

FREDERIC WEST

OWEN'S FORTUNE; OR,
"DURABLE RICHES"

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"Durable Riches"**

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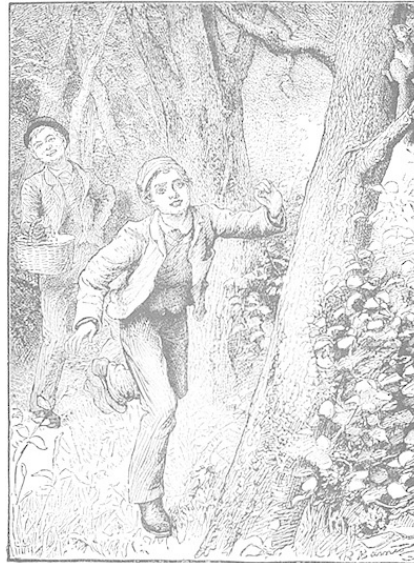
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Frederic West Owen's Fortune; Or, «Durable Riches»



"OWEN ... MADE A DART AFTER THE LITTLE CREATURE."—[Page 9](#).

CHAPTER I. THE RESOLVE

IT was a lovely fresh autumn afternoon; there were still a few blossoms in the cottage gardens, and the leaves which were left on the trees were coloured rich crimson and gold and brown, causing them to look almost like flowers ere they dropped off the branches to make room for the young buds that were swelling underneath, and silently preparing for the spring.

But two boys, who were in the woods just outside the village, were far too occupied to notice the leaves. They were searching for nuts; and a basket on the ground, already more than half filled, showed that their search had not been in vain. The younger of the two, Owen Hadleigh, was a fine, strong, intelligent boy of about fourteen years of age; his bright, dark eye was full of merriment as he laughingly told his companion he intended to make his fortune.

"Over these nuts?" asked Sam, ironically.

"Now look here, Sam Netherclift, you can laugh; I don't care for that. But I intend to make my fortune one day, and be a rich man."

"Like Squire Rowland?"

"Maybe; why not? I can work and earn it all."

"A likely thing!" laughed Sam; "and your father only a village schoolmaster."

"You'd better not laugh at my father," returned Owen, hotly; "there isn't a better man in the world than he is, and I intend to share all my fortune with him."

"How are you going to make it?"

"I don't know yet;" and Owen's face rather fell, for he had talked so confidently of what he would do, that Sam naturally would expect he had some sort of a plan, and he did not wish him to think he was only building castles in the air. But he added, bravely, "There are more ways than one of making a fortune, and I 'll try something yet. Father says Squire Rowland made his money by inventing a new dye, some bright colour no one had thought of before, and now he is rolling in riches. So I shall be sure to find some way of making money, never fear."

"When you have found out what to do, let me know, and I will come and help you," said Sam, laughing. He was a thorough boy, and had no thought beyond the present, though he was older than his companion, and had already to work on his father's farm.

But the conversation was suddenly interrupted by a squirrel, who flew rapidly up a branch just before them. Owen sprang to the tree, and made a dart after the little creature, but though he could not catch it, it had done him good service, for it had led him to a tree he had not noticed before, and which was covered with clusters of nuts.

"Hurrah!" shouted Owen, "here's the beginning of the fortune!"

Sam, of course, hastened to help, and to take his share, and both boys were too much engaged for the next hour to have any more lengthened conversation. As it grew dusk they started for home, carrying the basket between them, well pleased with the result of their afternoon's work.

The schoolhouse, with the adjoining cottage for the schoolmaster, stood somewhat apart from the other houses. Both buildings were almost covered with ivy and monthly roses, some of which were even now blooming, though it was late in the year. The little garden in front of the cottage was trim and tidy, though all was still and quiet as the boys pushed the gate open and went in. Owen's mother had died before he could remember, but his father had so loved and cared for his only child, that the boy realised no loss or want. His father was everything to him, and he repaid his care with most grateful love. The two lived alone in the rose-covered cottage, and did the needful work, with the help of a woman who came in twice a-week to do the washing and set things straight in general. She was in the kitchen when the boys went in.

"Is that you, Owen?" she said, raising her voice, that he might hear her in the front parlour.

"Yes, Mrs. Mitchell, it's all right; it is only me and Sam. Where is father?" he added, going into the kitchen, where she was busily ironing.

"He's gone to Allenbury," she answered shortly.

"Gone to town! He never said anything about going!" exclaimed the boy, with surprise, for his father mostly made him his confidant in everything.

"He'll be back in good time; he said he had to go on particular business." And Mrs. Mitchell turned back to her ironing, as if she did not care to be questioned.

Owen looked at her anxiously, but he did not speak again, and returned to the next room with a somewhat saddened face. He had noticed that his father was not quite himself lately, and he feared that there was some trouble pressing on him, that he should go off to Allenbury like this, without saying a word.

Sam was already dividing the nuts, and in this interesting occupation Owen soon forgot his anxiety, and was laughing and joking with his friend, as if there was no such thing as trouble in the world.

"Well," said Sam at last, "I must go, I suppose; I have those cows to see after, and father is pretty strict if I don't attend them well. It's fine to be you, having your time to yourself, and nothing to do."

"Nothing to do!" echoed Owen. "Why, I've no idle time, I can tell you. I have the water to fetch in, and the wood to chop, and the garden to see to, besides my lessons, and father is very particular about them."

"When are you going to leave school? You are near fourteen, are you not? I left when I was twelve. Shall you go to school when you are a man?"

Owen laughed. "Father wants me to learn all I can; he says we can't have too much education, and if I want to make a fortune, I must gather all knowledge I can now."

"How will geography, and sums, and history help you to make your fortune?"

"I don't know *how*, but I suppose they all come in. If I didn't know anything of geography, how could I trade with foreign countries, or know where to write for the stuff I wanted? And how could I tell whether they were cheating me or not, if I couldn't add up my sums? I should like to learn foreign languages too, to be able to talk to the merchants myself; but father does not know any language but English."

Sam looked wonderingly at his young companion's eager face. He did not care for education himself, and he could not understand the desire for it in Owen. He had passed through school, as do many, learning just so much as he was obliged, and no more. Though he could read and write, it was very seldom he took up either book or pen, spending his time in wandering about the lanes and woods when he was released from the farm duties which fell to his share. He was a good-natured, pleasant companion, but could in no way share Owen's aspirations, though it amused him to listen to them.

When he was gone, Owen took up a book in order to study his lessons for the next day, but the fading light soon drove him into the brighter region of the fire. The warm glow spread itself all over the little kitchen, and even the snowy linen on the table looked attractive as it grew gradually smoother and fairer under Mrs. Mitchell's experienced hands. Owen watched her a while from the chimney-corner, and presently he said—

"It must be very nice to iron, Mrs. Mitchell; to see the things that look all rough, and uncomfortable, and damp, smoothing themselves out under your hand, and looking pleasant and happy."

Mrs. Mitchell was a character in her way, and had many thoughts under her somewhat stern face, but it had never occurred to her that the clothes were any happier for being ironed.

"I expect it is you who are happier for seeing the things smooth, Owen," she said; "it makes no difference to them, of course. But it do make a great difference to us to have things nice about us. I suppose that is the reason the dear Lord says, 'Whatsoever things are lovely, ... think on these things.'"

"Do you think that God cares about our having things nice and pretty?"

"Why, my dear, of course I do. Do you think God would have taken all the trouble to put so much beauty into the world if He hadn't meant us to love it and enjoy it? See what lots of flowers He has given us, and such beautiful colours, even turning the leaves bright for us when the flowers are going. And when the snow comes down, He arranges it as beautiful as possible, making the very frost trace delicate patterns on the windows, and on the ground."

"Yes, I know," said Owen, eagerly; "father was reading to me yesterday how that every snowflake is a crystal."

"Ah, I expect the more you search into God's works, the more beauty you will find, Owen." The good woman went on busily with her work as she spoke, presently adding, "I think, too, that God's children should always try to have things nice and pleasant about them, at least, as far as may be. I know that a struggling woman, with a lot of little children, can't have things as nice as she would. But every one may be clean, and if all did their best, the world would look different to what it does now."

"Mrs. Mitchell, I am going to do my best, and make my fortune one day."

"I am very glad, Owen; I hope you will."

"Do you? That is kind of you. Sam Netherclift laughs, and thinks I shall never do it."

"You may do it, if you seek it in the right way. There are two sorts of fortune, Owen. I hope you'll get the better."

"Two sorts! What are they?"

"One is a fortune of riches that take to themselves wings, and soon fly away; and the other sort is 'durable riches.'"

"Oh, I should make a fortune that would last, of course. Riches that fly away are not of much use. I should seek the best fortune, Mrs. Mitchell."

"I hope so, I hope so, indeed," said the woman, as she set down her cool iron, and took a fresh one from the fire.

Owen did not reply at once; he fancied there was some hidden meaning in Mrs. Mitchell's words, but he did not understand what it was. He turned to his book, and for a while there was silence, only broken by the sound of the iron on the board.

Presently he looked up, and asked, "Did father say when he would be in, Mrs. Mitchell?"

"No, he said he wasn't sure, but he should not be late."

"You knew my mother, didn't you? I wish she had lived till now."

"Ah, you may well wish that. A sweeter and a better woman never lived. Yes, I knew her, and tended her in her last illness. She was a rich woman, too."

"A rich woman! how do you make that out?"

"Rich in faith, and love, and good works; those are the riches that last, Owen. You will never be rich unless you come to the Saviour."

"Squire Rowland is rich, and he isn't—" Owen paused for a suitable word—"you know what I mean, Mrs. Mitchell; he does not go to church, or visit the poor."

"No, I fear he is not a child of God, poor man. He is rich in this world's goods; but this world will not last for ever, and we shall live on after this world is burnt up. So it is best to have riches we can take with us. Better be poor here, and rich in the world to come, than rich on earth, to pine in miserable poverty for ever."

"But will all rich men be poor in the other world?"

"No, indeed. God sometimes gives earthly riches to His children to spend for Him, though I must say I think they are generally poor. But those of God's children who are rich here count their money the least part of their fortune. A wealthy Christian man once lost all his money by the breaking of a bank, and a friend meeting him after, said, 'I am sorry to hear you have lost everything.' He replied, 'It is a mistake; I have not lost everything. I have not lost Christ, I have not lost heaven, nor

God's Word, nor the peace He gives. And on earth I have not lost my wife, nor my health, nor my senses, nor many good friends.' You see, Owen, one may be very rich, and yet have very little money."

"But money is a good thing, too; we cannot do without it."

"It is good for what we can do with it. Money is no good stored away and laid up. But it may be of great use and blessing if laid out and spent for the Saviour. Yet I think those people are the happiest who have just enough for every day's use."

"I don't know, Mrs. Mitchell. I should like to have more than I could count."

"God grant you never may, Owen; it would ruin you, body and soul. Seek the lasting riches, and leave God to give you sufficient means to live on. Isn't that a Bible on the shelf? Just reach it down, and turn to Proverbs, the eighth chapter and seventeenth and eighteenth verses."

Owen did as he was bid, and read out aloud, "I love them that love Me; and those that seek Me early shall find Me. Riches and honour are with Me; yea, durable riches and righteousness."

"That's the true fortune; God give you grace to seek it."

Owen did not reply; he sat with the book in his hands, looking thoughtfully into the fire, till suddenly he heard a step outside, and jumped up to greet his father.

CHAPTER II. CHANGES

MR. HADLEIGH was a tall, thin, anxious-looking man, a great contrast to his son. He entered the room slowly, and sat down in the arm-chair by the fire, as if he were very weary.

"Are you not well, father?" asked Owen, anxiously.

"I have had a long walk, my son. I shall be better when I have had some tea."

Owen was accustomed to wait upon his father, and soon put the tea in the little teapot, and set it down by the fire to brew while he fetched the bread and butter out of a neighbouring cupboard, and cutting a slice of bread off the loaf, he knelt down before the fire to toast it. Mrs. Mitchell meanwhile put her irons away, and folded up the remaining clothes without a word, except just as she was tying on her bonnet she ventured to say, "I suppose you got through your business, Mr. Hadleigh. It seems to have knocked you up a bit."

"Yes; the result was what I expected. But I am more concerned for others than for myself."

"God can see after them, and care for them even better than you can. His ways are always better than ours."

"No doubt; but one cannot always realise it," said the schoolmaster wearily.

Mrs. Mitchell ventured no more than a quiet "good-night," as she saw Owen was listening to the conversation, evidently desiring to know what they meant. But when she was by herself out in the road, she said softly, "Poor things, they are both in trouble. Mr. Hadleigh is a clever man, no doubt, and gets the children on wonderful; but he has not got that quiet trust in God that Mrs. Hadleigh had. God give it him!"

Just as she turned the corner of the lane leading to her cottage, she met the vicar.

"Ha, Mrs. Mitchell, I have just been to your cottage, but your little girl told me you were not in yet. I hear that Mr. Hadleigh has some trouble pressing upon him. I have thought him looking anxious and careworn for some time; but he is such a reserved man, one cannot get much out of him. I thought perhaps you could give me a hint how I could help him."

"Indeed, sir, I wish you would go and see him; I fear he is in a sad way. He has not been feeling well for a long time, though he will not own it. He will not go to Dr. Benson for fear all the village should talk; but to-day he went over to Allenbury to see Dr. Foster, and he has evidently told him some bad news about himself, for he seemed very low when he came in; but Owen was there, so I could not ask."

"No; the poor boy will feel it sadly if his father is really seriously ill. I never saw such deep attachment between father and son."

Meanwhile Owen and his father were having a little talk. The poor boy seemed very uneasy during tea, and as soon as he had cleared away the remains of the meal, he sat down on his accustomed seat by his father's side, and said anxiously, "What is it father? Something is wrong, I am sure."

Mr. Hadleigh put his hand on the boy's head for a few moments without speaking. Presently he said, "You have often talked of making your fortune, Owen; how should you like to go to your Uncle James, and learn his business as a beginning?"

"I should like to go into business very well, father, but I could not leave you. You will not send me away?"

"No, I will not do that, but I may have to leave you, Owen. The doctor says my heart is seriously diseased."

Mr. Hadleigh could get no further for the look of dismay that crept over his son's face. But, boy-like he would not let the tears fall, keeping his eyes steadfastly fixed on the fire, till his voice was calm enough to say, "Perhaps the doctor was mistaken, and you may get better. Doctors are often wrong."

"It may be," returned Mr. Hadleigh, anxious not to grieve the boy too much at first.

While they were talking, Mr. Sturt, the vicar, came in, and Owen gladly took the opportunity of escaping upstairs for a while. It was a sore trouble to him, for he loved his father devotedly; but after the first grief was over, hope took her place again, and the boy went downstairs more cheerfully than his father expected.

The days and weeks passed by, and things went on much as usual for Owen. His father still taught in the school, and the boy did all he could to help him, sweeping out the schoolroom, and getting up in the dark mornings to light the fire before his father was out of bed—in every way he could, trying to lessen his father's work. But Mr. Hadleigh's health was not again alluded to. No doubt he spoke of it to Mrs. Mitchell, who was often in and out, but Owen heard nothing of it, and he began to hope it was all a mistake. The winter came in early, with sharp frosts and snow, and Owen, with his friend Sam, was often on the ponds a good part of the day, sliding and skating to his heart's content.

One evening, as he ran home glowing with exercise and fun, his father asked him, "How shall you like the town, Owen? It will be a great contrast to the country."

"I should not like it at all, father; except, I suppose, one can get more money there."

"Yes, I suppose so. Your uncle is reckoned a rich man, and he has always been annoyed with me that I did not go into business too; but I had no taste for it. Country life always had greater charms for me, even with less to live upon. But I think you will get on, Owen; you have more push in you than I ever had. Only don't let the earthly fortune that you desire, blind your eyes to the heavenly riches. I neglected them too long, and though I can thank God that He has saved me, yet I often fear I shall have little reward yonder, for I have hidden my hope in my own breast, and have been content to keep my riches to myself, instead of trading with them. Mind that you do otherwise, Owen. Seek *first*

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