

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

confrères in the stupendous mischief, and went home to his dinner one day, conscious that half a million dollars had slipped through his fingers. He ate but little, walked his rooms for an hour like a caged tiger, muttered and swore to himself, and finally went off to his club. There seemed to be no way in which he could drown his anger, disappointment, and sense of loss, except by a debauch, and he was brought home by his faithful Phipps at the stage of confidential silliness.

When his brokers appeared at ten the next morning, he drove them from the house, and then, with such wits as he could muster, in a head still tortured by his night's excesses, thought over his situation. A heavy slice of his ready money had been practically swept out of existence. If he was not crippled, his wings were clipped. His prestige was departed. He knew that men would thereafter be wary of following him, or trusting to his sagacity. Beyond the power of his money, and his power to make money, he knew that he had no consideration on 'Change—that there were five hundred men who would laugh to see the General go down—who had less feeling for him, personally, than they entertained toward an ordinary dog. He knew this because so far, at least, he understood himself. To redeem his position was now the grand desideratum. He would do it or die!

There was one direction in which the General had permitted himself to be shortened in, or rather, one in which he had voluntarily crippled himself for a consideration. He had felt himself obliged to hold large quantities of the stock of the Crooked Valley Railroad, in order to maintain his seat at the head of its management. He had parted with comparatively little of it since his first huge purchase secured the place he sought, and though the price he gave was small, the quantity raised the aggregate to a large figure. All this

was unproductive. It simply secured his place and his influence.

No sooner had he thoroughly realized the great loss he had met with, in connection with his Wall Street conspiracy, than he began to revolve in his mind a scheme which he had held in reserve from the first moment of his control of the Crooked Valley Road. He had nourished in every possible way the good-will of those who lived along the line. Not only this, but he had endeavored to show his power to do anything he pleased with the stock.

The people believed that he only needed to raise a finger to carry up the price of the stock in the market, and that the same potent finger could carry it down at will. He had already wrought wonders. He had raised a dead road to life. He had invigorated business in every town through which it passed. He was a king, whose word was law and whose will was destiny. The rumors of his reverses in Wall Street did not reach them, and all believed that, in one way or another, their fortunes were united with his.

The scheme to which he reverted in the first bitter moments of his loss could have originated in no brain less unscrupulous than his own. He would repeat the game that had been so successful at Sevenoaks. To do this, he only needed to call into action his tools on the street and in the management.

In the midst of his schemes, the bell rang at the door, and Talbot was announced. Mr. Belcher was always glad to see him, for he had no association with his speculations. Talbot had uniformly been friendly and ready to serve him. In truth, Talbot was almost his only friend.

"Toll, have you heard the news?"

"About the International Mail?"

"Yes."

"I've heard something of it, and I've come around

this morning to get the facts. I shall be bored about them all day by your good friends, you know."

"Well, Toll, I've had a sweat."

"You're not crippled?"

"No, but I've lost every dollar I have made since I've been in the city. Jones has gone under; Pell has gone under. Cramp & Co. will have to make a statement, and get a little time, but they will swim. The General is the only man of the lot who isn't shaken. But, Toll, it's devilish hard. It scares me. A few more such slices would spoil my cheese."

"Well, now, General, why do you go into these things at all? You are making money fast enough in a regular business."

"Ah, but it's tame, tame, tame! I must have excitement. Theatres are played out, horses are played out, and suppers raise the devil with me."

"Then take it easy. Don't risk so much. You used to do this sort of thing well—used to do it right every time. You got up a good deal of reputation for foresight and skill."

"I know, and every man ruined in the International Mail will curse me. I led them into it. I shall have a sweet time in Wall Street when I go there again. But it's like brandy; a man wants a larger dose every time, and I shall clean them out yet."

Talbot's policy was to make the General last. He wanted to advise him for his good, because his principal's permanent prosperity was the basis of his own. He saw that he was getting beyond control, and, under an exterior of compliance and complaisance, he was genuinely alarmed.

"Toll," said Mr. Belcher, "you are a good fellow."

"Thank you, General," said the factor, a smile spreading around his shining teeth. "My wife will be glad to know it."

"By the way—speaking of your wife—have you seen anything of Mrs. Dillingham lately?"

"Nothing. She is commonly supposed to be absorbed by the General."

"Common Supposition is a greater fool than I wish it were."

"That won't do, General. There never was a more evident case of killing at first sight than that."

"Well, Toll, I believe the woman is fond of me, but she has a queer way of showing it. I think she has changed. It seems so to me, but she's a devilish fine creature. Ah, my heart! my heart! Toll."

"You were complaining of it the other day. It was a theological seminary then. Perhaps that is the name you know her by."

"Not much theological seminary about her!" with a laugh.

"Well, there's one thing that you can comfort yourself, with, General; she sees no man but you."

"Is that so?" inquired Mr. Belcher, eagerly.

"That is what everybody says."

Mr. Belcher rolled this statement as a sweet morsel under his tongue. She must be hiding her passion from him under an impression of its hopelessness! Poor woman! He would see her at the first opportunity.

"Toll," said Mr. Belcher, "after a moment of delicious reflection, 'you're a good fellow.'"

"I think I've heard that remark before."

"Yes, you're a good fellow, and I'd like to do something for you."

"You've done a great deal for me already, General."

"Yes, and I'm going to do something more."

"Will you put it in my hand or my hat?" inquired Talbot, jocularly.

"Toll, how much Crooked Valley stock have you?"

"A thousand shares."

"What did you buy it for?"

"To help you."

"What have you kept it for?"

"To help keep the General at the head of the management."

"Turn about is fair play, isn't it?"

"That's the adage," responded Talbot.

"Well, I'm going to put that stock up; do you understand?"

"How will you do it?"

"By saying I'll do it. I want it whispered along the line that the General is going to put that stock up within a week. They're all greedy. They are all just like the rest of us. They know it isn't worth a continental copper, but they want a hand in the General's speculations, and the General wants it understood that he would like to have them share in his profits."

"I think I understand," said Talbot.

"Toll, I've got another vision. Hold on now! I behold a man in the General's confidence—a reliable, business man—who whispers to his friend that he heard the General say that he had all his plans laid for putting up the Crooked Valley stock within a week. This friend whispers it to another friend. No names are mentioned. It goes from friend to friend. It is whispered through every town along the line. Everybody gets crazy over it, and everybody quietly sends in an order for stock. In the meantime the General and his factor, yielding to the pressure—melted before the public demand—gently and tenderly unload! The vision still unrolls. Months later I behold the General buying back the stock at his own price, and with it maintaining his place in the management. Have you followed me?"

"Yes, General, I've seen it all. I comprehend it, and I shall unload with all the gentleness and tenderness possible."

Then the whimsical scoundrel and his willing lieutenant laughed a long, heartless laugh.

"Toll, I feel better, and I believe I'll get up," said the General. "Let this vision sink deep into your soul. Then give it wings, and speed it on its mission. Remember that this is a vale of tears, and don't set your affections on things below. By-by!"

Talbot went downstairs, drawing on his gloves, and laughing. Then he went out into the warm light, buttoned up his coat instinctively, as if to hide the plot he carried, jumped into his coupé, and went to his business.

Mr. Belcher dressed himself with more than his usual care, went to Mrs. Belcher's room and inquired about his children, then went to his library and drew forth from a secret drawer a little book. He looked it over for a few minutes, then placed it in his pocket, and went out. The allusion that had been made to Mrs. Dillingham, and the assurance that he was popularly understood to be her lover, and the only man who was regarded by her with favor, intoxicated him, and his old passion came back upon him.

It was a strange manifestation of his brutal nature that at this moment of his trouble, and this epoch of his cruelty and crime, he longed for the comfort of a woman's sympathy. He was too much absorbed by his affairs to be moved by that which was basest in his regard for his beautiful idol. If he could feel her hand upon his forehead; if she could tell him that she was sorry for him; if he could know that she loved him; ay, if he could be assured that this woman, whom he had believed to be capable of guilt, had prayed for him, it would have been balm to his heart. He was sore with struggle, and guilt, and defeat. He longed for love and tenderness. As if he were a great bloody dog, just coming from the fight of an hour, in which he had been

worsted, and seeking for a tender hand to pat his head, and call him "poor, good old fellow," the General longed for a woman's loving recognition. He was in his old mood of self-pity. He wanted to be petted, smoothed, commiserated, reassured; and there was only one woman in all the world from whom such ministry would be grateful.

He knew that Mrs. Dillingham had heard of his loss, for she heard of and read everything. He wanted her to know that it had not shaken him. He would not for the world have her suppose that he was growing poor. Still to appear to her as a person of wealth and power; still to hold her confidence as a man of multiplied resources, was, perhaps, the deepest ambition that moved him. He had found that he could not use her in the management of his affairs. Though from the first, up to the period of her acquaintance with Harry Benedict, she had led him on to love her by every charm she possessed, and every art she knew, she had always refused to be debased by him in any way.

When he went out of his house, at the close of his interviews with Talbot and Mrs. Belcher, it was without a definitely formed purpose to visit the charming widow. He simply knew that his heart was hungry. The sunflower is gross, but it knows the sun as well as the morning-glory, and turns to it as naturally. It was with like unreasoning instinct that he took the little book from its drawer, put on his hat, went down his steps, and entered the street that led him toward Mrs. Dillingham's house. He could not keep away from her. He would not if he could, and so, in ten minutes, he was seated with her, *vis à vis*.

"You have been unfortunate, Mr. Belcher," she said, sympathetically. "I am very sorry for you. It is not so bad as I heard, I am sure. You are looking very well."

"Oh! it is one of those things that may happen any

day, to any man, operating as I do," responded Mr. Belcher, with a careless laugh. "The General never gets in too deep. He is just as rich to-day as he was when he entered the city."

"I am so glad to hear it—gladder than I can express," said Mrs. Dillingham, with heartiness.

Her effusiveness of good feeling and her evident relief from anxiety, were honey to him.

"Don't trouble yourself about me," said he, musingly. "The General knows what he's about, every time. He has the advantage of the rest of them, in his regular business."

"I can't understand how it is," responded Mrs. Dillingham, with fine perplexity. "You men are so different from us. I should think you would be crazy with your losses."

Now, Mr. Belcher wished to impress Mrs. Dillingham permanently with a sense of his wisdom, and to inspire in her an inextinguishable faith in his sagacity and prudence. He wanted her to believe in his power to retain all the wealth he had won. He would take her into his confidence. He had never done this with relation to his business, and under that treatment she had drifted away from him. Now that he found how thoroughly friendly she was, he would try another method, and bind her to him. The lady read him as plainly as if he had been a book, and said:

"Oh, General! I have ascertained something that may be of use to you. Mr. Benedict is living. I had a letter from his boy this morning—dear little fellow—and he tells me how well his father is, and how pleasant it is to be with him again."

Mr. Belcher frowned.

"Do you know I can't quite stomach your whim—about that boy? What under heaven do you care for him?"

"Oh, you mustn't touch that whim, General," said Mrs. Dillingham, laughing. "I am a woman, and I have a right to it. He amuses me, and a great deal more than that. I wouldn't tell you a word about him, or what he writes to me, if I thought it would do him any harm. He's my pet. What in the world have I to do but to pet him? How shall I fill my time? I'm tired of society, and disgusted with men—at least, with my old acquaintances—and I'm fond of children. They do me good. Oh, you mustn't touch my whim!"

"There is no accounting for tastes!" Mr. Belcher responded, with a laugh that had a spice of scorn and vexation in it.

"Now, General, what do you care for that boy? If you are a friend to me, you ought to be glad that he interests me."

"I don't like the man who has him in charge. I believe Balfour is a villain."

"I'm sure I don't know," said the lady. "He never has the courtesy to darken my door. I once saw something of him. He is like all the rest, I suppose; he is tired of me."

Mrs. Dillingham had played her part perfectly, and the man before her was a blind believer in her loyalty to him.

"Let the boy go, and Balfour too," said the General. "They are not pleasant topics to me, and your whim will wear out. When is the boy coming back?"

"He is to be away all summer, I believe."

"Good!"

Mrs. Dillingham laughed.

"Why, I am glad of it, if you are," she said.

Mr. Belcher drew a little book from his pocket.

"What have you there?" the lady inquired.

"Women have great curiosity," said Mr. Belcher, slapping his knee with the little volume.

"And men delight to excite it," she responded.

"The General is a business man, and you want to know how he does it," said he.

"I do, upon my word," responded the lady.

"Very well, the General has two kinds of business, and he never mixes one with the other."

"I don't understand."

"Well, you know he's a manufacturer—got his start in that way. So he keeps that business by itself, and when he operates in Wall Street, he operates outside of it. He never risks a dollar that he makes in his regular business in any outside operation."

"And you have it all in the little book?"

"Would you like to see it?"

"Yes."

"Very well, you shall, when I've told you all about it. I suppose that it must have been ten years ago that a man came to Sevenoaks who was full of all sorts of inventions. I tried some of them, and they worked well; so I went on furnishing money to him, and, at last, I furnished so much that he passed all his rights into my hands—sold everything to me. He got into trouble, and lost his head—went into an insane hospital, where I supported him for more than two years. Then he was sent back as incurable, and, of course, had to go to the poor-house. I couldn't support him always, you know. I'd paid him fairly, run all the risk, and felt that my hands were clean."

"He had sold everything to you, hadn't he?" inquired Mrs. Dillingham, sympathetically.

"Certainly, I have the contract, legally drawn, signed, and delivered."

"People couldn't blame you, of course."

"But they did."

"How could they, if you paid him all that belonged to him?"

"That's Sevenoaks. That's the thing that drove me

away. Benedict escaped, and they all supposed he was dead, and fancied that because I had made money out of him, I was responsible for him in some way. But I punished them. They'll remember me."

And Mr. Belcher laughed a brutal laugh that rasped Mrs. Dillingham's sensibilities almost beyond endurance.

"And, now," said the General, resuming, "this man Balfour means to get these patents, that I've owned and used for from seven to ten years, out of me. Perhaps he will do it, but it will be after the biggest fight that New York ever saw."

Mrs. Dillingham eyed the little book. She was very curious about it. She was delightfully puzzled to know how these men who had the power of making money managed their affairs. Account-books were such conundrums to her!

She took a little hassock, placed it by Mr. Belcher's chair, and sat down, leaning by the weight of a feather against him. It was the first approach of the kind she had ever made, and the General appreciated it.

"Now you shall show me all about it," she said.

The General opened the book. It contained the results, in the briefest space, of his profits from the Benedict inventions. It showed just how and where all those profits had been invested and re-invested. Her admiration of the General's business habits and methods was unbounded. She asked a thousand silly questions, with one, occasionally, which touched an important point. She thanked him for the confidence he reposed in her. She was delighted to know his system, which seemed to her to guard him from the accidents so common to those engaged in great enterprises; and Mr. Belcher drank in her flatteries with supreme satisfaction. They comforted him. They were balm to his disappointments. They soothed his wounded vanity. They assured him of perfect trust where he most tenderly wanted it.

In the midst of these delightful confidences, they were interrupted. A servant appeared who told Mr. Belcher that there was a messenger at the door who wished to see him on urgent business. Mrs. Dillingham took the little book to hold while he went to the door. After a few minutes, he returned. It seemed that Phipps, who knew his master's habits, had directed the messenger to inquire for him at Mrs. Dillingham's house, and that his brokers were in trouble and desired his immediate presence in Wall Street. The General was very much vexed with the interruption, but declared that he should be obliged to follow the messenger.

"Leave the little book until you come back," insisted Mrs. Dillingham, sweetly. "It will amuse me all day."

She held it to her breast with both hands, as if it were the sweetest treasure that had ever rested there.

"Will you take care of it?"

"Yes."

He seized her unresisting hand and kissed it.

"Between this time and dinner I shall be back. Then I must have it again," he said.

"Certainly."

Then the General retired, went to his house and found his carriage waiting, and, in less than an hour, was absorbed in ravelling the snarled affairs connected with his recent disastrous speculation. The good-nature engendered by his delightful interview with Mrs. Dillingham lasted all day, and helped him like a cordial.

The moment he was out of the house, and had placed himself beyond the possibility of immediate return, the lady called her servant, and told him that she should be at home to nobody during the day. No one was to be admitted but Mr. Belcher, on any errand whatsoever.

Then she went to her room, and looked the little book over at her leisure. There was no doubt about the business skill and method of the man who had made every

entry. There was no doubt in her own mind that it was a private book, which no eye but that of its owner had ever seen, before it had been opened to her.

She hesitated upon the point of honor as to what she would do with it. It would be treachery to copy it, but it would be treachery simply against a traitor. She did not understand its legal importance, yet she knew it contained the most valuable information. It showed, in unmistakable figures, the extent to which Benedict had been wronged. Perfectly sure that it was a record of the results of fraud against a helpless man and a boy in whom her heart was profoundly interested, her hesitation was brief. She locked her door, gathered her writing materials, and, by an hour's careful and rapid work, copied every word of it.

After completing the copy, she went over it again and again, verifying every word and figure. When she had repeated the process to her entire satisfaction, and even to weariness, she took her pen, and after writing: "This is a true copy of the records of a book this day lent to me by Robert Belcher," she affixed the date and signed her name.

Then she carefully wrapped Mr. Belcher's book in a sheet of scented paper, wrote his name and the number and street of his residence upon it, and placed it in her pocket. The copy was consigned to a drawer and locked in, to be recalled and re-perused at pleasure.

She understood the General's motives in placing these records and figures in her hands. The leading one, of course, related to his standing with her. He wanted her to know how rich he was, how prudent he was, how invincible he was. He wanted her to stand firm in her belief in him, whatever rumors might be afloat upon the street. Beyond this, though he had made no allusion to it, she knew that he wanted the use of her tongue among his friends and enemies alike. She was a talking wo-

man, and it was easy for her, who had been so much at home in the General's family, to strengthen his reputation wherever she might touch the public. He wanted somebody to know what his real resources were—somebody who could, from personal knowledge of his affairs, assert their soundness without revealing their details. He believed that Mrs. Dillingham would be so proud of the possession of his confidence, and so prudent in showing it, that his general business reputation, and his reputation for great wealth, would be materially strengthened by her. All this she understood, because she knew the nature of the man, and appreciated the estimate which he placed upon her.

Nothing remained for her that day but the dreaded return of Mr. Belcher. She was now more than ever at a loss to know how she should manage him. She had resumed, during her interview with him, her old arts of fascination, and seen how easily she could make him the most troublesome of slaves. She had again permitted him to kiss her hand. She had asked a favor of him and he had granted it. She had committed a breach of trust; and though she justified herself in it, she felt afraid and half ashamed to meet the man whom she had so thoroughly befooled. She was disgusted with the new intimacy with him which her own hand had invited, and heartily wished that the long game of duplicity were concluded.

The General found more to engage his attention than he had anticipated, and after a few hours' absence from the fascinations of his idol, he began to feel uneasy about his book. It was the first time it had ever left his hands. He grew nervous about it at last, and was haunted by a vague sense of danger. As soon, therefore, as it became apparent to him that a second call upon Mrs. Dillingham that day would be impracticable, he sent Phipps to her with a note apprising her of the

fact, and asking her to deliver to him the little account book he had left with her.

It was with a profound sense of relief that she handed it to the messenger, and realized that, during that day and evening at least, she should be free, and so able to gather back her old composure and self-assurance. Mr. Belcher's note she placed with her copy of the book, as her authority for passing it into other hands than those of its owner.

While these little things, which were destined to have large consequences, were in progress in the city, an incident occurred in the country, of no less importance in the grand outcome of events relating to Mr. Belcher and his victim.

It will be remembered that after Mr. Belcher had been apprised by his agent at Sevenoaks that Mr. Benedict was undoubtedly alive, and that he had lived, ever since his disappearance, at Number Nine, he wrote to Sam Yates, putting profitable business into his hands, and that he also directed his agent to attach him, by all possible means, to the proprietor's interests. His motive, of course, was to shut the lawyer's mouth concerning the autograph letters he had furnished. He knew that Yates would remember the hints of forgery which he had breathed into his ear during their first interview in the city, and would not be slow to conclude that those autographs were procured for some foul purpose. He had been careful, from the first, not to break up the friendly relations that existed between them, and now that he saw that the lawyer had played him false, he was more anxious than ever to conciliate him.

Yates attended faithfully to the business intrusted to him, and, on reporting results to Mr. Belcher's agent, according to his client's directions, was surprised to find him in a very friendly and confidential mood, and ready with a proposition for further service. There were tan-

gled affairs in which he needed the lawyer's assistance, and, as he did not wish to have the papers pertaining to them leave his possession, he invited Yates to his house, where they could work together during the brief evenings, when he would be free from the cares of the mill.

So, for two or three weeks, Sam Yates occupied Mr. Belcher's library—the very room in which that person was first introduced to the reader. There, under the shade of the old Seven Oaks, he worked during the day, and there, in the evening, he held his consultations with the agent.

One day, during his work, he mislaid a paper, and in his search for it, had occasion to examine the structure of the grand library table at which he wrote. The table had two sides, finished and furnished exactly alike, with duplicate sets of drawers opposite to each other. He pulled out one of these drawers completely, to ascertain whether his lost paper had not slipped through a crack and lodged beyond it. In reaching in, he moved, or thought he moved, the drawer that met him from the opposite side. On going to the opposite side, however, he found that he had not moved the drawer at all. He then pulled that out, and, endeavoring to look through the space thus vacated by both drawers, found that it was blocked by some obstacle that had been placed between them. Finding a cane in a corner of the room, he thrust it in, and pushed through to the opposite side a little secret drawer, unfurnished with a knob, but covered with a lid.

He resumed his seat, and held the little box in his hand. Before he had time to think of what he was doing, or to appreciate the fact that he had no right to open a secret drawer, he had opened it. It contained but one article, and that was a letter directed to Paul Benedict. The letter was sealed, so that he was measurably relieved from the temptation to examine its con-

tents. Of one thing he felt sure: that if it contained anything prejudicial to the writer's interests—and it was addressed in the handwriting of Robert Belcher—it had been forgotten. It might be of great importance to the inventor. The probabilities were, that a letter which was deemed of sufficient importance to secrete in so remarkable a manner was an important one.

To Sam Yates, as to Mrs. Dillingham, with the little book in her hand, arose the question of honor at once. His heart was with Benedict. He was sure that Belcher had some foul purpose in patronizing himself, yet he went through a hard struggle before he could bring himself to the determination that Benedict and not Belcher should have the first handling of the letter. Although the latter had tried to degrade him, and was incapable of any good motive in extending patronage to him, he felt that he had unintentionally surrounded him with influences which had saved him from the most disgraceful ruin. He was at that very moment in his employ. He was eating every day the bread which his patronage provided.

After all, was he not earning his bread? Was he under any obligation to Mr. Belcher which his honest and faithful labor did not discharge? Mr. Belcher had written and addressed the letter. He would deliver it, and Mr. Benedict should decide whether, under all the circumstances, the letter was rightfully his. He put it in his pocket, placed the little box back in its home, replaced the drawers which hid it, and went on with his work.

Yates carried the letter around in his pocket for several days. He did not believe the agent knew either of the existence of the letter or the drawer in which it was hidden. There was, in all probability, no man but himself in the world who knew anything of the letter. If it was a paper of no importance to anybody, of

course Mr. Belcher had forgotten it. If it was of great importance to Mr. Benedict, Mr. Belcher believed that it had been destroyed.

He had great curiosity concerning its contents, and determined to deliver it into Mr. Benedict's hand; so, at the conclusion of his engagement with Mr. Belcher's agent, he announced to his friends that he had accepted Jim Fenton's invitation to visit the new hotel at Number Nine, and enjoy a week of sport in the woods.

Before he returned, he became entirely familiar with the contents of the letter, and, if he brought it back with him on his return to Sevenoaks, it was for deposit in the post-office, directed to James Balfour in the handwriting of Paul Benedict.

The contents of this note were of such importance in the establishment of justice, that Yates, still doubtful of the propriety of his act, was able to justify it to his conscience. Under the circumstances, it belonged to the man to whom it was addressed, and not to Mr. Belcher at all. His own act might be doubtful, but it was in the interest of fair dealing, and in opposition to the schemes of a consummate rascal, to whom he owed neither respect nor good-will. He would stand by it, and take the consequences of it.

Were Mrs. Dillingham and Sam Yates justifiable in their treachery to Mr. Belcher? A nice question this, in casuistry! Certainly they had done as they would have been done by, had he been in their circumstances and they in his. He, at least, who had tried to debauch both of them, could reasonably find no fault with them. Their act was the natural result of his own influence. It was fruit from seeds of his own sowing. Had he ever approached them with a single noble and unselfish motive, neither of them could have betrayed him.