendish remembers you."

What Talbot really wished to make sure of was, that Cavendish should know that he had brought him his client.

At last they heard a little bell which summoned the boy, who soon returned to say that Mr. Cavendish would see them. Mr. Belcher looked around for a mirror, but discovering none, said :

"Toll, look at me! Am I all right? Do you see anything out of the way?"

Talbot having looked him over, and reported favorably, they followed the boy into the penetralia of the great office, and into the presence of the great man. Mr. Cavendish did not rise, but leaned back in his huge

carved chair, and rubbed his hands, pale in their morning whiteness, and said, coldly :

"Good morning, gentlemen; sit down."

Mr. Talbot declined. He had simply brought to him his friend, General Belcher, who, he believed, had a matter of business to propose. Then, telling Mr. Belcher that he should leave the coupé at his service, he retired.

Mr. Belcher felt that he was already in court. Mr. Cavendish sat behind his desk in a judicial attitude, with his new client fronting him. The latter fell, or tried to force himself, into a jocular mood and bearing, according to his custom on serious occasions.

"I am likely to have a little scrimmage," said he, "and I shall want your help, Mr. Cavendish."

Saying this, he drew forth a check for a thousand dollars, which he had drawn in the ante-room, and passed it over to the lawyer. Mr. Cavendish took it up listlessly, held it by its two ends, read its face, examined its back, and tossed it into a drawer, as if it were a suspicious sixpence.

"It's a thousand dollars," said Mr. Belcher, surprised that the sum had apparently made no impression.

"I see—a retainer—thanks!"

All the time the hawk-eyes were looking into Mr. Belcher. All the time the scalp was moving backward and forward, as if he had just procured a new one, that might be filled up before night, but for the moment was a trifle large. All the time there was a subtle scorn upon the lips, the flavor of which the finely curved nose apprehended with approval.

"What's the case, General?"

The General drew from his pocket his forged assignment, and passed it into the hand of Mr. Cavendish.

"Is that a legally constructed document?" he inquired.

Mr. Cavendish read it carefully, every word. He

looked at the signatures. He looked at the blank page on the back. He looked at the tape with which it was bound. He fingered the knot with which it was tied. He folded it carefully, and handed it back.

"Yes—absolutely perfect," he said. "Of course I know nothing about the signatures. Is the assignor living?"

"That is precisely what I don't know," replied Mr. Belcher. "I supposed him to be dead for years. I have now reason to suspect that he is living."

"Have you been using these patents?"

"Yes, and I've made piles of money on them."

"Is your right contested?"

"No; but I have reason to believe that it will be."

"What reason?" inquired Mr. Cavendish, sharply.

Mr. Belcher was puzzled.

"Well, the man has been insane, and has forgotten, very likely, what he did before his insanity. I have reason to believe that such is the case, and that he intends to contest my right to the inventions which this paper conveys to me.

"What reason, now?"

Mr. Belcher's broad expanse of face crimsoned into a blush, and he simply answered:

"I know the man."

"Who is his lawyer?"

"Balfour."

Mr. Cavendish gave a little start.

"Let me see that paper again," said he.

After looking it through again, he said, dryly:

"I know Balfour. He is a shrewd man, and a good lawyer: and unless he has a case, or thinks he has one, he will not fight this document. What devilry there is in it, I don't know, and I don't want you to tell me. I can tell you that you have a hard man to fight. Where are these witnesses?"

"Two of them are dead. One of them is living, and is now in the city."

"What can he swear to?"

"He can swear to his own signature, and to all the rest. He can relate and swear to all the circumstances attending the execution of the paper."

"And you know that these rights were never previously conveyed."

"Yes, I know they never were."

"Then, mark you, General, Balfour has no case at all—provided this isn't a dirty paper. If it is a dirty paper, and you want me to serve you, keep your tongue to yourself. You've recorded it, of course."

"Recorded it?" inquired Mr. Belcher in an alarm which he did not attempt to disguise.

"You don't mean to tell me that this paper has been in existence more than six years, and has not been recorded?"

"I didn't know it was necessary."

Mr. Cavendish tossed the paper back to the owner of it with a sniff of contempt.

"It isn't worth that!" said he, snapping his fingers.

Then he drew out the check from his drawer, and handed it back to Mr. Belcher.

"There's no case, and I don't want your money," said he.

"But there is a case!" said Mr. Belcher, fiercely, scared out of his fear. "Do you suppose I am going to be cheated out of my rights without a fight? I'm no chicken, and I'll spend half a million before I'll give up my rights."

Mr. Cavendish laughed.

"Well, go to Washington," said he, "and if you don't find that Balfour or somebody else has been there before you, I shall be mistaken. Balfour isn't very much of a chicken, and he knows enough to know that the first as



signment recorded there holds. Why has he not been down upon you before this? Simply because he saw that you were making money for his client, and he preferred to take it all out of you in a single slice. I know Balfour, and he carries a long head. Chicken!"

Mr. Belcher was in distress. The whole game was as obvious and real to him as if he had assured himself of its truth. He staggered to his feet. He felt the hand of ruin upon him. He believed that while he had been perfecting his crime he had been quietly overreached. He lost his self-command, and gave himself up to profanity and bluster, at which Mr. Cavendish laughed.

"There's no use in that sort of thing, General," said he. "Go to Washington. Ascertain for yourself about it, and if you find it as I predict, make the best of it. You can make a compromise of some sort. Do the best you can."

There was one thing that Mr. Cavendish had noticed. Mr. Belcher had made no response to him when he told him that if the paper was a dirty one he did not wish to know it. He had made up his mind that there was mischief in it, somewhere. Either the consideration had never been paid, or the signatures were fraudulent, or perhaps the paper had been executed when the assignor was demonstrably of unsound mind. Somewhere, he was perfectly sure, there was fraud.

"General," said he, "I have my doubts about this paper. I'm not going to tell you why. I understand that there is one witness living who will swear to all these signatures."

"There is."

"Is he a credible witness? Has he ever committed a crime? Can anything wrong be proved against him?"

"The witness," responded Mr. Belcher, "is my man Phipps; and a more faithful fellow never lived. I've

known him for years, and he was never in an ugly scrape in his life."

"Well, if you find that no one is before you on the records, come back; and when you come you may as well multiply that check by ten. When I undertake a thing of this kind, I like to provide myself against all contingencies."

Mr. Belcher groaned, and tore up the little check that seemed so large when he drew it, and had shrunk to such contemptible dimensions in the hands of the lawyer.

"You lawyers put the lancet in pretty deep."

"Our clients never do!" said Mr. Cavendish through his sneering lips.

Then the boy knocked, and came in. There was another gentleman who wished to see the lawyer.

"I shall go to Washington to-day, and see you on my return," said Mr. Belcher.

Then, bidding the lawyer a good-morning, he went out, ran down the stairs, jumped into Mr. Talbot's waiting coupé, and ordered himself driven home. Arriving there, he hurriedly packed a satchel, and, announcing to Mrs. Belcher that he had been unexpectedly called to Washington, went out, and made the quickest passage possible to Jersey City. As he had Government contracts on hand, his wife asked no questions, and gave the matter no thought.

The moment Mr. Belcher found himself on the train, and in motion, he became feverishly excited. He cursed himself that he had not attended to this matter before. He had wondered why Balfour was so quiet. With Benedict alive and in communication, or with Benedict dead, and his heir in charge, why had he made no claim upon rights which were the basis of his own fortune? There could be but one answer to these questions, and Cavendish had given it!

He talked to himself, and attracted the attention of those around him. He walked the platforms at all the stations where the train stopped. He asked the conductor a dozen times at what hour the train would arrive in Washington, apparently forgetting that he had already received his information. He did not reach his destination until evening, and then, of course, all the public offices were closed. He met men whom he knew, but he would not be tempted by them into a debauch. He went to bed early, and, after a weary night of sleeplessness, found himself at the Patent Office before a clerk was in his place.

When the offices were opened, he sought his man, and revealed his business. He prepared a list of the patents in which he was interested, and secured a search of the records of assignment. It was a long time since the patents had been issued, and the inquisition was a tedious one; but it resulted, to his unspeakable relief, in the official statement that no one of them had ever been assigned. Then he brought out his paper, and, with a blushing declaration that he had not known the necessity of its record until the previous day, saw the assignment placed upon the books.

Then he was suddenly at ease. Then he could look about him. A great burden was rolled from his shoulders, and he knew that he ought to be jolly; but somehow his spirits did not rise. As he emerged from the Patent Office, there was the same weird light in the sky that he had noticed the day before, on leaving his house with Talbot. The great dome of the Capitol swelled in the air like a bubble, which seemed as if it would burst. The broad, hot streets glimmered as if a volcano were breeding under them. Everything looked unsubstantial. He found himself watching for Balfour, and expecting to meet him at every corner. He was in a new world, and had not become wonted to it—the world of conscious

crime—the world of outlawry. It had a sun of its own, fears of its own, figures and aspects of its own. There was a new man growing up within him, whom he wished to hide. To this man's needs his face had not yet become hardened, his words had not yet been trained beyond the danger of betrayal, his eyes had not adjusted their pupils for vision and self-suppression.

He took the night train home, breakfasted at the Astor, and was the first man to greet Mr. Cavendish when that gentleman entered his chambers. Mr. Cavendish sat listlessly, and heard his story. The lawyer's hands were as pale, his scalp as uneasy, and his lips as redolent of scorn as they were two days before, while his nose bent to sniff the scorn with more evident approval than then. He apprehended more thoroughly the character of the man before him, saw more clearly the nature of his business, and wondered with contemptuous incredulity that Balfour had not been sharper and quicker.

After Mr. Belcher had stated the facts touching the Washington records, Mr. Cavendish said:

"Well, General, as far as appearances go, you have the lead. Nothing but the overthrow of your assignment can damage you, and, as I told you the day before yesterday, if the paper is dirty, don't tell me of it—that is, if you want me to do anything for you. Go about your business, say nothing to anybody, and if you are prosecuted, come to me."

Still Mr. Belcher made no response to the lawyer's suggestion touching the fraudulent nature of the paper; and the latter was thoroughly confirmed in his original impression that there was something wrong about it.

Then Mr. Belcher went out upon Wall Street, among his brokers, visited the Exchange, visited the Gold Room, jested with his friends, concocted schemes, called upon Talbot, wrote letters, and filled up his day. Going home to dinner, he found a letter from his agent

at Sevenoaks, giving in detail his reasons for supposing not only that Benedict had been in the village, but that, from the time of his disappearance from the Sevenoaks poor-house, he had been living at Number Nine with Jim Fenton. Balfour had undoubtedly found him there, as he was in the habit of visiting the woods. Mike Conlin must also have found him there, and worst of all, Sam Yates must have discovered him. The instruments that he had employed, at a considerable cost, to ascertain whether Benedict were alive or dead had proved false to him. The discovery that Sam Yates was a traitor made him tremble. It was from him that he had procured the autographs on which two of his forgeries were based. He sat down immediately, and wrote a friendly letter to Yates, putting some business into his hands, and promising more. Then he wrote to his agent, telling him of his interest in Yates, and of his faithful service, and directing him to take the reformed man under his wing, and, as far as possible, to attach him to the interests of the concern.

Two days afterward, he looked out of his window and saw Mr. Balfour descending the steps of his house with a travelling satchel in his hand. Calling Phipps, he directed him to jump into the first cab, or carriage, pay double price, and make his way to the ferry that led to the Washington cars, see if Balfour crossed at that point, and learn, if possible, his destination. Phipps returned in an hour and a half with the information that the lawyer had bought a ticket for Washington.

Then Mr. Belcher knew that trouble was brewing, and braced himself to meet it. In less than forty-eight hours, Balfour would know, either that he had been deceived by Benedict, or that a forgery had been committed. Balfour was cautious, and would take time to settle this question in his own mind.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

WHEREIN THE GENERAL LEAPS THE BOUNDS OF LAW,  
FINDS HIMSELF IN A NEW WORLD, AND BECOMES  
THE VICTIM OF HIS FRIENDS WITHOUT KNOWING IT.

FOR several weeks the General had been leading a huge and unscrupulous combination for "bearing" International Mail. The stock had ruled high for a long time—higher than was deemed legitimate by those familiar with its affairs—and the combination began by selling large blocks of the stock for future delivery, at a point or two below the market. Then stories about the corporation began to be circulated upon the street, of the most damaging character—stories of fraud, speculation, and rapidly diminishing business—stories of maturing combinations against the company—stories of the imminent retirement of men deemed essential to the management. The air was full of rumors. One died only to make place for another, and men were forced to believe that where there was so much smoke there must be some fire. Still the combination boldly sold. The stock broke, and went down, down, down, day after day, and still there were strong takers for all that offered. The operation had worked like a charm to the point where it was deemed prudent to begin to repurchase, when there occurred one of those mysterious changes in the market which none could have foreseen. It was believed that the market had been oversold, and the holders held. The combination was short, and up went the stock by the run. The most frantic efforts were made to cover, but without avail, and as the contracts matured, house after house went down with a crash that startled the country. Mr. Belcher, the nearest man of them all, turned the cold shoulder to his