

Ellen Stephenson

I WAS for several years in the frequent habit of spending an evening in the cozy parlour of a tavern, at no great distance from Farringdon Street, which has long since been pulled down, but at the period I write of had a prosperous trade, and was kept by a man of the name of Stephenson. This, in my wife's very decided opinion, extremely objectionable practice, was brought to a sudden end by the alarming advent of twins, in swift succession to three single blessings of the same kind; previous, however, to which connubial catastrophe, one or two circumstances had occurred in connection with mine host of the Star and Garter, to which after events gave a strange colour and significance.

I must premise that I never liked the man,—the attraction of his house to me consisting solely in the company which frequented it,—though I could have given no other reason for the disfavour with which I and others regarded him, than a certain down-cast, furtive expression of countenance which seldom left him, for he was a scrupulously civil and obliging person to his customers. I think his unprepossessing aspect was the more noticed by us from the striking contrast between it and the clear, candid brow, and altogether gentle and winsome countenance of his daughter, Ellen, the damsel who waited upon the parlour guests, and certainly one of its chief attractions. This, at least, was emphatically the case as regarded Mr. Richard Barstow, a superior young man, who had recently commenced business as a bookseller in Skinner Street. He, it was quite clear, encountered nightly the murky atmosphere of tobacco-cloud entirely for the sake of the bright eyes, which ever and anon shone through it with a light from heaven; and I was not at all surprised to hear him say, as we one evening walked home together, — “Ellen Stephenson is certainly the prettiest girl, with the sweetest voice, the gentlest temper, and nicest manners in the world. I have a mind to pop the question, notwithstanding that prudence bids me wait a year or two longer, at the very least.” I perfectly agreed with my friend's estimate of fair Ellen's charms, and still more decidedly with the suggestions of prudence, which I, with a laudable desire to aid the weaker side, endeavoured to fortify with all the wise axioms applicable in such cases I could at the moment think of. But alas! those respectable personages, Prudence and Wisdom, however grave and weighty, are feather-light in the scale against a slim damsel of nineteen, when Youth and Passion hold the balance; and a week had not passed before it was abundantly plain to me that the question *had* been popped, and answered in the affirmative,—with timid blushfulness, no doubt, for the tell-tale brightness still beamed upon her varying cheek, and sparkled in her gentle eyes. Stephenson had not as yet been consulted, for he looked neither more nor less heavy, austere, preoccupied, than usual; but that would no doubt have been the next scene in the matrimonial comedy, or tragedy, or tragi-comic farce, as the hereafter should determine, had not a fresh actor suddenly intruded himself and sent the previous *dramatis personæ*; to the right-about before they had well commenced their parts.

This ominous intrusion took place one fine evening in June, 1814, in the person of a seedy-looking man of about fifty. He entered our symposium just upon half-past nine o'clock, and being a perfect stranger, as well as of much snobbier appearance than we law-clerk dignities—nearly all of us were minor potentates in the bigwig pandemonium—altogether relished, he was rather sternly scrutinized as he stealthily seated himself, and called for a “go” and a “screw,” yet none of us afterwards remembered to have read any *purpose* in the fellow's dull, grey eyes, and shuffling, awkward manner. He had, no doubt, dropped in by accident, and I at once summed

him up to the full total of a begging letter-writer, or other kindred respectability. In less than five minutes he had subsided into oblivion, and we had resumed our facetious commentaries upon the great personages just then on a visit to John Bull—Prince Blucher’s snuffing ugliness,—Alexander’s full-moon features, haloed with red hair, and so on, which poignant witticisms were presently interrupted by a cracked voice, pitched in *alt.*, screaming from out a smoke-cloud—

“Ah! Master Philip, is that you? God bless me, I’m in luck at last then.”

“Who the deuce is the fellow speaking to?” gleamed instantly from a score of eyes,—a question that it did not require words to answer. Stephenson had entered the room with several glasses of spirits and water on a tray, all of which the sudden start elicited by the stranger’s greeting, caused to fall with a crash on the floor, a catastrophe momentarily unheeded by the landlord, who was glazing with terror-dilated eyes at the new comer.

“You—you here, Duffy?” he presently gasped out with spasmodic effort; “I thought you were—were—”

“Dead, didn’t you?” chuckled the cracked voice; “but I ain’t you see; and what’s more, as you’ll be, I know, glad to hear, I was never better nor likely to last longer.”

Stephenson glanced at the attentive company, muttered something in excuse of his awkwardness in letting the glasses fall, busied himself for a moment in gathering up the fragments, and then with a hurried deprecatory sign to Duffy, as he called him, left the room followed by the repulsive stranger. This was sufficiently odd and perplexing, but there was much more in the matter than any of us at all guessed of. On the next evening but one, Master Duffy shone out with extreme brilliance, having been newly togged from top to toe, by the Moseses of the day, at nobody doubted, Stephenson’s expense. He moreover drank nothing less expensive than brandy and water, and that to excess; strutted like a stage prince about the house, and in every way so outrageously conducted himself, that Stephenson must have kicked him a dozen times out of the house had not some more potent influence mastered his rage. But if he dared not defy, he might at least

escape the fellow; and it was with only momentary surprise I heard about a fortnight after Duffy’s first appearance, that Stephenson had suddenly decamped. The new landlord, Owen Morgan, could only inform us that he had purchased the lease, stock, &c. of his predecessor, who, ten minutes after the money was paid, left the house in a hackney coach, with the weeping, sobbing Ellen, whither to betake himself no one knew, nor after urgent inquiry could discover. Duffy was absent on a pleasure excursion, to witness a prize-fight, I believe, and terribly wroth he was at finding that the bird had flown. As to poor Barstow, he was so utterly disconsolate and woebegone at the sudden disappearance of the Light of the Star and Garter, that I really feared, for a time, that suicide, in its modern and chiefly fatal form of excessive brandy and water, would be the melancholy result. Time, fortunately, is more than a match, in a general way, for the deadliest rage or the most heart-breaking tenderness. Duffy, after running himself to seed again in fruitless search of the particular coach that had carried off his precious dupe or victim, sank back into his previous haunts and habits; and as to the bereaved bookseller, he recovered with such reasonable speed, that in less, I think, than four months from the evanishment of his charmer, the last flickering symptom of the disorder still faintly lurking in his veins, showed

itself by the present of a shilling to an excruciating street vocalist for her melancholy execution of—

“Young Ellen was the fairest flower.”

A calamitous donation it proved to be, for not one evening was allowed to pass without a reiteration of the same floricultural fact by the same remorseless voice; till at length my exasperated friend was provoked to the energetic expression of a wish that “Young Ellen” was with an individual unnameable to ears polite; a sign, it struck me, of almost perfect convalescence, spite of his after ingeniously-figurative explanation of the words he had hastily used. Be this as it may, the vocalist was conciliated by a more considerable gift than the first,—the fairest flower transplanted to another locality, and Richard (Barstow) was himself again.

Well, the days sped on. Summer, winter, spring were gone, and summer was slipping away again, when a severe attack of illness confined Mr. Prince for several weeks to his bed, and when subdued, left him in so prostrate a condition, that wintering in one of the sanatoria of Southern Europe was pronounced indispensable to the perfect recovery of health. He left England in September, and I was thrown, for some months at least, on the *pavé*, a disaster which the arrival of the twins before alluded to, did not in the least degree tend to render more agreeable. I was sitting one morning in the Rainbow by the Temple, profoundly meditating, I well remember, upon the miserable instability of the affairs of the world in general,—the decline of Napoleon’s fortunes, and my own more particularly [Waterloo had come off the previous June], and the discussion of some fine natives and finer stout, when who should poke his nose in at the doorway, but Old Dodsley, of Chancery Lane. He was evidently in quest of some one, and that some one, it presently appeared, was me.

“You have nothing to do just at present, I am told,” said Dods., coming according to his wont to business at once.

“As to *nothing* to do, that is an overstatement; nothing of pressing importance would be nearer the mark.”

“Exactly: well, I can put a job in your way, for which, without flattery, you are exceedingly well qualified. Be at the office,” he added, “precisely at ten tomorrow morning. Good-bye.”

“One moment, if you please, Mr. Dodsley. How about the figure—the *solatium*?”

“The remuneration will, I have no doubt, be liberal, but I shall not be paymaster.”
“Ha!”

“That’s pleasant hearing, isn’t it?” continued old close-fist, with a grin; “Your principal will be Charles Atkins, Esquire, of the Bombay Civil Service. He wished to engage the services of one of my clerks, but neither can be spared. Good-bye again, and be punctual.”

I was punctual, and found Charles Atkins, a bilious-looking gentlemanly man, of between fifty and sixty, I judged,—but perhaps the liver misled me a few years,—there before me. The

business in hand, I found, was to set out immediately on a voyage of discovery through Great Britain and Ireland, in search of a missing damsel, one Laura Atkins, and only child of the gentleman before me. The preliminary particulars confided to me were briefly these: “Mr. Charles Atkins, of Boroughbridge, Yorkshire, after being married to Laura Franklin, of the same place, about six months, obtained a cadetship in the Civil Service of the Honourable East India Company, and thereupon forthwith set off for the Western Presidency, leaving his wife to follow as soon as a decrepit and only aunt who had money to bequeath, and relatives eager to receive it, should have departed this life. This event did not occur till nearly three years afterwards, when the young wife and mother—for a daughter, the Laura now in question, had been born about five months after Mr. Atkins’s departure,—immediately made diligent preparation for the Indian voyage. Death—unexpected, almost sudden, for she was ill only about a week—surprised her at the task, but not till she had given instructions that an elderly female servant, in whom she had great confidence, should, without loss of time, proceed to Bombay with the child. Accordingly on the third day after the funeral of Mrs. Atkins, the woman—a married person, but separated from her husband, a drunken, worthless fellow—set out with her infant charge by coach for the metropolis, where they were to embark in the “Clive” East Indiaman. Neither woman nor child reached London, and the only reliable particulars since obtained were, that on changing coaches at Sheffield, a respectable looking man, with whom the woman appeared to be extremely intimate, continued the journey with her. Peterboro was reached in safety, but after leaving that city, a terrific night-storm overtook them, the horses took fright, and madly plunging away, upset the coach at a quick turn of the road not very far out of Cambridge. The woman and another person were killed on the spot; the child escaped unhurt, and was taken charge of by the man who assumed to be the woman’s husband. After the inquest verdict of “Accidental Death” had been returned, he proceeded on to London, taking with him, as a matter of course, his wife’s luggage, containing money and other property belonging to Mr. Atkins, to the amount of more than five hundred pounds. Neither he nor the child had since been seen or heard of; but it had been well ascertained that the man who obtained possession of the infant, Laura, and her father’s property, was *not* the real husband of the woman, who was a fellow of the name of Duffy—”

“Duffy!” I exclaimed, “Duffy!”

“Yes, James Duffy: does that name suggest anything to you?” said Mr. Atkins, with quick interrogation. “Well, I can hardly say: what manner of man is he?”

“I have never seen him, but people tell me a loutish fellow, now about fifty,—it is sixteen years since his wife was killed,—of sallow complexion, and a shrill, harsh voice.”

“And the man who carried off the child; is his name known or suspected?”

“Yes, suspected. He is thought, from the description obtained of his person, to have been one Philip Gosnold.”

“Philip Gosnold; humph! Have you the description of his person with you?”

“Yes; you will find it in this handbill.”

I read the description in a sort of flurried silence, and mentally commenting upon it as I read. “Dark hair, bushy whiskers,”—Stephenson does not wear whiskers, and his hair, a wig by-the-by, is a wry light brown. “Tall and thin,”—tall? yes, but thin! Years to be sure may account for that change. “Nose prominent,”—that’s right—” “and bowlegged.”—Stephenson for a thousand! Here I looked up, and saw that both Dodsley and Mr. Atkins were keenly regarding me. It was certainly no part of my game to show my hand too quickly, and I instantly assumed, as cleverly as I could, an air of doubt and perplexity.

“These are but doubtful guides,” I said, “in such a labyrinth. And the child,” I added, “the missing Laura, what was she like: I mean, of course, as to complexion, eyes, hair?”

“Extremely fair,—blue eyes,—hair, light brown,” replied Mr. Atkins, in a voice vibrating with emotion; “and surely, I either strangely misread the expression of your countenance, or God’s gracious providence has at last brought me in contact with one from whom I may expect efficient help.”

“It is best,” I said, “not to be over-sanguine; and, descending to vulgar, but essential considerations, what is to be the pecuniary reward for success in this matter?”

“I am not,” promptly rejoined Mr. Atkins, “by any means, a rich man, in the city acceptance of the term, still, if two hundred guineas, over and above all reasonable expenses, will suffice—”

“Quite, quite,” I interrupted, “and this little matter reduced to writing—you will excuse, I know, inveterate business habits—I set forward at once upon my mission, with, let me add, some hope of bringing it to a successful issue.”

All necessary preliminaries being at last settled, I sallied forth in mounting spirits, which, however, an hour or two’s quiet cogitation cooled down considerably. True, I had little doubt that my Duffy was the Duffy, mine host Stephenson, Philip Gosnold, and pretty Ellen, the lost Laura; but how to run the quarry to earth without giving such tongue as would allure others to the scent, and consequent participation of the spoil, was a matter of much difficulty. The first two or three days I spent in quietly seeking out Duffy, who, I at last succeeded in assuring myself, had left London about a month previously. The next step was to advertise, in a friend’s name, a reward of five pounds for the discovery of the hackney coachman who had, on such a day and hour, conveyed Stephenson and daughter from the Star and Garter. This produced Coachee himself, and by diligent following up of the clue thus obtained, I at length discovered that Stephenson and Ellen had left London more than two months after they disappeared from the Star and Garter, by the Southampton coach. Other indices, unnecessary to detail, showed themselves. I determined to vigorously follow up the trail thus fortunately hit upon, and with this view booked myself for that ancient, and now go-ahead city by, I think, the Telegraph coach, without delay. But I could not have the heart to leave town without giving my old friend Barstow a quiet hint of the delightful possibilities beginning to dawn upon the horizon of the dreamland of the future. I found him, as far as outward appearances enabled me to judge, in vigorous health of mind and body, and busily engaged in getting up, in conjunction with a gentleman in the “row,” a new and splendid edition of *Seneca*, with copious notes by an erudite A.M. I had not seen him for some time, and his greeting was very cordial, and no doubt, to add to the pleasure of

the visit, he forthwith set about regaling me with a heap of eloquent extracts from the new work, illustrative of the nothingness of everything, which I was fain to stop at last with,— “There, there, that will do, my dear fellow. The old heathen was quite right, I dare say; and as you are in so very philosophic a mood, it will, I suppose, scarcely interest you to hear that it is possible I shall see Ellen Stephenson in a day or two.”

Alas for philosophy! The rapt admirer of Seneca leaped up from his chair like a flash of lightning, whirling, as he did so, the sacred book to the other end of the shop.

“Good God!” he exclaimed, “see Ellen—see Ellen Stephenson! What can you mean?”

“Barstow, my dear boy, what are you about? Who, a moment ago, could have believed that Seneca would now be sprawling open-leaved upon the waste heap, and by your irreverent hand, too,—fie! Fie!”

“Pshaw!— Stuff!—Humbug! You spoke of Ellen—”

“And this, too,” I persisted, “just after reading that delightful passage upon the folly of love and the vanity of beauty, so charmingly set forth by the divine Seneca—”

“The devil fly away with the divine Seneca,” burst in my excited friend, quite fiercely; “speak to me of Ellen! what of her?”

It would have been cruel to tantalise him further; so I e’en yielded to his impatience, and briefly ran over the chief incidents of the eight or ten previous days. The relation greatly agitated him, and the flashing of his fine dark eyes showed that the smothered and seemingly extinguished fire was blazing again as fiercely as ever.

“It is she,” he said, in a quick tremulous voice, “Ellen is the Laura you are in search of, I feel assured; and you will I fervently hope, trust, believe, find her. And thank God,” he added, with a burst, “that her father is not a rich man. I have myself, Robert,” he added, “had a windfall lately in the shape of a legacy, which, the duty paid, will put fifteen hundred pounds in my pocket!”

This was gratifying; but it is needless to prolong the conversation. It will suffice to say, that I was intrusted with a hundred love messages, all of which I forgot before reaching Holborn Hill; and of one letter, which I promised and fully intended to deliver at the proper time.

My search in Southampton was a protracted and tedious one, but perseverance seldom fails of success, and I finally obtained information which left little doubt that I should find Philip Gosnold, *alias* Stephenson, and now it appeared *alias* Parker, at a roadside inn, near Titchfield, on the road to Gosport.

I alighted from the coach when within about a mile of the house, and walked quietly on. The fates were propitious. The first person my eye lit on upon entering the door, was Ellen! She was standing within the bar, and it needed but a single glance to show me how hardly anxiety and grief had dealt with her. The rounded outlines of her charming person had become spare and

angular, and she was pale as marble,—a paleness instantly effaced by a flood of richest crimson as she caught sight of me; and with a slight scream, yet eagerly extended hands, recognised and gave me welcome. The next moment the death-like pallor came again, and her flurried look was turned towards a man at the further corner of the bar.

“Ah, Stephenson,” I exclaimed, “you there—”

“Hush!” interrupted Ellen, “hush!”

I followed her glance from some persons outside the open door to the swinging sign, which announced that “James Parker” was licensed to sell wines and spirits at the Black Horse. I nodded compliant intelligence, and walked inside the bar. Stephenson, who looked extremely worn and anxious, and more gloomy and downcast than ever, appeared at first uncertain how to receive me, but my frank greeting partially reassured him, and we were soon chatting with some familiarity together. There was, I presently found, a nearer fear than I could possibly inspire, lower limb of the law as I might be, the incarnation of which dread presently appeared in the likeness of Duffy! Duffy, handsomely rigged out again, and ten times more triumphantly insolent than ever!—why and wherefore I now perfectly understood. He appeared a little startled at seeing me, but his look quickly changed to a cold and impudent one,—a favour which I have seldom experienced any difficulty in returning full change for.

My course was now plain, but I was first desirous of a private interview with Ellen. This I with some difficulty obtained; and she, poor harassed child, was soon induced to give me her entire confidence. She had been aware, from the time of leaving the Star and Garter, that her father,—as she, of course, still believed Stephenson to be— “was in Duffy’s power for some fault—some—some crime,” she hesitated, with her sweet eyes full of tears, “known to his persecutor. I could not abandon him,” she went on to say with increasing emotion; “for whatever his faults, he has been ever kind and indulgent to me; and even now, when he is again and hopelessly in that bad man’s thrall, refuses to purchase safety by even appearing to acquiesce in the—the proposal—the—

Poor Ellen burst into a flood of tears: I quite understood her. “The ugly miscreant!” I exclaimed. “But never mind, we will fit him with something more suitable than the prettiest wife in all England. And as for you, my poor child, I really think I have a letter for you somewhere about me. Ah, here it is.” How eagerly, well-mannered as she was, did she snatch Barstow’s thickly-scribbled missive from my hand, and recognise with the bright carnation of her glowing cheeks, the no doubt familiar hand. I now withdrew, first, however, exacting a pledge of secrecy, and busied myself in penning, and despatching, two letters, one to Mr. Charles Atkins, the other to Mr. Richard Barstow, which gentleman I counselled to wait without a moment’s delay upon, as I hoped, his future father-in-law.

A scrap of writing reached me by the earliest post from Barstow.

“All, right—gloriously right,” he scrawled: “Dear Ellen’s father and himself would be with me exactly at the time appointed, and as I had directed, would quit the post chaise at about a mile

from the Black Horse. As to Stephenson, he was to be forgiven, of course, for his kindness to Ellen, &c.”

All right, indeed, and not one hour too soon. Duffy, who had a keen scent for coming events, was, I heard, furious for his immediate union with Ellen; and when I and my two eagerly-impatient friends entered the Black Horse by the back way, he, Stephenson, and Ellen, were,—the maid of all work whispered,—together in the inner bar, and, as our ears quickly made us aware, quarrelling, the men at least, fiercely. Mr. Atkins was too nervously agitated to act decisively, but I could hardly hold that confounded Barstow back for half a minute.

“You defy me then, do you, Philip Gosnold?” we heard Duffy exclaim at the top of his cracked voice; “but I tell you again, that either I marry Ellen, or—”

“You be — ,” roared Barstow, bursting into the room, followed by Mr. Atkins and myself; “Ellen, beloved Ellen, —your father—myself—everybody,—O Lord!” He was blubbering like a mooncalf, and so were others for that matter; but I shall not attempt to transcribe the Babel of exclamations, explanations, sobs, raptures, embracings, hysterics, that followed. Indeed, I heard a part only, having immediately busied myself in driving out the astounded Stephenson, and his quondam friend, Duffy. The former slowly comprehended the bewildering scene, and very grateful he was for the assurance I gave him, that, in consideration of the redeeming point of his kindness to Ellen, or rather Laura Atkins, he would not be prosecuted. When we had leisure to look about for Duffy, we discovered that that worthy had absquatulated, as Yankees say, taking with him the bar cashbox, a not very weighty affair, and he has never, to my knowledge, turned up since. An hour afterwards I looked in at the bar parlour: the tremulous calm of a recent but assured happiness had succeeded to the first tumultuous emotion of the father and daughter, of the lover and his promised bride. I was overwhelmed with thanks and praises. My friend Barstow pronounced me to be emphatically the cleverest fellow in all England; dove Ellen kissed me; and Mr. Atkins grasping me warmly by the hand, left there a cheque for—but that is private business. I may, however, mention, that in the pleasant dreams I had that night, one perpetually recurring image presented itself, namely, Mrs. T—, papering up in the very wantonness of riches, the locks of our five olive branches with bank notes.

From *Leaves from the Diary of a Law-Clerk* by the Author of “Recollections of a Detective Police Officer,” &c. London: J.C. Brown & Co., 1857.