

CHAPTER XXV.

IN WHICH THE GENERAL GOES THROUGH A GREAT MANY TRIALS, AND MEETS AT LAST THE ONE HE HAS SO LONG ANTICIPATED.

THE fact that the General had deposited the proceeds of his foreign sales of arms with a European banking house, ostensibly subject to draft for the materials of his manufactures, has already been alluded to. This deposit had been augmented by subsequent sales, until it amounted to an imposing sum, which Mrs. Dillingham ascertained, from the little account-book, to be drawing a low rate of interest. With the proprietor, this heavy foreign deposit was partly a measure of personal safety, and partly a measure of projected iniquity. He had the instinct to provide against any possible contingencies of fortune or crime.

Two or three days after his very agreeable call upon Mrs. Dillingham, he had so far mastered his difficulties connected with the International Mail that he could find time for another visit, to which he had looked forward with eager anticipation.

"I was very much interested in your little book, Mr. Belcher," said the lady, boldly.

"The General is one of the ablest of our native authors, eh?" responded that facetious person, with a jolly laugh.

"Decidedly," said Mrs. Dillingham, "and so very terse and statistical."

"Interesting book, wasn't it?"

"Very! And it was so kind of you, General, to let me see how you men manage such things!"

"We men!" and the General shrugged his shoulders.

"One man, then," said the lady, on seeing that he

was disposed to claim a monopoly in the wisdom of business.

"Do you remember one little item—a modest little item—concerning my foreign deposits? Eh?"

"Little item, General! What are you doing with so much money over there?"

"Nothing, or next to nothing. That's my anchor to windward."

"It will hold," responded the lady, "if weight is all that's needed."

"I intend that it shall hold, and that it shall be larger before it is smaller."

"I don't understand it;" and Mrs. Dillingham shook her pretty head.

Mr. Belcher sat and thought. There was a curious flush upon his face, as he raised his eyes to hers, and looked intensely into them, in the endeavor to read the love that hid behind them. He was desperately in love with her. The passion, a thousand times repelled by her, and a thousand times diverted by the distractions of his large affairs, had been raised to new life by his last meeting with her; and the determinations of his will grew strong, almost to fierceness. He did not know what to say, or how to approach the subject nearest to his heart. He had always frightened her so easily; she had been so quick to resent any approach to undue familiarity; she had so steadily ignored his insinuations, that he was disarmed.

"What are you thinking about, General?"

"You've never seen me in one of my trances, have you?" inquired Mr. Belcher, with trembling lips and a forced laugh.

"No! Do you have trances?"

"Trances? Yes; and visions of the most stunning character. Talbot has seen me in two or three of them."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Not at all. The General's visions are always of a celestial character—warranted not to injure the most delicate constitution! I feel one of them coming on now. Don't disturb me."

"Shall I fan you?"

"Do, please!"

The General closed his eyes. He had never before betrayed such excitement in her presence, and had never before appeared so dangerous. While she determined that this should be her last exposure to his approaches, she maintained her brave and unsuspecting demeanor, and playfully waved her fan toward him.

"I behold," said the General, "a business man of great ability and great wealth, who discovers too late that his wife is unequally yoked with an unbeliever. Love abides not in his home, and his heart is afloat on the fierce, rolling sea. He leaves his abode in the country, and seeks in the tumultuous life of the metropolis to drown his disappointments. He there discovers a beautiful woman, cast in Nature's finest mould, and finds himself, for the first time, matched. Gently this heavenly creature repels him, though her heart yearns toward him with unmistakable tenderness. She is a prudent woman. She has a position to maintain. She is alone. She is a friend to the wife of this unfortunate gentleman. She is hindered in many ways from giving rein to the impulses of her heart. This man of wealth deposits a magnificent sum in Europe. This lady goes thither for health and amusement, and draws upon this sum at will. She travels from capital to capital, or hides herself in Alpine villages, but is found at last by him who has laid his wealth at her feet."

The General revealed his vision with occasional glances through half-closed eyes at the face that hung bowed before him. It was a desperate step, but he had deter-

mined to take it when he entered the house. Humiliated, tormented, angry, Mrs. Dillingham sat before him, covering from his sight as well as she could the passion that raged within her. She knew that she had invited the insult. She was conscious that her treatment of him, from the first, though she had endeavored to change her relations with him without breaking his friendship, had nursed his base passion and his guilty purpose. She was undergoing a just punishment, and acknowledged to herself the fact. Once she would have delighted in tormenting him. Once she would not have hesitated to drive him from her door. Once—but she was changed. A little boy who had learned to regard her as a mother, was thinking of her in the distant woods. She had fastened to that childish life the hungry instincts of her motherly nature. She had turned away forever from all that could dishonor the lad, or hinder her from receiving his affection without an upbraiding conscience.

Mr. Belcher's instincts were quick enough to see that his vision had not prospered in the mind to which he had revealed it; and yet, there was a hesitation in the manner of the woman before him which he could not explain to himself, if he admitted that his proposition had been wholly offensive. Mrs. Dillingham's only wish was to get him out of the house. If she could accomplish this without further humiliation, it was all she desired.

"General," she said, at last, "you must have been drinking. I do not think you know what you have said to me."

"On the contrary, I am perfectly sober," said he, rising and approaching her.

"You must not come near me. Give me time! give me time!" she exclaimed, rising and retreating.

Mr. Belcher was startled by the alarmed and angry

look in her eyes. "Time!" he said, fiercely; "Eternity, you mean."

"You pretend to care for me, and yet you disobey what you know to be my wish. Prove your friendship by leaving me. I wish to be alone."

"Leave you, with not so much as the touch of your hand?" he said.

"Yes."

The General turned on his heel, took up his hat, paused at the door as if hesitating what to do; then, without a word, he went downstairs and into the street, overwhelmed with self-pity. He had done so much, risked so much, and accomplished so little! That she was fond of him there was no question in his own mind; but women were so different from men! Yet the villain knew that if she had been easily won his heart would have turned against her. The prize grew more precious through the obstacles that came between him and its winning. The worst was over, at least; she knew his project; and it would all come right in time!

As soon as he was out of the house, Mrs. Dillingham burst into a fit of uncontrollable weeping. She had passed through the great humiliation of her life. The tree which she had planted and nursed through many years of unworthy aims had borne its natural fruit. She groaned under the crushing punishment. She almost cursed herself. Her womanly instincts were quick to apprehend the fact that only by her own consent or invitation, could any man reach a point so near to any woman that he could coolly breathe in her ear a base proposition. Yet, with all her self-loathing and self-condemnation, was mingled a hatred of the vile man who had insulted her, which would have killed him had it been possible for him to know and realize it.

After her first passion had passed away, the question concerning her future came up for settlement. She could

not possibly remain near Mr. Belcher. She must not be exposed to further visits from him. The thought that in the little account-book which she had copied there was a record that covered a design for her own destruction, stung her to the quick. What should she do? She would consult Mr. Balfour.

She knew that on that evening Mr. Belcher would not be at home, that after the excitements and disappointments of that day he would seek for solace in any place but that which held his wife and children. So, muffled in a slight disguise, and followed by her servant, she stole out of her house during the evening, and sought the house of the lawyer. To him she poured out her heart. To him she revealed all that had passed between her and the proprietor, and to him she committed the care of the precious document of which she had possessed herself, and the little note that accompanied it.

Mr. Balfour advised her to leave the city at once, and to go to some place where Mr. Belcher would not be able to find her. He knew of no place so fit for her in every respect as Number Nine, with his own family and those most dear to her. Her boy and his father were there; it was health's own home; and she could remain away as long as it might be necessary. She would be wanted as a witness in a few months, at furthest, in a suit which he believed would leave her persecutor in a position where, forgetting others, he would be absorbed in the effort to take care of himself.

Her determination was taken at once. Mr. Balfour accompanied her home, and gave her all the necessary directions for her journey; and that night she packed a single trunk in readiness for it. In the morning, leaving her house to the care of trusty servants, she rode to the station, while Mr. Belcher was lolling feverishly in his bed, and in an hour was flying northward toward the place that was to be her summer home, and into a region

that was destined to be associated with her future life, through changes and revolutions of which she did not dream.

After her thirty-six hours of patient and fatiguing travel, the company at Jim Fenton's hotel, eager for letters from the city, stood on the bank of the river, waiting the arrival of the guide who had gone down for the mail, and such passengers as he might find in waiting. They saw, as he came in sight, a single lady in the stern of the little boat, deeply veiled, whose name they could not guess. When she debarked among them, and looked around upon the waiting and curious group, Harry was the first to detect her, and she smothered him with kisses. Mr. Benedict stood pale and trembling. Harry impulsively led her toward him, and in a moment they were wrapped in a tender embrace. None but Mrs. Balfour, of all who were present, understood the relation that existed between the two, thus strangely reunited; but it soon became known, and the little romance added a new charm to the life in the woods.

It would be pleasant to dwell upon the happy days and the pleasant doings of the summer that followed—the long twilights that Mr. Benedict and Mrs. Dillingham spent upon the water, their review of the events of the past, the humble confessions of the proud lady, the sports and diversions of the wilderness, and the delights of society brought by circumstances into the closest sympathy. It would be pleasant to remain with Jim and “the little woman,” in their new enterprise and their new house-keeping; but we must return to the city, to follow the fortunes of one who, if less interesting than those we leave behind, is more important in the present stage and ultimate resolution of our little drama.

Soon after Mrs. Dillingham's departure from the city, Mr. Belcher missed her. Not content with the position in which he had left his affairs with her, he called at her

house three days after her disappearance, and learned that the servants either did not know or would not tell whither she had gone. In his blind self-conceit, he could not suppose that she had run away from him. He could not conclude that she had gone to Europe, without a word of her purpose breathed to him. Still, even that was possible. She had hidden somewhere, and he should hear from her. Had he frightened her? Had he been too precipitate? Much as he endeavored to explain her sudden disappearance to his own advantage, he was left unsatisfied and uneasy.

A few days passed away, and then he began to doubt. Thrown back upon himself, deprived of the solace of her society, and released from a certain degree of restraint that she had always exercised upon him, he indulged more freely in drink, and entered with more recklessness upon the excitements of speculation.

The General had become conscious that he was not quite the man that he had been. His mind was darkened and dulled by crime. He was haunted by vague fears and apprehensions. With his frequent and appalling losses of money, he had lost a measure of his faith in himself. His coolness of calculation had been diminished; he listened with readier credulity to rumors, and yielded more easily to the personal influences around him. Even the steady prosperity which attended his regular business became a factor in his growing incapacity for the affairs of the street. His reliance on his permanent sources of income made him more reckless in his speculations.

His grand schemes for “gently” and “tenderly” unloading his Crooked Valley stock upon the hands of his trusting dupes along the line, worked, however, to perfection. It only required rascality, pure and simple, under the existing conditions, to accomplish this scheme, and he found in the results nothing left to be desired.

They furnished him with a capital of ready money, but his old acquaintances discovered the foul trick he had played, and gave him a wide berth. No more gigantic combinations were possible to him, save with swindlers like himself, who would not hesitate to sacrifice him as readily and as mercilessly as he had sacrificed his rural victims.

Mrs. Dillingham had been absent a month when he one day received a polite note from Mr. Balfour, as Paul Benedict's attorney, requesting him, on behalf of his principal, to pay over to him an equitable share of the profits upon his patented inventions, and to enter into a definite contract for the further use of them.

The request came in so different a form from what he had anticipated, and was so tamely courteous, that he laughed over the note in derision. "Milk for babes!" he exclaimed, and laughed again. Either Balfour was a coward, or he felt that his case was a weak one. Did he think the General was a fool?

Without taking the note to Cavendish, who had told him to bring ten thousand dollars when he came again, and without consulting anybody, he wrote the following note in answer:

"TO JAMES BALFOUR, ESQ.:

"Your letter of this date received, and contents noted. Permit me to say in reply:

"1st. That I have no evidence that you are Paul Benedict's attorney.

"2d. That I have no evidence that Paul Benedict is living, and that I do not propose to negotiate in any way, on any business, with a fraud, or a man of straw.

"3d. That I am the legal assignee of all the patents originally issued to Paul Benedict, which I have used and am now using. I hold his assignment in the desk on which I write this letter, and it stands duly recorded in Washington, though, from my ignorance of the law, it has only recently been placed upon the book in the Patent Office.

"Permit me to say, in closing, that, as I bear you no malice, I will show you the assignment at your pleasure, and thus relieve you from the danger of entering upon a conspiracy to defraud me of rights which I propose, with all the means at my disposal, to defend.

"Yours,
ROBERT BELCHER."

Mr. Belcher read over this letter with great satisfaction. It seemed to him very dignified and very wise. He had saved his ten thousand dollars for a while, at least, and bluffed, as he sincerely believed, his dreaded antagonist.

Mr. Balfour did more than to indulge in his professional smile, over the frank showing of the General's hand, and the voluntary betrayal of his line of defence. He filed away the note among the papers relating to the case, took his hat, walked across the street, rang the bell, and sent up his card to Mr. Belcher. That self-complacent gentleman had not expected this visit, although he had suggested it. Instead, therefore, of inviting Mr. Balfour to his library, he went down to the drawing-room, where he found his visitor, quietly sitting with his hat in his hand. The most formal of courtesies opened the conversation, and Mr. Balfour stated his business at once. "You were kind enough to offer to show me the assignment of Mr. Benedict's patents," he said. "I have called to see it."

"I've changed my mind," said the General.

"Do you suspect me of wishing to steal it?" inquired Mr. Balfour.

"No, but the fact is, I wrote my note to you without consulting my lawyer."

"I thought so," said Mr. Balfour. "Good-day, sir."

"No offence, I hope," said Mr. Belcher, with a peculiar toss of the head, and a laugh.

"Not the least," said the lawyer, passing out of the door.

The General felt that he had made a mistake. He was in the habit of making mistakes in those days. The habit was growing upon him. Indeed, he suspected that he had made a mistake in not boldly exhibiting his assignment. How to manage a lie, and not be managed by it, was a question that had puzzled wiser heads than that of the General. He found an egg in his possession that he was not ready to eat, though it was too hot to be held long in either hand, and could not be dropped without disaster.

For a week, he was haunted with the expectation of a suit, but it was not brought, and then he began to breathe easier, and to feel that something must be done to divert his mind from the subject. He drank freely, and was loud-mouthed and blustering on the street. Poor Talbot had a hard time, in endeavoring to shield him from his imprudences. He saw that his effort to make his principal "last" was not likely to be successful.

Rallied by his "friends" on his ill-luck, the General declared that he only speculated for fun. He knew what he was about. He never risked any money that he could not afford to lose. Everybody had his amusement, and this was his.

He was secure for some months in his seat as President of the Crooked Valley Railroad, and calculated, of course, on buying back his stock in his own time, at his own price. In the meantime, he would use his position for carrying on his private schemes.

The time came at last when he wanted more ready money. A grand combination had been made, among his own unprincipled set, for working up a "corner" in the Muscogee Air Line, and he had been invited into it. He was flattered by the invitation, and saw in it a chance for redeeming his position, though, at bottom, the scheme was one for working up a corner in Robert Belcher.

Under the plea that he expected, at no distant day, to go to Europe, for rest and amusement, he mortgaged his house, in order, as he declared, that he might handle it the more easily in the market. But Wall Street knew the fact at once, and made its comments. Much to the proprietor's disgust, it was deemed of sufficient importance to find mention in the daily press.

But even the sum raised upon his house, united with that which he had received from unloading his Crooked Valley stock, was not sufficient to give him the preponderance in the grand combination which he desired.

He still held a considerable sum in Crooked Valley bonds, for these were valuable. He had already used these as collaterals, in the borrowing of small sums at short time, to meet emergencies in his operations. It was known by money-lenders that he held them. Now, the General was the manufacturer of these bonds. The books of the corporation were under his control, and he intended that they should remain so. It was very easy for him to make an over-issue, and hard for him to be detected in his fraud by any one who would be dangerous to him. The temptation to make this issue was one which better men than he had yielded to in a weak moment, and, to the little conscience which he possessed, the requisite excuses were ready. He did not intend that any one should lose money by these bonds. He only proposed a temporary relief to himself. So he manufactured the bonds, and raised the money he wanted.

Meantime, the members of the very combination in which he had engaged, having learned of his rascally operation with the stock, were secretly buying it back from the dupes along the road, at their own figures, with the purpose of ousting him from the management, and taking the road to themselves. Of this movement he did not learn until it was too late to be of use to him.

It was known, in advance, by the combination, that

the working up of the corner in Muscogee Air Line would be a long operation. The stock had to be manipulated with great care, to avoid exciting a suspicion of the nature of the scheme, and the General had informed the holders of his notes that it might be necessary for him to renew them before he should realize from his operations. He had laid all his plans carefully, and looked forward with an interest which none but he and those of his kind could appreciate, to the excitements, intrigues, marches and countermarches of the mischievous campaign.

And then came down upon him the prosecution which he had so long dreaded, and for which he had made the only preparation consistent with his greedy designs. Ten thousand dollars of his ready money passed at once into the hands of Mr. Cavendish, and Mr. Cavendish was satisfied with the fee, whatever may have been his opinion of the case. After a last examination of his forged assignment, and the putting of Phipps to an exhaustive and satisfactory trial of his memory with relation to it, he passed it into the lawyer's hands, and went about his business with uncomfortable forebodings of the trial and its results.

It was strange, even to him, at this point of his career, that he felt within himself no power to change his course. No one knew better than he, that there was money enough in Benedict's inventions for both inventor and manufacturer. No one knew better than he, that there was a prosperous course for himself inside the pale of equity and law, yet he found no motive to walk there. For the steps he had taken, there seemed no retreat. He must go on, on, to the end. The doors that led back to his old life had closed behind him. Those which opened before were not inviting, but he could not stand still. So he hardened his face, braced his nerves, stiffened his determination, and went on.

Of course he passed a wretched summer. He had intended to get away for rest, or, rather, for an exhibition of himself and his equipage at Newport, or Saratoga, or Long Branch; but through all the burning days of the season he was obliged to remain in the city, while other men were away and off their guard, to watch his Wall Street operations, and prepare for the *coup de grace* by which he hoped to regain his lost treasure and his forfeited position. The legal trial that loomed up before him, among the clouds of autumn, could not be contemplated without a shiver and a sinking of the heart. His preparations for it were very simple, as they mainly related to the establishment of the genuineness of his assignment.

The months flew away more rapidly with the proprietor than with any of the other parties interested in the suit, and when, at last, only a fortnight was wanting to the time of the expected trial, Mr. Balfour wrote to Number Nine, ordering his family home, and requiring the presence of Mr. Benedict, Mrs. Dillingham, Harry and Jim.

Just at this time, the General found himself in fresh difficulty. The corner in Muscogee Air Line was as evasive as a huckleberry in a mouth bereft of its armament. Indeed, to use still further the homely but suggestive figure, the General found that his tongue was in more danger than his huckleberry. His notes, too, secured by fraudulent collaterals, were approaching a second and third maturity. He was without ready money for the repurchase of his Crooked Valley stock, and had learned, in addition, that the stock had already changed hands, in the execution of a purpose which he more than suspected. Large purchases of material for the execution of heavy contracts in his manufactures had drained his ready resources, in the department of his regular business. He was getting short, and into a tight

place. Still he was desperate, and determined to sacrifice nothing.

Mr. Benedict and Jim, on their arrival in the city, took up their residence in Mrs. Dillingham's house, and the landlord of Number Nine spent several days in making the acquaintance of the city, under the guidance of his old companion, who was at home. Jim went through a great mental convulsion. At first, what seemed to him the magnitude of the life, enterprise, and wealth of the city, depressed him. He declared that he "had be'n growin' smaller an' smaller every minute" since he left Sevenoaks. "I felt as if I'd allers be'n a fly, crawlin' 'round on the edge of a pudden," he said, when asked whether he enjoyed the city. But, before the trial came on, he had fully recovered his old equanimity. The city grew smaller the more he explored it, until, when compared with the great woods, the lonely rivers, and the broad solitudes in which he had spent his life, it seemed like a toy; and the men who chattered in the market, and the women who thronged the avenues, or drove in the park, or filled the places of amusement, came to look like children, engaged in frolicsome games. He felt that people who had so little room to breathe in must be small; and before the trial brought him into practical contact with them, he was himself again, and quite ready to meet them in any encounter which required courage or address.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN WHICH THE CASE OF "BENEDICT *vs.* BELCHER" FINDS ITSELF IN COURT, AN INTERESTING QUESTION OF IDENTITY IS SETTLED, AND A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE TAKES PLACE.

"OYEZ! Oyez! All - persons - having - business - to - do - with - the - Circuit - Court - of - the - United - States - for - the - Southern - District - of - New - York, - draw - near, - give - your - attention, - and - you - shall - be - heard."

"That's the crier," whispered Mr. Benedict to Jim.

"What's the matter of 'im?" inquired the latter.

"That's the way they open the court."

"Well, if he opens it with cryin', he'll have a tough time a shuttin' on it," responded Jim, in a whisper so loud that he attracted attention.

There within the bar sat Mr. Balfour, calmly examining his papers. He looked up among the assembled jurors, witnesses, and idlers, and beckoned Benedict to his side. There sat Robert Belcher with his counsel. The great rascal was flashily dressed, with a stupendous show of shirt-front, over which fell, down by the side of the diamond studs, a heavy gold chain. Brutality, vulgarity, self-assurance and an overbearing will, all expressed themselves in his broad face, bold eyes and heavy chin. Mr. Cavendish, with his uneasy scalp, white hands, his scornful lips and his thin, twitching nostrils, looked the very impersonation of impatience and contempt. If the whole court-room had been thronged with vermin instead of human beings, among which he was obliged to sit, he could not have appeared more disgusted. Quite retired among the audience, and deeply veiled, sat Mrs. Dillingham. Mr. Belcher detected her, and, though he could not see her face, felt that he could