

The Dramatic Author

Waters

DURING my third year of service in the force I was a frequent visitor in the evenings at the Wrekin Tavern, an establishment well known to most Londoners. My especial business there was to be on the watch for a certain tradesman, whose predilection for convivial, and particularly theatrical society, had led him step by step to distaste for and neglect of his business, and finally to a ruin of a deeper dye than inability to meet pecuniary obligations commonly involves. I waited and watched in vain: Mr. Stephen H— did not again show himself at his once favorite place of resort, and ultimately effected his escape to America, though the pursuit after him was very hot indeed. As far, therefore, as he was concerned my time was thrown away, and I should have escaped much disquietude had these visits to the Wrekin been wholly barren in professional experience.

It was not to be so: one of the *habitués* of the place was a young and quite unmistakable Celt, though his name, which I need not write at length, was a common English one. His face was intellectual rather than handsome, but there was much spiritual beauty in his dark eyes and flashing smile. He had, I was told, taken a degree at Trinity College, Dublin, had written with success in the fugitive literature of that capital, and about four months previously to my night acquaintance with him arrived in London with the manuscript of a five-act tragedy, acceptance of which by the management of one of the large theatres he was still awaiting with a nervous impatience, strongly dashed with misgiving, notwithstanding that all those amongst his tavern-associates to whom he had read the play were unanimously of opinion that it was a work of wondrous genius. C—was a prime favorite with the frequenters of the Wrekin; quick in repartee, and an ever-flowing fount of genial, if not very exquisite humor. He sang well, too; and one particular song said to be his own composition, both in words and music, twice or thrice during the same evening. It did not much impress me with an idea of his skill as a writer of ballads, it being a mere echo of the sensuous sweetness of Moore's songs, and its main gist to persuade the fair one to whom it was addressed that true wisdom consisted in enjoying herself whilst she could, forasmuch that, though her lips were roses, her eyes stars, her breath the sighs of flowerets in heaven, she might die ere the morrow! Nothing very new or striking in that, it seemed to me. His dramatic genius might, however, be of a higher order than his song power, and, if so, I sincerely hoped that its successful manifestation would not be long delayed; for, even to a stranger, it was a sad sight to see a man of evidently great promise so wasting, soiling his golden prime; brightening, night after night, the thick smoke of intoxication with flashes of a genius which, if possibly unequal, to the creation of a great tragedy, was certainly of a diviner quality than is vouchsafed to the ordinary run of educated men. The Helicon, the draughts of which I had read inspired or stimulated the poetic soul, was not, I felt quite sure, brandy and water.

There were other circumstances which quickened the sort of languid interest which from the first I felt in the gifted young Irishman. He was himself well dressed, and appeared to be tolerably well-supplied with money. His board, I suspected, cost very little; his drink expenses, including frequent treats to others, could not certainly exceed fifteen, or say twenty shillings, per diem—outgoings which a small legacy he had come into possession of just before he left Dublin sufficed as yet to meet. But there was an elderly, gray-haired man, almost constantly sitting by

his side at the Wrekin, whose thread-bare habiliments and niggardly expenditure contrasted strangely with the fashionable apparel and lavish outlay of the young man, for whom he evidently felt the tenderest regard, the highest admiration. I noticed that Dobbs, as he was called—he was, I heard, a now shelved actor, who had been the original Dobbs in some play or farce—I noticed, I say, that Dobbs would sit for hours over one glass of ale or porter, almost constantly refused to be treated by the thoughtless author, and ever when the hour arrived—a sufficiently late one—for the departure of the general company, made use of every means of persuasion in his power—tears in his fading eyes, the name of Aileen (which, imperfectly overhearing, I mistook for Ellen), trembling from his thin, shrivelled lips—to induce him to go home, rarely with success. I felt a great respect for the original Dobbs. He might be a bad actor, but he certainly was a true gentleman, spite of his seedy clothes, his utter poverty, and the contaminating associations with which that poverty had forced him into contact.

I wished, in a half-careless way, to know something more of him and his connection with C—, and with that view questioned one Roberts, a conspicuous frequenter of the Wrekin, and, I was informed, a provincial actor of unquestionable talent, against whom so unaccountable a prejudice prevailed amongst the metropolitan managers, that he had never been able to obtain a London engagement. Now, I had closely observed this Roberts, in consequence of a vague notion I entertained that I had somewhere seen him under discreditable circumstances—not, however, being able, after much trying, to remember when or where; and he evidently having no recollection of me, I concluded that a real or fancied resemblance to another person had misled me.

“Is Dobbs, as you call him, related to C—?” I asked, amidst the clink and clatter attending the replenishment of pipes, pots, and glasses, at the conclusion of an uproariously-applauded song.

“Not yet,” replied Roberts, in a tone as guarded as my own. “Not yet; but if C—’s play be accepted and prove successful—and I hope my head will never ache till then—they will no doubt be father and son-in-law.”

“Dobbs has a daughter, then, whom C— is courting?”

“Yes; and a very nice girl indeed is Aileen M’Grath, but possessed of no more talent for the stage, which till C— fell in her way she was intended for, than her stick of a father. As to the play itself, which is to make all their fortunes,” continued Roberts, “it will never be accepted by any manager who has not lost his senses, and this the fellows here who praise it to the skies, and who will drain the conceited Celt of his last shilling before they have done with him, know as well as I do; ay, and they will tell him so too, when that last shilling is spent: not, probably, till then. C— is as devoid of true dramatic genius,” added Roberts, touching the empty glass before him with the end of his pipe, “as this glass is of brandy and water.”

I understood the hint quite well, but, as I had paid for the last tumbler, I did not see the expediency of acting upon it. The disappointment was a transient one.

“Roberts,” said C—, who had left the room for a few minutes, and was passing us on returning to his seat, “Roberts, you will take a glass, —two if you will,—with me this evening?”

“Thou ace of trumps, I will!” exclaimed Roberts, jumping up, and grasping C—’s hand with a natural assumption of friendship and esteem decisive of his talent as an actor; “thou ace of trumps, I will! Ace of hearts, as well as trumps, I should have said.”

“Let me tell you,” interrupted C—, “why I am in such capital spirits tonight. I met Harley this afternoon, and he assured me that my play has been read in the green-room to the chiefs of the company by Charles Kemble, and that a most favorable opinion has been expressed; some even predicting that its success will equal that of Knowles’s *Virginus*.”

“Why, of course it will!” was Roberts’s prompt rejoinder: “men are not stocks and stones; they have powers of appreciation; and knowing, as we all do, that Knowles’s play was made by Macready’s acting—that acting itself mere melodramatic strutting and spouting, by the way—the superior success of yours is not to be doubted. “Waiter,” added Mr. Roberts, as that functionary came up, and C— passed to his place, “two hot brandies and water for me—Mr. C— pays. Shillingsworths, mind.”

The order given, Mr. Roberts relit his pipe, favored me with an expressive wink, and resumed his former strain of scampish malignity, which I interrupted by a curt “Goodnight.”

During the next two months I looked in at the Wrekin two or three times a week, if I happened to be passing near; almost invariably found C— there, and knew without inquiring that the fate of his play was still undecided. His clothes were getting seedy, his watch and a diamond breast-pin had disappeared, and his bright young life seemed to be passing under the shadow of a great eclipse. The fire of his wit and humor flashed faintly at intervals only, and it was painfully manifest that the mental and moral wreck of a fine mind could only be averted by the speedy realization of the dream of success and fame by which he had been lured from the safe, beaten path of life. The original Dobbs, I observed, was still hopeful, or affected to be so; but his cheerful commonplaces fell upon ears deafer with each passing day to such windy consolation. Several times I was about to counsel the misguided young man to break away at all hazard from the thralldom of a dreaming idleness, and get to work of some sort—literary work, if none other were within his reach—but the half-formed words remained unspoken. What right had I to obtrude advice upon a person with whom I had never exchanged a word? It would have been sheer impertinence to do so. It was in the stars, nevertheless, that C— and I should be brought into close communication with each other. It came to pass thus wise.

The day when acceptance or rejection of the play by the Covent Garden management was to be definitively announced, had arrived, and C— awaited at the Wrekin with fierce restlessness the coming of the managerial missive which would decide his fate.

The afternoon had passed away, and evening was wearing late; still it came not, though Roberts, who had volunteered to go and question the stage-manager as to the reason of the delay, had been gone more than an hour. At last Dobbs, unable to bear the cruel suspense any longer, jumped up and left the room, declaring that he would see Mr. Charles Kemble himself, and be back in no time.

He had been gone about ten minutes only when Roberts bounced into the room. Instantly there was a dead silence; the smokers put down their pipes, and C—, trembling in every limb, staggered, as it were, to his feet, and with ashen lips quivered out, “Well?”

“It is *not* well, I am sorry to say,” replied Roberts, with a miserable affectation of sympathy. “Mr. Harley is grieved to say that the play has been rejected, and adds, that the MS. will be returned this evening or early tomorrow.”

Poor C— fell down in his seat as if shot, looked round with a wild, ghastly stare, and burst into a fit of laughter! One of the company sitting near proffered him a full glass of hot spirits and water, which he emptied at a gulp. It appeared to still his agitation; and looking round, as if his purpose needed excuse, he muttered some half-incoherent words, to the effect “that after such news he must take a draught of fresh air to revive himself;” and as his fevered eyes met mine, in passing me (he knew my vocation), he added, “that he should be back in five minutes, or less.”

A vague apprehension of the purpose for which he was hurrying away crossed my mind, and after a lapse of two or three minutes I started up to go in quest of the unfortunate youth.

As I opened the door to go out, I was almost knocked off my legs by the sudden inrush of Dobbs in a state of tremendous excitement, and waving a paper triumphantly aloft.

“Hurra!” he screamed; “hurra!” The play will be put in rehearsal immediately. Where’s C—?”

Half-a-dozen voices replied that he would be back immediately; and it was then angrily demanded of Roberts why he had just before announced, upon the authority of Mr. Harley, that the play was rejected.

“I did not say of my own knowledge that Mr. Harley had so expressed himself,” sullenly rejoined Roberts. “Franks was my informant. I spoke after him.”

“Then Franks is a liar!” cried Dobbs. “Here is the genuine article in black and white!” again triumphantly waving aloft the paper in his hand. He next read it with asthmatic stops, adding, “Here it is in black and white, written by Mr. Charles Kemble himself, and given me unsealed, because there was no wax or wafer at hand:

“Theatre Royal, Covent Garden.

“Mr. Charles Kemble presents his compliments to Mr. C—, and is happy to inform him that his admirable play has been definitively accepted by the management, and will be immediately put in rehearsal. If Mr. C— can make it convenient to call tomorrow at the Theatre, between twelve and two, Mr. Charles Kemble will confer with him upon the business arrangements consequent upon the acceptance of the play.”

“That’s conclusive, I rather think—a little about the edges!” continued Dobbs. “But why does not C— return? Surely he cannot be gone home already!”

“No—no—no,” was the chorus answer; and Dobbs went on to relate in detail his interview with the great Mr. Kemble. I stayed not to hear him, the apprehension which the peculiar expression of C—’s face as he passed out of the room had excited, coming back upon me, as minute after minute passed away, with augmented force.

I vainly sought for him about the purlieus of the tavern; and as I had made myself acquainted with the whereabouts of his domicile, I stepped briskly in that direction, my sharp walk presently accelerated to a run. Henrietta Street was no great distance, and I soon ascertained he had not been there since he left in the morning. I hurried back as swiftly to see if he had returned to the Wrekin. A few yards from the tavern I met a police-officer, and asked him if he had seen a tall young man, wearing a short cloak and a kind of military fur-cap. Yes, he had, about five minutes before, leaning against a lamp-post in Catherine Street. The officer thought he was tipsy, accosted him, and was rudely repulsed, and the man went on his way with a feeble, staggering pace, but not so much so as to justify police interference. “He was going towards the Strand,” added the officer, calling after me. I had concluded so; the mode, in this instance, of accomplishing the mischief which is so swift to enter into the thoughts of desperate men having instinctively, as it were, suggested itself to my mind.

The night was bleak and gusty; there were very few persons abroad; the clouded moon afforded barely sufficient light to dimly distinguish objects in the distance; and it was not till I had crossed the Strand at the end of Catherine Street, and proceeded some way along Waterloo Place, that I fancied—believed—I saw Mr. C—. A tall man was standing on the curb, within a dozen paces of the end of the bridge. Presently a phaeton came rapidly through the gate, the brilliant lamps of which shone for a moment full upon the man’s face, and I knew I was not mistaken. C— was standing still; his suicidal intent, as I judged, checked by the tremendous “perhaps,” which makes calamity of such long life. I feared to resolve that hesitation in a fatal sense by showing myself till I was within grappling distance. A false pride would, I dreaded, prompt him to consummate the dreadful purpose of which he would instantly be aware he was suspected. I therefore crept cautiously along, keeping myself as much as possible in shadow, and had got within perhaps twenty paces of him when he suddenly started off at a run, and passed through the revolving bridgeway. I followed hard, but he heard not, or, at least, appeared not to hear my pursuing steps, and I soon neared him sufficiently to be able to frustrate the design of which I suspected him, should he attempt to put it in execution.

He did attempt to do so, near the middle of the bridge, and in another half minute would have been over the parapet, and whelmed in the deep waters of the river. I caught him first by the cloak, which came away in my hand. The pull, fortunately checked his spring, and the next moment I seized him firmly round the body, and drew him by main force off the parapet on to the bridge.

“D—n! who are you? And how dare you interfere with me?” he exclaimed. “Loose your hold, or by the living God—”

“Do not, Mr. C—, take the name of the living God in vain at such a moment. It is useless to struggle. If you persist in doing so I must summon assistance, though I wish to spare you the exposure which—”

“Ha! I know you now!” he interrupted. “You are the police-fellow who has frequented the Wrekin for some months past. You are a devilish clever lynx-eyed chap, they say, and know, perhaps, as well as I do, that I am not only trodden down into the mire of poverty, but am trembling on the very verge of infamy.”

“I know nothing—suspect nothing of the kind, Mr. C—. A young man, with good health and fine talents, is very silly, it seems to me, to attempt drowning himself for nothing of more moment than a passing literary disappointment! Besides,” I added, “that fellow Roberts is one whose assertion I would not value at a button’s worth. I do not believe he has seen Mr. Harley, or that your play has been rejected.”

“What is that?” exclaimed C—, stopping short and peering eagerly in my face. We were by then slowly returning towards Waterloo Place. “What is that?”

“Before I say another word, Mr. C—, you must give me your word, as a gentleman, that you will never again, under any circumstances, attempt suicide. If you refuse to do so, you will have to appear in the morning before a magistrate.”

“Yes—yes. I promise, upon the word of a gentleman (with bitter emphasis upon ‘gentleman’). And now what meant you about Roberts? Your tone and look intimated more, much more than your words. Speak,” he added, in a quick, trembling voice. “Do not keep me in suspense, nor mock me!”

I at once ran over what had occurred at the Wrekin after he left, and repeated pretty nearly the very words of Mr. Charles Kemble’s note.

He listened with suspended breath; and when my voice ceased, and he felt that what I had said was the truth, his high-strung nerves gave way, and he leaned for support upon the balustrade, sobbing like a child.

Now the circumstances did not, to my prosaic mind, warrant—explain, such extreme emotion; and the sentence, “Trembling on the very verge of infamy,” which, when uttered by him, had jarred unpleasantly on my ear, recurred painfully. No doubt the young man was in debt; but even should his play prove unremunerative, which I knew enough of such matters to be aware was quite possible, unliquidated liabilities did not usually involve infamy.

C— presently grew calmer, and we walked on. I took the liberty of advising him not to return to the Wrekin that night. I would myself look in and bring out Dobbs. He took my counsel; and after I had given him my private address, he and the original Dobbs, now much mystified by my budding intimacy with his son-in-law elect, took their joyous way homeward.

Shortly afterwards the play was advertised in the newspapers and playhouse placards, and was, as well as I could judge, strongly cast.

A few days before the decisive night I received twelve free tickets for the theatre, with Mr. and Mrs. C—’s compliments. C— had then married Aileen M’Grath, upon the strength of his yet

problematical success as a playwright! A rash venture it seemed at the first blush; and yet, if the marriage rescued him from his Wrekin associates, it might turn out to be the most prudent step he could have taken.

As, if I myself should be able to witness the performance, three tickets were all we could make use of, I called at Henrietta Street to return the remainder, which might be more advantageously disposed of. I was then introduced to Mrs. C—, a most sprightly, amiable young woman, with about as lovable a face and figure as one could wish to meet with. Her eyes, I well remember, were of the gray blue color, peculiar, as far as my observation has gone, to Irishwomen; and her nose, slightly *retoussé*, added wonderfully to the arch expression of her bright face. No cunning, sinister event cast the faintest shadow upon her clear young brow, and I sincerely hoped, though with much misgiving, that the moral sunshine which illumined her new home would be perennial.

C—, who was going to the theatre, left with me. Once out of the sight and hearing of his wife, the buoyant gayety he had assumed in her presence suddenly subsided into a stern, gloomy sadness. In reply to my look, questioning the reason of such a change, he muttered something about the precariousness of his position; adding, in a tone of petulant discontent,—

“The truth is, Waters, I begin to think I have made a fool of myself, which, by the by, I have a knack of doing, with respect to money arrangements. The Covent Garden management offered me two hundred pounds down for my play, or four hundred if it should run ten consecutive nights, and I—I accepted and signed the latter proposal.”

“And rightly so, I should think.”

“Well, yes, under ordinary circumstances; but the truth is, that I *must* have one hundred pounds within a fortnight of tomorrow. Should I fail in obtaining it, I shall curse you with my last breath for your interference on the bridge. You need not,” he added, forcing a faint laugh, “you need not fix that ‘detective’ look so sternly upon my face. My position is exactly this: a fortnight ago I took up an acceptance for fifty pounds; an accommodation acceptance, which I had discounted with a city house trading largely with Dublin, by an acceptance by the same party for one hundred pounds at a month, receiving, of course, the difference, without which I could not have married Aileen. The discounters know the circumstances of the acceptor very well. You understand, therefore, that the bill must be paid at maturity.”

“Must be paid by you at maturity; because otherwise your friend, the acceptor, might be sued. That is all you fear?”

“What the devil else do you suppose I fear?” he exclaimed, taking care, however, that I should not see his face. “That is fear enough, I think. It struck me,” he added, more quietly, “that you might know some party who would advance me, in case of necessity, the hundred pounds, upon my legal assignment of my, of course hypothetical, claim upon the Covent Garden management for four hundred pounds.”

“I am not acquainted with any such party. The acceptor of the one hundred pound bill,” I added, “would, of course, be glad to enter into the arrangement, the realization of the said hypothetical claim being, you say, your only chance of relieving him of his actual responsibility.”

“The old skinflint would not do it,” burst out poor C—, with incautious vehemence, “to save his nephew from the gallows!”

“His nephew!”

“Ay; didn’t I tell you an uncle was the acceptor? But here we are at the stage-entrance to the theatre. Good morning.”

I understood better now the purport of the phrase “Trembling upon the very verge of infamy! “Still it was but a suspicion, after all, from which I drew such frightful conclusions—a suspicion, moreover, which I had no inclination to test the soundness of.

Covent Garden Theatre was full, though not crowded, on the decisive night, and the play, which I thought manifested considerable poetic power, of a didactic kind, but of which the dramatic interest, such as it was, could neither have hurried the pulse nor suffused the eyes of the most susceptible of the auditors, was well enough received, and given out for repetition amidst general but languid applause. It was, I felt, a great pity that C— had not taken the two hundred pounds. His play, I more than feared, would never run the ten consecutive nights.

It was withdrawn after the sixth representation; and about noon on the day I saw that announcement placard I looked in at the Wrekin, with the anxious purpose of hearing tidings of the practically unsuccessful dramatic author. To my great surprise C— was there, in the highest spirits. Leaving his chums, he beckoned me apart, and informed me that his play was temporarily withdrawn, to be shortened, by himself of course, and otherwise rendered more telling as an acting play. “And,” added C—, “the management have this very morning paid me one hundred guineas down for the copyright.”

“You have lost no time then, I suppose, in taking up your uncle’s acceptance?”

“I have sought to do so,” he replied, flushing scarlet; “but the city firm have paid it away. It will be due the day after tomorrow, and will, no doubt, turn up in due course. It is payable at my own place, and I shall therefore have no trouble about it. Will you,” he added, “stay and take a glass or two of wine with a few friends I expect here presently?”

I abruptly declined the invitation, and left the house. The rest of the day was spent in the performance of duties which kept me in the immediate neighborhood, and my way home lying past the Wrekin, I dropped in to speak and reason with C—, who, I remembered, with much uneasiness, if but for his young wife’s sake, had probably the hundred guineas in his pocket.

There was not one person in the general room, and ordering a glass of ale, I took occasion to ask the waiter what had become of the usual company, and especially of Mr. C—.

“He went away two or three hours ago with a whole lot of them,” was the reply. “They are gone to a billiard-room hereabouts, where Mr. C— and Roberts are to play a dozen games of sixty up for five pounds a game.”

“Good God!” I exclaimed, greatly startled. “Why, C— must be downright mad!”

“That’s about it,” replied the man; “though it ain’t for me, of course, to holler about what the gents do with their money. Roberts,” he added, confidentially, “though he swore he knew nothing scarcely about the game—hadn’t played it, in fact, for ever so many years—will polish Mr. C— off in style, depend upon it, though Mr. C— is, I hear, a fine player. Between ourselves,” continued the waiter, with deepening confidence, “Mr. Roberts is a gent that don’t mind acting as a billiard-marker at a slap-up West-end establishment when he’s out of luck and an engagement; and that, I’ve a notion, is one reason why the respectable theatrical gents fight shy of him. He has got, however, “ added the loquacious servitor, “a prime engagement at the Theatre Royal, Liverpool: eight guineas a week, I’m told—no less; and starts tomorrow or next day. It’s a pity for poor C—’s sake—who is a real gentleman, and no mistake—that he didn’t start yesterday.”

“Had C—, who you say is a fine player, taken much wine when he left to play the match with Roberts?”

“He had, sir.”

“Do you know where the slap-up West-end billiard establishment, at which Mr. Roberts has sometimes assisted as marker, is situated?”

“I do not. It’s pretty much hearsay I’ve been a letting on, you must understand; and in course,” the man added, with his finger on his lip, “mum’s the word between us two, whether it’s all gospel or not.”

I nodded assent, and exit waiter.

I was cudgelling my brains once more as to where I had seen Roberts, the waiter’s hint as to his occasional vocation as billiard-marker having narrowed the range of police-vision over which my memory glanced, and the man’s face was dimly surging into recollection, when a tumult of voices was heard from without, quickly succeeded by the inrush of seven or eight men all speaking together; the loudest and fiercest being C—, whom the others were striving to soothe into resigned acquiescence in the loss of fifty pounds, which Roberts had got from him by billiard sharpening. C— was mad with rage—drunk—with wine and passion;—rage against himself, not against the winner of his money, he evidently having no suspicion that he had been the victim of unfair play—unfair in this particular, that your opponent, knowing himself to be a superior player, against whom you positively have not the ghost of a chance, pretends that he knows little or nothing about the game. The only word-sedative to which C— was not wholly insensible was a promise, many times iterated, that Roberts would give him his “revenge” the next day!

I listened in sad silence, knowing as I did that I was witnessing a fearful tragedy, upon the last act of which the curtain was about to rise. C— drank furiously—tossed brandy down his throat as if he therewith hoped to quench the fiery arrows of remorse—to sweep from his brain the images of ruin, shame, despair, which I could not doubt were trooping through it with ceaseless continuity.

At last I interposed. Rising abruptly, I approached C—, touched him on the arm, and said I wished to—nay, that I *would* see him home at once. He had not observed me before, and my sudden appearance greatly startled him. I comprehended the mortal fear which, in his half frenzied state, whitened his flushed face and shook his frame, and I hastened to say, “It’s getting late, Mr. C—; you are not yourself, and I will see you home.”

He complied, with the helpless submissiveness of a child, and, taking his arm within mine to steady him, we left the place. Neither of us spoke, I think, till we were at the door of No. 2, Henrietta Street, Covent Garden.

“You will say nothing to my wife?” he whispered.

“Nothing that is not absolutely necessary to be said. I shall tell her that you have fifty pounds about you, which she must take possession of, and that I shall be here early tomorrow.”

The door opened before C— could make any reply; he was got to bed, and I had a conference with Mrs. C— and her father. A very painful one. I did not want to talk about the one hundred pounds acceptance—to know any thing concerning it, except as to the means of meeting it on the next day but one. “There are no means,” sobbed the pale nervous wife; “none—no resource—no hope! Oh, my husband!” saying which, she swooned in her father’s arms; and he, too, was crying like a child.

The next morning I was told that C— was delirious, and that a serious attack of brain-fever was apprehended. I learned, also, that had he avoided the snare set for him by Roberts, prosperous and happy days were, in all likelihood, in store for him and his; a note having been received from the manager of a great morning paper, offering C— a reportership in the “Gallery”—as reporting the speeches of noble lords and honorable members is, I believe, technically termed—at a weekly salary of five guineas, C—’s stenographic skill being, I had before heard, remarkable.

What was to be done? What could I do to compel that rascal Roberts to refund the fifty pounds, of which he had swindled C—? Ay, and to refund the fifty pounds before twenty-four hours had passed away! That was the question of questions!

The ransack of my memory anent Roberts had at last suggested that I had seen him at the Marlborough Street Police Office, as a prisoner in a gambling case, of which Kearns, a very active officer, had the management. I could remember nothing of the result of the investigation; but there could certainly be no harm, and might be much good, in advising with Kearns as to the present very pressing matter.

I did so; and at about half-past eleven in the forenoon Kearns and I—having previously matured our plan of action—entered the public room of the Wrekin, where we found Mr. Roberts. He was

in splendid feather. The successful swindle of the previous day, and his engagement at the Theatre Royal, Liverpool, had puffed him up amazingly; and he was unusually mouthy, boastful, and ostentatiously generous. He was gracious enough to present me with a glass of wine. I declined the favor, and he then offered it to my companion. Clever actor as he might be, he never made a more natural start of surprise and consternation than when he recognized Kearns.

“Mr. Calvert, I believe,” said Kearns, not too loud—“a gentleman whom I once had the honor to—”

“Hush! hush!” interrupted Roberts. “Step this way,” he added, after a flurried glance at the company. “I have a word to say to you in private.”

He led the way to an adjoining room, whither, after conferring together, we followed.

Roberts had already ordered in wine, which he pressed us to partake of.

“I shall take nothing at your expense, nor with you,” said Kearns: “you have been at your old swindling tricks again, I hear.”

“What right have you to address me in that style?” retorted Roberts, endeavoring to put on a frontlet of defiance.

“*Your* style won’t do for me, my fine fellow,” rejoined Kearns; “so you had better not try it on. The state of the case is this,” continued Kearns, “and no two ways about it. A certain person, Calvert *alias* Roberts by name, was detected in swindling a rich young greenhorn by billiard-sharpening; also of having palmed off upon a drunken country yokel a note of the Bank of Elegance for a genuine twenty-pound note. Well, neither of the two cheated gents would appear against Calvert *alias* Roberts; that respectable individual having, with as many oaths as would fill a bushel basket, sworn to leave off his swindling ways and live honestly for the future. Well, now, here it is; I know where to drop upon one of them bamboozled gents in less than half an hour—my friend Waters keeping you company the while; and when I inform said bamboozled gent that you have been and robbed a poor fellow of fifty pounds by the old dodge, it strikes me you’ll be likely to make your appearance in Marlborough Street, instead of the Theatre Royal, Liverpool.”

This bounce on the part of my friend Kearns was very well done; but judging from the dogged expression which, as he was speaking, overgrew Roberts’s face, I, more than doubting its success, struck in before he could reply:

“One effect of which appearance at Marlborough Street, in your real name of Roberts, would be to certainly put an end to your Liverpool engagement, even supposing that the evidence should in a legal sense break down; which could, however, hardly be, fortified as it would be by yesterday’s billiard-sharpening.”

“This was too plain to be disputed, and Roberts’s countenance fell wofully.

“In neither of the cases mentioned,” he presently said, “did I commit any fraud; and I cannot believe that in this country the criminal law can be put in motion to force a man—for I see your object—to refund his fair winnings.”

“We have nothing to do, Mr. Roberts, with your refunding of fair or unfair winnings. You will act in that respect as you think fit. Meanwhile, my friend Kearns will go and seek out the party who declined to prosecute on a former occasion, and whilst he is gone, though I may not take Calvert *alias* Roberts into custody, I shall certainly not lose sight of him. Be as quick as you can, Kearns,” I added. The officer said he should be back in no time, and hurried off.

“This insolent humbug does not impose upon me,” said Roberts: “not a bit of it; and were it not for the public scandal, and the probable loss in consequence, of the Liverpool engagement, I would see you both in flames before I would part with a penny of my lawful winnings.”

“I have nothing, I again say, to do with your lawful or unlawful winnings; but as certainly as that you are a practised blackleg, I shall immediately advise Mr. C— to apply for a summons against you; and I have no doubt that he will forthwith act upon that advice.”

“D—n you and your advice!” exclaimed Roberts, with choking rage: “I am in a cursed fix, and yet—”

“I shall go and speak to Mr. C— at once,” said I, rising to go. “Prompt action in all such cases is advisable, and we shall always be able to find Mr. Roberts, otherwise, Calvert, in Liverpool or elsewhere.”

I then left, and walked towards Henrietta Street, still very dubious as to the result. Mr. C—, his wife told me, was much calmer, and I had barely time to caution her not to speak of his illness, or to accept of less than the fifty pounds, when there was a violent ring at the first-floor bell, and peeping through the blind, the original Dobbs announced that Roberts was at the door.

“Mrs. C—,” said that worthy, still in a flaming rage, “that insolent puppy of a peeler, Waters, is, I know, now with your husband, trying to persuade him to trump up a charge of cheating against me, knowing well, as he does, that such a charge—false, absurd as it is—would just now utterly blast my prospects. I therefore return the fifty pounds which I fairly won of your husband; under solemn protest, mind you. Here are the identical notes, and the devil give you joy of them!”

Victory! Hurrah!

The terrible bill was duly paid upon presentation next day. At least, I judged so from the renewed brightness of Mrs. C—’s countenance when I called in the evening. An hour or thereabouts previously I had the honor of touching my hat to Mr. Roberts, in response to that gentleman’s clinched fist shaken savagely at me from the box-seat of the Liverpool night-coach.

Mr. and Mrs. C— emigrated with their young family, some six or seven years after the occurrences I have roughly penned; with much advantage, I have reason to believe, to their fortunes. The original Dobbs went with them.

Dick & Fitzgerald, 1864