

Conscience Money
J. Saunders

I

“WILLIAM BRADLEY, you have been found guilty by the jury of the murder of John Mellish, and I am bound to say I concur in their verdict. It has been clearly proved that you were in debt to him as your landlord; that this had led to angry words between you; that you were near the unhappy gentleman at the time he was so barbarously murdered; that the instrument of his destruction, the hammer, found close by, was yours; that your whole attitude and behaviour at the time of the discovery beckoned conscious guilt. The jury then have rightly discharged their duty; I must now do mine.

“The sentence I have to pass upon you is that you be taken back to the prison whence you came, and thence to the place of execution, and there be hanged by the neck until you are dead; and that your body when dead be taken down, and buried in the precincts of the prison where you were last confined before this sentence of execution was passed upon you; and may the Lord have mercy on your soul!”

The prisoner, with his hands stretched toward the judge, strove to speak.

“I—my lord—” but the organs of speech seemed paralyzed.

A heart-rending shriek ran through the court—there was a low murmur, a sense of half-suppressed agitation and tumult; amid which two officials moved forward, and led the prisoner away in a stupor.

About a quarter of an hour afterwards a benevolent young lawyer put into a cab, and paid the fares of, Eliza Bradley, the condemned man’s wife, Will Bradley, his son, and three children over ten years.

“Do you think she is fit to go?” he asked, looking at the woman, as she sat rigid and white as death.

“I think so, sir,” answered Will Bradley; “I think we’ll be better at home.”

That home was the very house, the rent of which had given rise to the fatal quarrel between Bradley and Mellish; and facing it, was the very brickfield wherein the landlord had been found, murdered. But at such a time home was home to them, even under these circumstances. All the street (which was not far from the Old Bailey) knew *how* they returned, and came out to stare at them. Even that fact, however, so hardened are the poor and wretched—even that fact did not destroy the intense relief and comfort with which, when the stairs were mounted, and a door unlocked and opened upon three little prisoners, they all clung together and wept aloud, making for some minutes a motionless family sculpture-piece of misery’s own grouping.

Mrs. Bradley, a pale, black-eyed, and still comely woman, had sank on her knees just inside the threshold, clasping two little dirty children with one arm, while the other hand clutched Will's, and her head was thrown back against him as he stood behind her, the youngest child in his arms, and a brother and sister clinging and weeping at either side of him. The next in age, to Will, a great boy of fourteen, lay prostrate with his face in his mother's skirt.

Will himself, a sturdy young fellow of twenty, in bricklayer's clothes, was the only upright and calm figure in the group. He was the first to break it up, to prepare and make them take less bitter food than their own tears and sobs—and in less than an hour he had seen his mother in bed, almost calm, with her sleeping children in her arms. After this he sat with his brothers—the two great boys—by the fire, comforting them by an occasional kind word of the very simplest philosophy, and himself with his pipe, till far on into the night.

At last he made them go to their bed, which was in the same room where he was sitting; but as they still continued to break out now and then with fresh bursts of grief, Will judged it best to stop his soothing words and try a tonic in the form of a sound scolding. He did so, and told Harry to kick Ned every time he made “that howling,” and gave Ned permission to do the same kindness to Harry.

In a little while they fell asleep, and Will was left to himself, his pipe, and his own thoughts. What were these thoughts after such a day—before such a prospect? They were such thoughts as made him envy all the sorrow-stricken ones about him; they were more bitter than his mother's grief, they were more helpless than the babes that slept beside her. In every other breast than Will's the burden of sorrow was simply—“Father is to die—father is innocent, yet must die.”

In Will's heart rang the bitter burden, “*Is father innocent?*” for the evidence against him had been so simple and so strong, and Will knew certain things which, had they been known in court, had made it stronger still. Mellish was, in Will's opinion, a brute, who almost deserved the treatment he had met with. Will could not have turned from his father if in a downright quarrel he had caused this man's death, but his father had declared himself innocent; all his family believed him—all but Will, and his father alone guessed his doubt, and refused to see him even after his sentence. This was Will's bitterness. This was what he had to sit and think of when he had comforted all the rest, and lulled them to sleep.

When Harry said his prayers, Will had heard him add the words, “O Lord, don't let 'em hang him! You haven't seen a hanging, and *I* have. I know what it is. O don't let 'em hang him!”

But Will's last words before he slept that night were simply, “Is he innocent? Thou knowest. Let *me* know!”

The next morning, when all the pale faces were gathered by Will round the little breakfast-table, on which was not sufficient food to remove the look of hunger out of any of them, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in!” said Will.

A woman—a lodger from the ground floor—came in with a letter.

“Don’t be flustered, Mrs. Bradley, it’s for you—don’t be put out now; when the worst has come to the worst, you know it’s no use expecting nothing.”

“Thank you. That’ll do,” said Will, taking it from her, and putting it in his mother’s trembling hands.

Mrs. Bradley tore it open, and drew from the envelop a sheet of paper, which, on being unfolded, revealed another enclosure.

“Why, it’s a bank-note, Will!” she said, holding it up. “What is it? Is it enough to help *him* with—see, see!”

Will took it.

“It’s a five-pound note,” he said, quietly.

“Whoever from, Will?”

He examined the envelop and blank paper.

“Not a word; not a trace of who it’s come from.”

“But it’s for me, Will—it’s Mrs. William Bradley plain enough; isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” said the poor mother, hugging the thin form nearest to her, “God bless whoever sent it, to keep those worse than orphans from starving!”

Will sat quite still for several minutes, turning the note over in his hands.

Mrs. Bradley looked at him wistfully.

“I know what you’re thinking of, lad,” she said, presently. “You’re wishing it was enough to help him. O, surely, lad, whoever was good enough to send that, if they knew all, if they only knew all, would do more—would do something that should help him, that should do the lawing for him that any other man that could afford it would have.”

“Mother!” exclaimed Will, suddenly rising from his chair, “What if I do? It’s our last hope—what if I do?”

“What if you do *what*, Will?” asked poor Mrs. Bradley, impatiently.

“Take half this to find out the sender, and show him how it all is, how we can’t get any more lawing for father for want of money?”

Mrs. Bradley got up, and putting her arm round Will’s broad shoulders, pressed the note into his hand, saying, “Just leave us enough to keep from starving, and use the rest for him, Will—though it be wasted, it will comfort us to think of having done it for him.”

“I’ll go first to Leasem’s, and see what he says—if I don’t come back, mother, you’ll know the money is left there for you, and that I have found how to begin about this search.”

Will took leave of them all and went out into the hated street opposite the hated field. There was a strange, suppressed excitement in his step, and in his very breathing. He had got a wild, half-stupefying hope, which he had not hinted a word of—would not for worlds hint a word of—to those at home. This five-pound note. What did it mean? Was it possible, was it in any way possible it could be *conscience money*?

II

MR. LEASEM, Will’s employer, was a speculative builder in a small way, living in the Old Kent Road—a man who had but just risen from the ranks, and had not yet discovered the necessity of drawing the usual hard-and-fast social line between master and man. He welcomed his young workman with grave cordiality, and a silence, at once kindly and expressive of sympathy with his dreadful position—made him sit down, poured out a glass of ale, handed him a pipe, and then waited without seeming to wait, to learn what had brought him there.

Will stared blankly at the opposite wall, and drank, or rather tried to drink; then smoked on sporadically, as if lost in a perplexing thought. At last he took out the letter from his breast pocket, and said, “Will you look at that, guv’nor?”

Mr. Leasem did look, first at the envelop, then at the enclosure, and then at Will, and then handed both back.

“It’s a kindly thing, Will, ain’t it?”

“It looks so.”

“Have you any guess as to who it might be?”

“No. I wish I had.”

“Why?”

“I can’t say. But I do. Guv’nor, I’m going to ask two queer things.”

“What are they, Will?”

“Will you give me sovereigns for this, and let me keep it all the same for a few days?”

“That is a one queer thing, certainly. What’s the other? Perhaps your two queer things may explain one another.”

“Well, it’s this. Suppose—I only say suppose,” and the lad’s lips whitened as if with loathing for the word, “my father to be innocent, and the man who sent this knows it, mightn’t there come out of it all something worth my while to see to?”

With hand on knees, bending head, and sidelong glance, Will Bradley waited for an answer, as if Mr. Leasem’s reply involved either new hope or a second sentence of death.

Mr. Leasem was struck by the idea; but fearing to encourage delusions at so critical a time, replied:

“Hardly, lad! hardly. If you’d take my advice, you’d content yourself now with comforting them at home.”

Will struck his heavy fist on the table, and said, with a hard, thickening voice, “Guv’nor, I didn’t come here for that. I want help—not preachin’.”

He rose and put on his cap, when Mr. Leasem placed his hand on his shoulder, “Will, you are a lad to be trusted. You shall have the sovereigns.”

He put his hand into his trousers pocket, brought forth a handful of money, gold, silver, and copper all jumbled together, and counted from his capacious palm the five pieces.

“The note, Will, is now mine. We understand that—I lend it to you.”

“All right, guv’nor, and thank you kindly. If I’m missing a few days—”

“Your place shall be kept. And now, Will, if you are dead set to try this affair, I’ll tell you what to do. Go to the man whose address I am writing down, tell him you’ve got little or no money to spend, but say I sent you to ask his opinion.”

“Is he one of them detectives?”

“Yes, but a decent fellow for all that; I helped him once.”

Will took the paper, pored over it for full half a minute, shook hands with his master, and went away.

III

THE detective lodged in a couple of rooms, in a by-court not far from the Strand, one of them being occupied by the great man himself, while the other served for a waiting-room. They were

both sufficiently dark, not to say dirty, to accord with the mysterious mental atmosphere that seemed to hang about them. He had to wait with three other persons, while some visitor was closeted within.

There was a miserable-looking, aged man, seeking a divorce from his wife; an elegant, sprightly little woman seeking a divorce from her husband; and there was a knowing, shabby, vulgar-looking ruffian, who might be a detective out of work, and was certainly very hard up. This man made an effort to draw Will into talk, thinking perhaps to do a bit of sly business, but relapsed into silence under Will's stare and stern monosyllables. The others looked preoccupied with their own affairs, but still found time to wonder who the young workman was, and what he wanted. Will's only thought about them was that they, like all the world, might be thinking he was the son of a felon under sentence of death. But he neither bent his head nor covered his face, but stared doggedly at the door, through which he wanted to pass.

When admitted he found a thin, sharp, angry-faced man, with an impatient twang in the tones of his voice, which contrasted oddly with the artificial calmness and suavity he affected. Measuring Will with his eye, as he approached his table, there was a flickering expression across his face that seemed to say, "Nothing to be got here."

Will told his name, and the detective knew his man, and guessed his mission.

"Before you go any further, my poor fellow," said he, "I may as well tell you, if it's about your father it is hopeless."

Will stared at him so long and earnestly that the detective's eye quailed, and then his face smiled as if conscious of the ridiculousness of the thing, with such an innocent.

"You know Leasem—Mr. Leasem?"

"Old Kent Road?"

"Yes. He sent me to ask your opinion. Please look at that letter."

It was remarkable how differently the sight of the letter affected the detective and Will's master. The latter had seen nothing but an act of kindness in it, the former saw everything but that. The professional instinct was in arms in a moment, and he seemed almost about to be so absurd and quixotic as to offer to undertake the case without payment. But putting aside that folly, he went to the window with the letter, and there studied the envelop, the bit of paper, and the bank-note scrutinizingly for some time in silence.

"The job's well done!" he said, at last. "Not a reliable vestige of any kind left to track by. Paper of the commonest kind, no water mark; envelop ditto, and no tradesman's name; handwriting evidently disguised."

"Disguised—sure?" cried Will, eagerly, as though that one fact removed his every doubt, and gave overwhelming support to all his beliefs.

“Quite sure. The disguise is the weakest, the only weak part of the fellow’s case—because it’s so plainly a disguise.”

“Go on, please!” urged Will, feeling already the forces of the incoming flood of light, and his eyes dilating as they gazed on the very peculiar fount.

“There’s a post-mark, it is true—Birmingham—which is, therefore, the one place where you may be sure not to find him. Somebody has taken it there for him, and there posted it; or, if he’s very cautious, he may himself have gone secretly and hurriedly to do the job, and got back in time, say between night and morning, not to be missed from his employment.”

Seeing how greedily Will sucked all this in, the detective felt the unconscious flattery of his skill, and went on.

“A bank-note was just the only thing he could send without personal contact; gold must have been registered, post-office order have a name and address; stamps, five pounds’ worth, would attract attention in purchasing; a bank-note is popped into a letter, and nobody the wiser.

“Of course, there’s the number and date, but all he had to do was ask for a note in exchange for sovereigns of some small tradesman who had more notes of the same value, and wasn’t used to take record of particulars. To ensure that, he’d probably go again, plead anxiety about the fate of his letter, and ask for the number. If he couldn’t get it, he knew all was right, the communication effectually broken; and if he did get it, he’d go somewhere else, reexchange his note into sovereigns, and again try the same game till the job was accomplished.”

Poor Will’s face grew more and more blank as he saw knocked away one after another the props on which he had been erecting his edifice of hope.

“I must try something, mister,” he said.

“Right. Try then to trace the note backwards, and go to the bank of England to begin with. That’s one chance. The other is to go to Birmingham, and trust your luck. Accident and pluck often succeed when no other combination can. Let me know how you get on. I may help you at the last moment, if you really do discover anything worthwhile.”

Thus ended the interview, and poor Will, as he afterwards told his friends, departed with his purse half a guinea lighter, and his heart pounds heavier.

IV

IF truth, whether of word or action, is always in harmony with itself through all its parts, untruth of word or deed, however skillfully devised, exhibits invariably the opposite characteristic. The falsity may be a Hercules in proportion and strength, but then there is the ever vulnerable *heel*. So it proved.

Poor Will, after racking his brains till he felt they wouldn't much longer be of any use to him, in the vain effort to discover a recent owner of the bank-note, or any trace of the sender at Birmingham, returned to London with only a few shillings in his pockets, ill, worn out with fatigue and depression, and asking himself how he was to face his mother, and confess his utter and dreadful failure.

The poor fellow yearned for a bit of comfort, and resolved, before going home, to go to the only place and person that were likely to be able to give him any. The place was a gloomy-looking house at Clapham—the person a hard-worked general servant whose one solitary, quiet, and much abused “follower” was Will Bradley.

She was the daughter of a man named Lynch, who had lived in the same street as the Bradleys for many years, and whose struggle for bread had been harder even than their own. Six months before Bradley's arrest, Lynch had been obliged to accept a situation at a distance too great for him to think of taking his family with him. He had therefore left them; and although he sent them every farthing but what he required for his own bare sustenance, it was only enough to keep them. Like the Bradleys, they let the rent grow and grow, till their landlord, seeing it was absurd to expect ever to receive his money, turned them from the rooms, and seized and sold all their small possessions. They had gone into the workhouse, and thus poor Will Bradley's beloved was by no means so much a stranger to trouble as to be unable to sympathize with him.

In spite of this, however, Will had no sooner descended the area steps and rang the bell of the area door, than his already weary and sad heart began to beat—to thump so that the very stone steps under his feet seemed to shake with a new and sickening alarm. He had never seen Jenny Lynch since all was over, and his father had been shut up in the condemned cell. Will thought of the newspapers, the talk above stairs that Jenny would hear, the commands that had most likely been laid upon her concerning the murderer's son. He heard her light step in the passage—she opened the door—she stood before him.

Jenny was very pretty—she was what the Scotch would call a “bonnie lass,” with fair hair, and a sunshiny face, and quick impulsive glances and gestures. Her own class called her bright, her betters called her pert; perhaps she was both. At all events she had been not a little imperious and capricious in her treatment of poor Will, who, since he knew her, had acquired a curious habit of putting his hand protectingly to the side of his face whenever a woman spoke angrily to him.

As the two looked at each other, Will noticed with a sinking heart that Jenny turned pale instead of red, and that her hand trembled as it held the door.

“Jenny,” said Will, with a ghastly attempt at a smile.

Then Jenny drew back, and gave her head a little jerk towards a long seat just inside the door. Will interpreted it as “Come in, and don't let 'em hear you talking there; it's as much as my place is worth.”

Yes, she looked very pale, and very unlike herself, and Will, whose hope was like a handful of dry sand, which the tighter he grasped it the faster it ran out, felt the last grains trickling away

like so much life-blood. He crawled in at her bidding, and sat down on the bench, waiting for her first words, almost as he had waited for the words following the official's question of, "Gentlemen of the jury, what is your verdict?"

Jenny shut the door very carefully, then went to the end of the passage and shut another door at the foot of the stairs.

"O, how mortally ashamed she is of me!" thought Will.

She came back with slow and hesitating steps.

"Now for it," he thought; and with a despairing attempt to meet and break a little the blow he felt coming, he stammered out—"Jenny—I—I didn't ought to had come here."

Then the storm burst, and Will bowed his head and bore it pretty well. After all, it was nothing more dreadful than a heartier, stronger squeeze than he thought the slim arm capable of giving, a shower of warm tears on his face, and a voice sobbing over him, "Bless him! bless him! Poor old chap, what he's borne since I seen him! O Will, Will, I've most broke my heart about you!"

When they were what Jenny called "quieted down a bit," Will told her all about the five-pound note, and his useless journey.

"Will, dear, you can do no more—though if ever there was conscience money, *that's* conscience money, but you can do nothing more."

"That's the worst of it," said Will. "If I could, I could bear things so much better. But to sit down, and reckon the hours and days before he will be—"

To divert his thoughts, Jenny took a letter from her pocket, and slid it into his horny hand, dividing with her touch the iron-linked fingers, which seemed bent on self-torture.

"It's from father, Will. Such a kind letter, and sending me for mother twenty-five shillings in stamps, that she may leave the workhouse, and saying he will send ten shillings every week till he can come himself, or else he can have them down there."

"I'm glad to hear that, Jenny," said Will, and then his eyes fell on the letter she had put into his hands. There came a sudden light into them as he looked, and eagerly examined it all over.

The letter was of the most commonplace character, so far as regarded its appearance to ordinary eyes, but not so to Will's. He seemed almost in a trouble, as he hurriedly and vainly ransacked his pockets, and said below his breath, "My God, have I lost it?"

But no, the letter he sought was there, and had been missed merely through his impatience and agitation. He brought it forth, and compared it in silence with the one Jenny had just put into his hands. The envelopes were exactly alike, but that was only very negative kind of evidence. What moved him was that he saw in both that peculiar flourish over the t's which had first attracted his

eye on his mother's letter, and suggested the thought he had seen it before. Here it was again, and exactly where he had feared or hoped to find it.

Remembering that Jenny was watching, he ceased to look at the letter, and stared before him with eyes that rolled portentously under their new burden, till Jenny spoke, "Why, Will, what's the matter? You don't suppose those two letters have anything to do with one another, do you?"

Will laughed, as he said, "I did; but look at the handwritings. Not a bit alike, are they?" And again he laughed.

"No. Give me my letter."

"Have you taken out the stamps?"

"Yes."

"Where does he write from?"

"Leeds."

"And he tells you inside how to find him?"

"Yes."

"Well, I must be going. One kiss, Jenny."

Drawing her with a strong grasp into his arms, he held her in a passionate embrace, kissed her, all trembling and pale, and full of wonder as she was, then put her away, and stepped out into the road, through the area door, without another word, heedless of the voice that called after him, "Will! Will! my letter! my letter!"

V

TO the great surprise of Mr. Leasem, and to the somewhat more than surprise of Mrs. Leasem, their bedroom door opened one morning, before they had risen, and in stalked Will Bradley; looking so haggard, unwashed, and disorderly, that they wondered if he had ever been to bed since he parted with his master four days before. He had come to beg that another sovereign might be trusted to him. Mr. Leasem generously gave it, and was himself not a little excited by the hints which Will let fall.

It was yet very early, not seven o'clock, when he started off to walk to the railway station, when a sudden faintness warned him of a novel danger—he might be too ill, or too weak for the job at hand. So thinking, he did two acts, so absurdly extravagant for him, that he often thought about them afterwards. He took a cab to the station, and there sat down in the refreshment-room to breakfast, and ate heartily, for the first time for many a week. He seemed, too, to forget

everything but the great comfort of the meal, only that he once took out the letters, put them side by side, and put them back again.

The moment the doors of the carriage were opened, he planted himself in a corner of one of them, out of which he never moved, except when compelled by incidents of the journey, till he reached Leeds. He seemed to casual observers to be asleep the whole way; but when any one had occasion to touch him, or to speak to him, there was something in the face and eyes so alert, sinister and strange, mingled with shy awkwardness and immobility natural to him as a workman among strangers, that quite dispelled all notion of mental rest, or bodily slumber. He did volunteer to speak once. It was when two men came into the same carriage, and began talking about Leeds. He watched them till their talk ceased, then said to the nearest, "How far now, mate, to Leeds?"

"It's the next station. We shall be there in ten minutes."

Will drew himself up, rigidly, stared out of the carriage window, and again relapsed into the corner, his cap drawn down over his eyes, till the train stopped. He spoke to no one on leaving the station, but gazed up at the names of the streets and courts, as if seeking some particular one street or court, but feeling an instinctive dislike to mention the place of his destination. The peculiarity of his manner—influenced as it was by his absence of mind on all but one subject, attracted the attention of a policeman as he paced over the bridge, going in the direction of Hunslet Lane.

"Looking for somebody?" guessed the guardian of the public peace.

Will stared at him and the uniform, and replied, gruffly, "I'm a stranger in these parts, and am just looking about me," and passed on. A minute or two afterwards, he saw the policeman standing in the same place, following him inquisitively with his eye. Will turned down a street, as if to evade him.

Failing now to find unaided that which he sought, he began to study the faces of people as they passed, and stopped a woman and began to speak to her; when to her surprise his words became inaudible, and died away, and his face, turned in another direction, became livid, and she saw him walk hurriedly on, forgetting her altogether. The very man Will sought was there before him, not twenty yards off!

Did he know who followed? It was evident Will's first anxiety was to be clear about that, for he began to cover himself as much as possible, walking behind others; by crossing, sheltered by a cart, to the opposite side of the street; and by stopping suddenly, as if engrossed in the attractions of a shop window, when he saw his man stop at the corner of a street, in hesitation, and then return toward Will, whose heart began to beat wildly.

The man returned to the very shop, a stationer's, where Will stood on the threshold. He entered, brushing Will's clothes as he passed, to buy a newspaper. Will stared hard into the side-window at a print, but moved as far into the doorway as he could, to listen the while.

“Fresh particulars,” said the shopman, “about the murderer Bradley.”

There was a pause. Then a voice well known to Will answered, in a low stifled tone, “Is that in this paper?”

“Yes.”

The man laid down his money, and went out. Whether in so doing he caught a half-glimpse of Will, or that he merely noticed his listening attitude, while his own thoughts were peculiarly susceptible and active, it might be difficult for the keenest bystander to decide; but he tried in a furtive kind of way to get a look at Will’s countenance, in passing, which Will took care to prevent, and the man passed on, slowly reading his paper.

Will did not dare to move till he saw the corner reached, round which the man went slower than ever; but the instant he disappeared, Will moved rapidly after him, but paused just at the corner far from a passing shelter, to avoid the risk of exposing himself to the man who might be standing there close by.

When Will did venture to look, the man was nearly a hundred yards down the street, and running at full speed towards an opening on the left, into which he plunged. What should Will do? It was a desperate decision, but he did decide not to follow, but to run round the other way, not trusting to the chance that the alley might be that which we call a *cul-de-sac*, or place of “no thoroughfare.” He was right, and just in time to see the fugitive emerge from the other end of the long, winding court, turn and enter the second house, and with such haste that he did not even look behind.

Will had too much good sense to follow at once. Keeping out of sight of the window, but never for one single moment taking his eyes from the door, he waited till it was quite dark, avoiding observation as well as he could. Then a girl came forth from the house and left the door open, at least, so Will supposed. Should he now venture? While he hesitated minutes passed; and he began to fear the man would come out under the veil of darkness, and be lost to him forever! The girl soon returned carrying some candles in her hand. Will decided to go to her.

“Do you know, my little lass, one Thomas Lynch?”

“O yes, he lives in our house.”

“Sure now!”

“O yes; these candles is for him. He reads a deal.”

“I’m an old acquaintance, I want to surprise him. So you shall just show me his room. That’ll be capital fun, won’t it?”

The girl laughed.

“Has he got a light?”

“No, his last bit’s burnt out. He’s very poor.”

Will looked at the girl, and laughed in answer to her laugh, as they entered the house together—she going on tiptoe, and prepared, childlike, for the fullest enjoyment of the “surprise.”

“When you have shown me the door, run down and light a candle, ready, and at the right time I’ll call you.”

“O yes, that will be so nice!”

Will followed the girl stealthily along the narrow passage, and up the narrow stairs; then stopped, listening to the girl’s tap, and the reply, “Is it you, Molly? Come in.”

“Yes, Mr. Lynch,” said the girl, opening the door. “I’ll get a light.” Then she slid past the stranger, while he drew up against the wall to give her room.

No longer disguising his step, Will walked into the room, which was not utterly dark, for the light from a row of workshop windows, that overlooked it, cast a faint radiance, that revealed the dim outline of the chamber, and the meagre furniture, but fell especially on the form of a man, half bending over the table, supported by his hands, which rested upon it, his face towards the door as if he had started up in alarm and preparation.

Will paused just within the threshold, and was therefore only very darkly visible. Neither spoke. Will turned, closed the door, and locked it. Before he had well nigh time to turn again, or understand what was intended, the man leaped forward, and threw himself with his whole weight, and all the energy of despair, upon the intruder, who was driven by the shock violently against the door, while the house shivered to its very foundations. Will struck out instinctively, and with such power and success, that the assailant was hurled back against the table, and seriously hurt by the sharp edge.

“Thomas Lynch, this aint no good, you know.”

“Will Bradley, is that you? On my soul, I didn’t know you.”

“Well, you do now. It may also enlighten your mind to be made aware that I have a revolver here, with four shots—every one of ‘em capable o’ settling for once and all with a mean-spirited murderer like you!”

For a brief space there was a terrible silence in the chamber.

“You must be mad, Will!” at last was gasped out.

“That’s likely enough. But I aint come to talk. My father’s lying in the condemned cell for a crime that you know very well you committed.”

“How do you know that?”

“Ask me how I know your conscience pricked you to send my mother five pounds. Ask me how I know—but there, I’m soon done. I offer you, Thomas Lynch, your only chance of your neck. Confess before witnesses, and they shan’t know in time to hinder your getting away. If you won’t confess, I’ll get the people up from below, tell them you are a murderer, and, trust me, I won’t leave you till you are in the hands that’ll take precious care of you.”

There was no answer. Will spoke again;

“The girl has been frightened; but she’s coming up now. Choose!”

What passed through Lynch’s mind in that awful moment, may be guessed. Projects of denial, wild hope that Will, after all, knew nothing decisive—this one moment—then, the next, vivid hopes and equally vivid alarms that this was in truth a chance, and his only one, and that every moment’s delay endangered him more and more. He collapsed under the strain, and bursting into a wild passion of tears and sobs, and kneeling before Will, begged him to befriend him, and to hear the whole affair.

“Go on,” said Will, still standing in that darkness of the chamber, and gazing down upon the miserable and abject suppliant.

“I came back to my wife and children to bring them good news. I found another man living in my place, every bit of my worldly goods gone, my wife in the workhouse, one of my little ones dead. I sought him, the man that did this—John Mellish—intending no more than to let him know my mind. I stung him, and he struck at me, and passed on. There was a moment of devilish temptation—I yielded to it, saw a hammer lying near me; that’s enough. Will, I confess my crime, and that your father’s as innocent as a new-born babe.”

“And yet you’d ha’ let him be hanged? you mean-spirited hound!”

“Will, I’ve done my best to get up pluck to tell the truth and save him, but couldn’t.”

Will opened the door, and called.

“What are you going to do?” asked the criminal.

The girl came with a light, looking like a spectre.

“Who’s in the house?” demanded Will.

“Father and mother, and Uncle Ben,” sobbed she.

“Beg them to come up for a minute.”

The girl ran down with the message, leaving the candle.

“Tom Lynch, if I were you, I wouldn’t let grass grow under my feet. Ain’t you going to write?”

The murderer knelt down at the table, and with trembling hand wrote these words:

“It was I, not William Bradley, who killed Mr. Mellish. He stripped me of our house and home, and when I tried to shame him, and get some compensation, he struck at me with the loaded stick he carried. Hardly knowing what I was about, I took up Will Bradley’s hammer and killed him. Nobody saw me come or go. This is the truth. And may God and all men forgive me.
THOMAS LYNCH.”

When he had finished, and before he had risen from his knees, he turned to Will, and with hungry, bloodshot eyes, said, “Read! Will it do?”

Will read it slowly, once, twice, thrice. Then turning to the persons who had now come into the room, he said, in a voice as indifferent, as far as they were concerned, as if they were his own familiar friends. “I want you all to witness that this man has written and signed this paper.” Then turning to the murderer, “Have you, or have you not?”

“This is my writing,” said Lynch, not letting his eyes see aught but the paper.

“As you hope for salvation, do you say and swear it is true?” demanded Will.

“I do.”

“You are all witnesses to that?”

“Yes.” Yes.” Yes!” they said, as he looked successively at each.

“Please write your names down as witnesses,” continued Will.

This was done in silence, broken only by the scratching of the pen.

“Thank you all, friends,” said Will, in a shaking voice, as he took the paper and laid it in the breast of his coat. “You’ll know before long what it all means. Please leave me alone with him now.”

“We’ve neither of us much time to waste, Lynch,” he said, when they were alone. “I’ve only this to say to you; you know that Jenny—that Jenny and me have kep’ company?”

“Ah God, no!” moaned Lynch.

“Well, I’ve only this to say—which may ease your mind or not, according to your nature—your girl kep’ true to me when she thought me a murderer’s son, and now I want to tell you I’ll be true to her now she is—what she is—don’t shudder, I’m not going to name it. And more than that, I’ll

never let none of yours starve by reason of you sending that bank-note, which has saved you from bringing another man's blood on your head, and us, from the Lord knows what. Yes; you are cursing the note now, I see; but you will live to bless it, Tom Lynch—you will live to bless it. Now, make the most of your time, and fly; to-night I shall be in London; to-morrow all will be known."

* * * * *

Far away from the street and brickfield of bitter memory, the Bradleys, a month after Will's return from Leeds, piled their Christmas fire, and hung up their Christmas berries. There was not only the huge red-whiskered, jovial-eyed, William Bradley senior added to their number since we last saw them returning from the trial—there was a pale, thin little woman with eyes that seemed looking far, far past the thing they saw, following with their mental vision some object through dangers and through troubles, that kept her thoughts engrossed, spellbound, and shut away from the laughter and cheerful sights around her. This was Lynch's wife.

There were mixed up with the dark little Bradleys, five fair-haired, blue-eyed little girls, marvelously like a certain hard-worked general servant in the Clapham road. These were Lynch's children. Jenny was not there. Will sat by the fire thinking about her, and was almost as silent as Mrs. Lynch. He was thinking how hard it had been of her to cast him off as she had done with contempt and horror the moment she had known *why* he stole her letter. He was thinking, too, what hardships she might now be enduring in her new place, for she had been roughly expelled from the old one when the news had reached her mistress.

While he was thinking of these things, the children, who had been turned out on the stairs while William Bradley senior prepared a surprise for them, came rushing up, and burst into the room with a great and pleasant surprise for all; a delicious surprise for Will. Jenny had come—Jenny was sitting crying on the stairs, declaring she couldn't come in till Will went and told her she was forgiven. Even poor Mrs. Lynch rose and brightened at the news. Will, who scarcely needed any such assistance, was pushed by half a dozen hands toward the door.

When, after having had the stairs to themselves rather longer than they were aware of, the two came in together. Jenny, turning from her mother and the children, instantly sought out William Bradley senior, who had retired as much out of sight as his size would allow, having an immovable belief that he must be hateful to the girl's sight.

"There, there," he said, as she approached him and pressed his great hand in both her own, "never mind me yet, lass, wait till you get over it—never mind me yet."

"But I do mind, Mr. Bradley," said Jenny, her blue eyes running over with tears. "I do thank God that I see you saved—saved by his mercy and that blessed, blessed CONSCIENCE MONEY."

The Flag of Our Union, January 22, 1870