

ARTHUR

TIMOTHY SHAY

TRUE RICHES; OR,
WEALTH WITHOUT WINGS

Timothy Arthur

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T. S. Arthur

True Riches; Or, Wealth Without Wings

CHAPTER I

"A fair day's business. A *very* fair day's business," said Leonard Jasper, as he closed a small account-book, over which he had been poring, pencil in hand, for some ten minutes. The tone in which he spoke expressed more than ordinary gratification.

"To what do the sales amount?" asked a young man, clerk to the dealer, approaching his principal as he spoke.

"To just two hundred dollars, Edward. It's the best day we've had for a month."

"The best, in more than one sense," remarked the young man, with a meaning expression.

"You're right there, too," said Jasper, with animation, rubbing his hands together as he spoke, in the manner of one who is particularly well pleased with himself. "I made two or three trades that told largely on the sunny side of profit and loss account."

"True enough. Though I've been afraid, ever since you sold that piece of velvet to Harland's wife, that you cut rather deeper than was prudent."

"Not a bit of it—not a bit of it! Had I asked her three dollars a yard, she would have wanted it for two. So I said six, to begin with, expecting to fall extensively; and, to put a good face on the matter, told her that it cost within a fraction of what I asked to make the importation—remarking, at the same time, that the goods were too rich in quality to bear a profit, and were only kept as a matter of accommodation to certain customers."

"And she bought at five?"

"Yes; thinking she had obtained the velvet at seventy-five cents a yard less than its cost. Generous customer, truly!"

"While you, in reality, made two dollars and a half on every yard she bought."

"Precisely that sum."

"She had six yards."

"Yes; out of which we made a clear profit of fifteen dollars. That will do, I'm thinking. Operations like this count up fast."

"Very fast. But, Mr. Jasper"—

"But what, Edward?"

"Is it altogether prudent to multiply operations of this character? Won't it make for you a bad reputation, and thus diminish, instead of increasing, your custom?"

"I fear nothing of the kind. One-half the people are not satisfied unless you cheat them. I've handled the yardstick, off and on, for the last fifteen or twenty years, and I think my observation during that time is worth something. It tells me this—that a bold face, a smooth tongue, and an easy conscience are worth more in our business than any other qualities. With these you may do as you list. They tell far better than all the 'one-price' and fair-dealing professions, in which people have little faith. In fact, the mass will overreach if they can, and therefore regard these 'honest' assumptions with suspicion."

The young man, Edward Claire, did not make a reply for nearly a minute. Something in the words of Mr. Jasper had fixed his thought, and left him, for a brief space of time, absorbed in his own reflections.

Lifting, at length, his eyes, which had been resting on the floor, he said—

"Our profit on to-day's sales must reach very nearly fifty dollars."

"Just that sum, if I have made a right estimate," replied Jasper; "and that is what I call a fair day's business."

While he was yet speaking, a lad entered the store, and laid upon the counter a small sealed package, bearing the superscription, "Leonard Jasper, Esq." The merchant cut the red tape with which it was tied, broke the seal, and opening the package, took therefrom several papers, over which he ran his eyes hurriedly; his clerk, as he did so, turning away.

"What's this?" muttered Jasper to himself, not at first clearly comprehending the nature of the business to which the communication related. "Executor! To what? Oh! ah! Estate of Ruben Elder. Humph! What possessed him to trouble me with this business? I've no time to play executor to an estate, the whole proceeds of which would hardly fill my trousers' pocket. He was a thriftless fellow at best, and never could more than keep his head out of water. His debts will swallow up every thing, of course, saving my commissions, which I would gladly throw in to be rid of this business."

With this, Jasper tossed the papers into his desk, and, taking up his hat, said to his clerk—"You may shut the store, Edward. Before you leave, see that every thing is made safe."

The merchant than retired, and wended his way homeward.

Edward Claire seemed in no hurry to follow this example. His first act was to close the window-shutters and door—turning the key in the latter, and remaining inside.

Entirely alone, and hidden from observation, the young man seated himself, and let his thoughts, which seemed to be active on some subject, take their own way. He was soon entirely absorbed. Whatever were his thoughts, one thing would have been apparent to an observer—they did not run in a quiet stream. Something disturbed their current, for his brow was knit, his compressed lips had a disturbed motion, and his hands moved about at times uneasily. At length he arose, not hurriedly, but with a deliberate motion, threw his arms behind him, and, bending forward, with his eyes cast down, paced the length of the store two or three times, backward and forward, slowly.

"Fifty dollars profit in one day," he at length said, half audibly. "That will do, certainly. I'd be contented with a tenth part of the sum. He's bound to get rich; that's plain. Fifty dollars in a single day! Leonard Jasper, you're a shrewd one. I shall have to lay aside some of my old-fashioned squeamishness, and take a few lessons from so accomplished a teacher. But, he's a downright cheat!"

Some better thought had swept suddenly, in a gleam of light, across the young man's mind, showing him the true nature of the principles from which the merchant acted, and, for the moment, causing his whole nature to revolt against them. But the light faded slowly; a state of darkness and confusion followed, and then the old current of thought moved on as before.

Slowly, and now with an attitude of deeper abstraction, moved the young man backward and forward the entire length of the room, of which he was the sole occupant. He *felt* that he was alone, that no human eye could note a single movement. Of the all-seeing Eye he thought not—his spirit's evil counsellors, drawn intimately nigh to him through inclinations to evil, kept that consciousness from his mind.

At length Claire turned to the desk upon which were the account-books that had been used during the day, and commenced turning the leaves of one of them in a way that showed only a half-formed purpose. There was an impulse to something in his mind; an impulse not yet expressed in any form of thought, though in the progress toward something definite.

"Fifty dollars a day!" he murmurs. Ah, that shows the direction of his mind. He is still struggling in temptation, and with all his inherited cupidities bearing him downward.

Suddenly he starts, turns his head, and listens eagerly, and with a strange agitation. Some one had tried the door. For a few moments he stood in an attitude of the most profound attention. But the trial was not repeated. How audibly, to his own ears, throbbed his heart! How oppressed was his bosom! How, in a current of fire, rushed the blood to his over-excited brain!

The hand upon the door was but an ordinary occurrence. It might now be only a customer, who, seeing a light within, hoped to supply some neglected want, or a friend passing by, who wished

for a few words of pleasant gossip. At any other time Claire would have stepped quickly and with undisturbed expectation to receive the applicant for admission. But guilty thoughts awakened their nervous attendants, suspicion and fear, and these had sounded an instant alarm.

Still, very still, sat Edward Claire, even to the occasional suppression of his breathing, which, to him, seemed strangely loud.

Several minutes elapsed, and then the young man commenced silently to remove the various account-books to their nightly safe deposite in the fire-proof. The cash-box, over the contents of which he lingered, counting note by note and coin by coin, several times repeated, next took its place with the books. The heavy iron door swung to, the key traversed noiselessly the delicate and complicated wards, was removed and deposited in a place of safety; and, yet unrecovered from his mood of abstraction, the clerk left the store, and took his way homeward. From that hour Edward Claire was to be the subject of a fierce temptation. He had admitted an evil suggestion, and had warmed it in the earth of his mind, even to germination. Already a delicate root had penetrated the soil, and was extracting food therefrom. Oh! why did he not instantly pluck it out, when the hand of an infant would have sufficed in strength for the task? Why did he let it remain, shielding it from the cold winds of rational truth and the hot sun of good affections, until it could live, sustained by its own organs of appropriation and nutrition? Why did he let it remain until its lusty growth gave sad promise of an evil tree, in which birds of night find shelter and build nests for their young?

Let us introduce another scene and another personage, who will claim, to some extent, the reader's attention.

There were two small but neatly, though plainly, furnished rooms, in the second story of a house located in a retired street. In one of these rooms tea was prepared, and near the tea-table sat a young woman, with a sleeping babe nestled to-her bosom. She was fair-faced and sunny-haired; and in her blue eyes lay, in calm beauty, sweet tokens of a pure and loving heart. How tenderly she looked down, now and then, upon the slumbering cherub whose winning ways and murmurs of affection had blessed her through the day! Happy young wife! these are thy halcyon days. Care has not thrown upon thee a single shadow from his gloomy wing, and hope pictures the smiling future with a sky of sunny brightness.

"How long he stays away!" had just passed her lips, when the sound of well-known footsteps was heard in the passage below. A brief time, and then the room-door opened, and Edward Claire came in. What a depth of tenderness was in his voice as he bent his lips to those of his young wife, murmuring—

"My Edith!" and then touching, with a gentler pressure, the white forehead of his sleeping babe.

"You were late this evening, dear," said Edith, looking into the face of her husband, whose eyes drooped under her earnest gaze.

"Yes," he replied, with a slight evasion in his tone and manner; "we have been busier than usual to-day."

As he spoke the young wife arose, and taking her slumbering child into the adjoining chamber, laid it gently in its crib. Then returning, she made the tea—the kettle stood boiling by the grate—and in a little while they sat down to their evening meal.

Edith soon observed that her husband was more thoughtful and less talkative than usual. She asked, however, no direct question touching this change; but regarded what he did say with closer attention, hoping to draw a correct inference, without seeming to notice his altered mood.

"Mr. Jasper's business is increasing?" she said, somewhat interrogatively, while they still sat at the table, an expression of her husband's leading to this remark.

"Yes, increasing very rapidly," replied Claire, with animation. "The fact is, he is going to get rich. Do you know that his profit on to-day's sales amounted to fifty dollars?"

"So much?" said Edith, yet in a tone that showed no surprise or particular interest in the matter.

"Fifty dollars a day," resumed Claire, "counting three hundred week-days in the year, gives the handsome sum of fifteen thousand dollars in the year. I'd be satisfied with as much in five years."

There was more feeling in the tone of his voice than he had meant to betray. His young wife lifted her eyes to his face, and looked at him with a wonder she could not conceal.

"Contentment, dear," said she, in a gentle, subdued, yet tender voice, "is great gain. We have enough, and more than enough, to make us happy. Natural riches have no power to fill the heart's most yearning affections; and how often do they take to themselves wings and fly away."

"Enough, dear!" replied Edward Claire, smiling. "O no, not enough, by any means. Five hundred dollars a year is but a meagre sum. What does it procure for us? Only these two rooms and the commonest necessaries of life. We cannot even afford the constant service of a domestic."

"Why, Edward! what has come over you? Have I complained?"

"No, dear, no. But think you I have no ambition to see my wife take a higher place than this?"

"Ambition! Do not again use that word," said Edith, very earnestly. "What has love to do with ambition? What have we to do with the world and its higher places? Will a more elegant home secure for us a purer joy than we have known and still know in this our Eden? Oh, my husband! do not let such thoughts come into your mind. Let us be content with what God in his wisdom provides, assured that it is best for us. In envying the good of another, we destroy our own good. There is a higher wealth than gold, Edward; and it supplies higher wants. There are riches without wings; they lie scattered about our feet; we may fill our coffers, if we will. Treasures of good affections and true thoughts are worth more than all earthly riches, and will bear us far more safely and happily through the world; such treasures are given to all who will receive them, and given in lavish abundance. Let us secure of this wealth, Edward, a liberal share."

"Mere treasures of the mind, Edith, do not sustain natural life, do not supply natural demands. They build no houses; they provide not for increasing wants. We cannot always remain in the ideal world; the sober realities of life will drag us down."

The simple-hearted, true-minded young wife was not understood by her husband. She felt this, and felt it oppressively.

"Have we not enough, Edward, to meet every real want?" she urged. "Do we desire better food or better clothing? Would our bodies be more comfortable because our carpets were of richer material, and our rooms filled with costlier furniture? O no! If not contented with such things as Providence gives us to-day, we shall not find contentment in what he gives us to-morrow; for the same dissatisfied heart will beat in our bosoms. Let Mr. Jasper get rich, if he can; we will not envy his possessions."

"I do not envy him, Edith," replied Claire. "But I cannot feel satisfied with the small salary he pays me. My services are, I know, of greater value than he estimates them, and I feel that I am dealt by unjustly."

Edith made no answer. The subject was repugnant to her feelings, and she did not wish to prolong it. Claire already regretted its introduction. So there was silence for nearly a minute.

When the conversation flowed on again, it embraced a different theme, but had in it no warmth of feeling. Not since they had joined hands at the altar, nearly two years before, had they passed so embarrassed and really unhappy an evening as this. A tempting spirit had found its way into their Paradise, burning with a fierce desire to mar its beauty.

CHAPTER II

"Oh, what a dream I have had!" exclaimed Mrs. Claire, starting suddenly from sleep, just as the light began to come in dimly through the windows on the next morning; and, as she spoke, she caught hold of her husband, and clung to him, frightened and trembling.

"Oh, such a dream!" she added, as her mind grew clearer, and she felt better assured of the reality that existed. "I thought, love, that we were sitting in our room, as we sit every evening—baby asleep, I sewing, and you, as usual, reading aloud. How happy we were! happier, it seemed, than we had ever been before. A sudden loud knock startled us both. Then two men entered, one of whom drew a paper from his pocket, declaring, as he did so, that you were arrested at the instance of Mr. Jasper, who accused you with having robbed him of a large amount of money."

"Why, Edith!" ejaculated Edward Claire, in a voice of painful surprise. He, too, had been dreaming, and in his dream he had done what his heart prompted him to do on the previous evening—to act unfaithfully toward his employer.

"Oh, it was dreadful! dreadful!" continued Edith. "Rudely they seized and bore you away. Then came the trial. Oh, I see it all as plainly as if it had been real. You, my good, true, noble-hearted husband, who had never wronged another, even in thought—you were accused of robbery in the presence of hundreds, and positive witnesses were brought forward to prove the terrible charge. All they alleged was believed by those who heard. The judges pronounced you guilty, and then sentenced you to a gloomy prison. They were bearing you off, when, in my agony, I awoke. It was terrible, terrible! yet, thank God! only a dream, a fearful dream!"

Claire drew his arms around his young wife, and clasped her with a straining embrace to his bosom. He made no answer for some time. The relation of a dream so singular, under the circumstances, had startled him, and he almost feared to trust his voice in response. At length, with a deeply-drawn, sighing breath, nature's spontaneous struggle for relief, he said—

"Yes, dear, that was a fearful dream. The thought of it makes me shudder. But, after all, it was only a dream; the whispering of a malignant spirit in your ear. Happily, his power to harm extends no further. The fancy may be possessed in sleep, but the reason lies inactive, and the hands remain idle. No guilt can stain the spirit. The night passes, and we go abroad in the morning as pure as when we laid our heads wearily to rest."

"And more," added Edith, her mind fast recovering itself; "with a clearer perception of what is true and good. The soul's disturbed balance finds its equilibrium. It is not the body alone that is refreshed and strengthened. The spirit, plied with temptation after temptation through the day, and almost ready to yield when the night cometh, finds rest also, and time to recover its strength. In the morning it goes forth again, stronger for its season of repose. How often, as the day dawned, have I lifted my heart and thanked God for sleep!"

Thus prompted, an emotion of thankfulness arose in the breast of Claire, but the utterance was kept back from the lips. He had a secret, a painful and revolting secret, in his heart, and he feared lest something should betray its existence to his wife. What would he not have given at the moment to have blotted out for ever the memory of thoughts too earnestly cherished on the evening before, when he was alone with the tempter?

There was a shadow on the heart of Edith Claire. The unusual mood of her husband on the previous evening, and the dream which had haunted her through the night, left impressions that could not be shaken off. She had an instinct of danger—danger lurking in the path of one in whom her very life was bound up.

When Edward was about leaving her to go forth for the day, she lingered by his side and clung to him, as if she could not let him pass from the safe shelter of home.

"Ah! if I could always be with you!" said Edith—"if we could ever move on, hand in hand and side by side, how full to running over would be my cup of happiness!"

"Are we not ever side by side, dear?" replied Claire, tenderly. "You are present to my thought all the day."

"And you to mine. O yes! yes! We *are* moving side by side; our mutual thought gives presence. Yet it was the bodily presence I desired. But that cannot be."

"Good-bye, love! Good-bye, sweet one!" said Claire, kissing his wife, and gently pressing his lips upon those of the babe she held in her arms. He then passed forth, and took his way to the store of Leonard Jasper, in whose service he had been for two years, or since the date of his marriage.

A scene transpired a few days previous to this, which we will briefly describe. Three persons were alone in a chamber, the furniture of which, though neither elegant nor costly, evinced taste and refinement. Lying upon a bed was a man, evidently near the time of his departure from earth. By his side, and bending over him, was a woman almost as pale as himself. A little girl, not above five years of age, sat on the foot of the bed, with her eyes fixed on the countenance of her father, for such was the relation borne to her by the sick man. A lovely creature she was—beautiful even beyond the common beauty of childhood. For a time a solemn stillness reigned through the chamber. A few low-spoken words had passed between the parents of the child, and then, for a brief period, all was deep, oppressive silence. This was interrupted, at length, by the mother's unrestrained sobs, as she laid her face upon the bosom of her husband, so soon to be taken from her, and wept aloud.

No word of remonstrance or comfort came from the sick man's lips. He only drew his arm about the weeper's neck, and held her closer to his heart.

The troubled waters soon ran clear: there was calmness in their depths.

"It is but for a little while, Fanny," said he, in a feeble yet steady voice; "only for a little while."

"I know; I feel that here," was replied, as a thin, white hand was laid against the speaker's bosom. "And I could patiently await my time, but"—

Her eyes glanced yearningly toward the child, who sat gazing upon her parents, with an instinct of approaching evil at her heart.

Too well did the dying man comprehend the meaning of this glance.

"God will take care of her. He will raise her up friends," said he quickly; yet, even as he spoke, his heart failed him.

"All that is left to us is our trust in Him," murmured the wife and mother. Her voice, though so low as to be almost a whisper, was firm. She realized, as she spoke, how much of bitterness was in the parting hours of the dying one, and she felt that duty required her to sustain him, so far as she had the strength to do so. And so she nerved her woman's heart, almost breaking as it was, to bear and hide her own sorrows, while she strove to comfort and strengthen the failing spirit of her husband.

"God is good," said she, after a brief silence, during which she was striving for the mastery over her weakness. As she spoke, she leaned over the sick man, and looked at him lovingly, and with the smile of an angel on her countenance.

"Yes, God is good, Fanny. Have we not proved this, again and again?" was returned, a feeble light coming into the speaker's pale face.

"A thousand times, dear! a thousand times!" said the wife, earnestly. "He is infinite in his goodness, and we are his children."

"Yes, his children," was the whispered response. And over and over again he repeated the words, "His children;" his voice falling lower and lower each time, until at length his eyes closed, and his in-going thought found no longer an utterance.

Twilight had come. The deepening shadows were fast obscuring all objects in the sick-chamber, where silence reigned, profound almost as death.

"He sleeps," whispered the wife, as she softly raised herself from her reclining position on the bed. "And dear Fanny sleeps also," was added, as her eyes rested upon the unconscious form of her child.

Two hours later, and the last record was made in Ruben Elder's Book of Life.

For half an hour before the closing scene, his mind was clear, and he then spoke calmly of what he had done for those who were to remain behind.

"To Leonard Jasper, my old friend," said he to his wife, "I have left the management of my affairs. He will see that every thing is done for the best. There is not much property, yet enough to insure a small income; and, when you follow me to the better land, sufficient for the support and education of our child."

Peacefully, after this, he sank away, and, like a weary child falling into slumber, slept that sleep from which the awakening is in another world.

How Leonard Jasper received the announcement of his executorship has been seen. The dying man had referred to him as an old friend; but, as the reader has already concluded, there was little room in his sordid heart for so pure a sentiment as that of friendship. He, however, lost no time in ascertaining the amount of property left by Elder, which consisted of two small houses in the city, and a barren tract of about sixty acres of land, somewhere in Pennsylvania, which had been taken for a debt of five hundred dollars. In view of his death, Elder had wound up his business some months before, paid off what he owed, and collected in nearly all outstanding accounts; so that little work remained for his executor, except to dispose of the unprofitable tract of land and invest the proceeds.

On the day following the opening of our story, Jasper, who still felt annoyed at the prospect of more trouble than profit in the matter of his executorship, made a formal call upon the widow of his old friend.

The servant, to whom he gave his name, stated that Mrs. Elder was so ill as not to be able to leave her room.

"I will call again, then, in a few days," said he. "Be sure you give her my name correctly. Mr. Jasper—Leonard Jasper."

The face of the servant wore a troubled aspect.

"She is very sick, sir," said she, in a worried, hesitating manner. "Won't you take a seat, for a moment, until I go up and tell her that you are here? Maybe she would like to see you. I think I heard her mention your name a little while ago."

Jasper sat down, and the domestic left the room. She was gone but a short time, when she returned and said that Mrs. Elder wished to see him. Jasper arose and followed her up-stairs. There were some strange misgivings in his heart—some vague, troubled anticipations, that oppressed his feelings. But he had little time for thought ere he was ushered into the chamber of his friend's widow.

A single glance sufficed to tell him the whole sad truth of the case. There was no room for mistake. The bright, glazed eyes, the rigid, colourless lips, the ashen countenance, all testified that the hour of her departure drew nigh. How strong, we had almost said, how beautiful, was the contrasted form and features of her lovely child, whose face, so full of life and rosy health, pressed the same pillow that supported her weary head.

Feebly the dying woman extended her hand, as Mr. Jasper came in, saying, as she did so—

"I am glad you have come; I was about sending for you."

A slight tremor of the lips accompanied her words, and it was plain that the presence of Jasper, whose relation to her and her child she understood, caused a wave of emotion to sweep over her heart.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Elder, to find you so very ill," said Jasper, with as much of sympathy in his voice as he could command. "Has your physician been here to-day?"

"It is past that, sir—past that," was replied. "There is no further any hope for me in the physician's art."

A sob choked all further utterance.

How oppressed was the cold-hearted, selfish man of the world! His thoughts were all clouded, and his lips for a time sealed. As the dying woman said, so he felt that it was. The time of her departure had come. An instinct of self-protection—protection for his feelings—caused him, after a few moments, to say, and he turned partly from the bed as he spoke—

"Some of your friends should be with you, madam, at this time. Let me go for them. Have you a sister or near relative in the city?"

The words and movement of Mr. Jasper restored at once the conscious self-possession of the dying mother, and she raised herself partly up with a quick motion, and a gleam of light in her countenance.

"Oh, sir," she said eagerly, "do not go yet. I have no sister, no near relative; none but you to whom I can speak my last words and give my last injunction. You were my husband's friend while he lived, and to you has he committed the care of his widow and orphan. I am called, alas, too soon! to follow him; and now, in the sight of God, and in the presence of his spirit—for I feel that he is near us now—I commit to you the care of this dear child. Oh, sir! be to her as a father. Love her tenderly, and care for her as if she were your own. Her heart is rich with affection, and upon you will its treasures be poured out. Take her! take her as your own! Here I give to you, in this the solemn hour of my departure, that which to me is above all price."

And as she said this, with a suddenly renewed strength, she lifted the child, and, ere Jasper could check the movement, placed her in his arms. Then, with one long, eager, clinging kiss pressed upon the lips of that child, she sank backward on the bed; and life, which had flashed up brightly for a moment, went out in this world for ever.

CHAPTER III

Leonard Jasper would have been less than human had he borne such an assault upon his feelings without emotion; less than human had his heart instantly and spontaneously rejected the dying mother's wildly eloquent appeal. He was bewildered, startled, even deeply moved.

The moment he could, with propriety and a decent regard for appearances, get away from the house where he had witnessed so painful a scene, he returned to his place of business in a sobered, thoughtful state of mind. He had not anticipated so direct a guardianship of Ruben Elder's child as it was evident would now devolve upon him, in consequence of the mother's death. Here was to be trouble for him—this was his feeling so soon as there was a little time for reaction—and trouble without profit. He would have to take upon himself the direct charge of the little girl, and duly provide for her maintenance and education.

"If there is property enough for this, well and good," he muttered to himself; he had not yet become acquainted with the real state of affairs. "If not," he added, firmly, "the loss will be hers; that is all. I shall have sufficient trouble and annoyance, without being put to expense."

For some time after his return to his store, Jasper refrained from entering upon any business. During at least fifteen or twenty minutes, he sat at his desk, completely absorbed in thought. At length he called to Edward Claire, his principal clerk, and said that he wished to speak a few words with him. The young man came back from the counter to where he was sitting, wondering what had produced the very apparent change in his employer's state of mind.

"Edward," said Mr. Jasper, in a low, serious voice, "there is a little matter that I must get you to attend to for me. It is not very pleasant, it is true; though nothing more than people are required to do every day. You remember Mr. Elder, Ruben Elder, who formerly kept store in Second street?"

"Very well."

"He died last week."

"I noticed his death in the papers."

"He has appointed me his executor."

"Ah?"

"Yes; and I wish to my heart he had appointed somebody else. I've too much business of my own to attend to."

"Of course," said Claire, "you will receive your regular commissions for attending to the settlement of his estate."

"Poor picking there," replied Jasper, shrugging his shoulders. "I'd very cheerfully give up the profit to be rid of the trouble. But that doesn't signify now. Elder has left his affairs in my hands, and I must give them at least some attention. I'm not coming to the point, however. A little while ago I witnessed the most painful scene that ever fell under my eyes."

"Ah!"

"Yes, truly. Ugh! It makes the chills creep over me as I think of it. Last evening I received regular notification of my appointment as executor to Elder's estate, and to-day thought it only right to call upon the widow, and see if any present service were needed by the family. Such a scene as I encountered! Mrs. Elder was just at the point of death, and expired a few moments after my entrance. Besides a single domestic and a child, I was the only witness of her last extremity."

"Shocking!"

"You may well say shocking, Edward, unprepared as I was for such an occurrence. My nerves are quivering yet."

"Then the widow is dead also?"

"Yes; both have gone to their long home."

"How many children are left?"

"Only one—a little girl, not, I should think, above four years of age."

"Some near relative will, I presume, take charge of her."

"In dying, the mother declared that she had no friend to whom she could leave the child. On me, therefore, devolves the care of seeing to its maintenance."

"No friend. Poor child! and of so tender an age!"

"She is young, certainly, to be left alone in the world."

Jasper uttered these words, but felt nothing of the sad meaning they involved.

"What disposition will you make of her?" asked Claire.

"I've had no time to think of that yet. Other matters are first to be regarded. So let me come to the point. Mrs. Elder is dead; and, as far as I could see, there is no living soul, beyond a frightened servant, to do any thing. Whether she will have the presence of mind to call in the neighbours, is more than I can say. I left in the bewilderment of the moment; and now remember me that something is to be done for the dead. Will you go to the house, and see what is needed? In the next block is an undertaker; you had better call, on your way, and ask him to go with you. All arrangements necessary for the funeral can be left in his hands. Just take this whole matter off of me, Edward, and I will be greatly obliged to you. I have a good many things on my mind, that must receive close attention."

The young man offered no objection, although the service was far from being agreeable. On his return, after the absence of an hour, Jasper had, of course, many inquiries to make. Claire appeared serious. The fact was, he had seen enough to touch his feelings deeply. The grief of the orphaned child, as he was a witness thereto, had brought tears upon his cheeks, in spite of every manly effort to restrain them. Her extreme beauty struck him at the first glance, even obscured as it was under a veil of sorrow and weeping.

"There were several persons in, you say?" remarked Jasper, after Claire had related a number of particulars.

"Yes, three or four."

"Ladies, of course?"

"Yes."

"Did any of them propose to take the child home with them?"

"Not directly. One woman asked me a number of questions about the little girl."

"Of what nature?"

"As to whether there were any relatives or particular friends who would take charge of her?"

"And you told her there were none?"

"Yes; none of whom I had any knowledge."

"Well? What had she to say to that?"

"She wanted to know if there would be any thing for the child's support. I said that there would, in all probability."

"Well?"

"Then she gave me to understand, that if no one took the child, she might be induced to board her for a while, until other arrangements were made."

"Did you give her to understand that this was practicable?"

"No, sir."

"Why not? She will have to be boarded, you know."

"I neither liked the woman's face, manner, nor appearance."

"Why not?"

"Oh, she was a vulgar, coarse, hard-looking creature to my eyes."

"Kind hearts often lie concealed under unpromising externals."

"True; but they lie not concealed under that exterior, be well assured, Mr. Jasper. No, no. The child who has met with so sad a loss as that of a mother, needs the tenderest guardianship. At best, the case is hard enough."

Jasper did not respond to this humane sentiment, for there was no pity in him. The waves of feeling, stirred so suddenly a few hours before, had all subsided, and the surface of his heart bore no ripple of emotion. He thought not of the child as an object claiming his regard, but as a trouble and a hinderance thrown in his way, to be disposed of as summarily as possible.

"I'm obliged to you, Edward, for the trouble you have taken in my stead," he remarked, after a slight pause. "To-morrow, I may wish you to call there again. Of course, the neighbours will give needful attention until the funeral takes place. By that time, perhaps, the child will have made a friend of some one of them, and secure, through this means, a home for the present. It is, for us, a troublesome business at best, though it will soon be over."

A person coming in at the moment, Claire left his employer to attend at the counter. The new customer, it was quickly perceived by the clerk, was one who might readily be deceived into buying the articles for which she inquired, at a rate far in advance of their real value; and he felt instantly tempted to ask her a very high price. Readily, for it was but acting from habit, did he yield to this temptation. His success was equal to his wishes. The woman, altogether unsuspecting of the cheat practised upon her, paid for her purchases the sum of ten dollars above their true value. She lingered a short time after settling her bill, and made some observation upon a current topic of the day. One or two casually-uttered sentiments did not fall like refreshing dew upon the feelings of Claire, but rather stung him like words of sharp rebuke, and made him half regret the wrong he had done to her. He felt relieved when she retired.

It so happened that, while this customer was in, Jasper left the store. Soon after, a clerk went to dinner. Only a lad remained with Claire, and he was sent up-stairs to arrange some goods.

The hour of temptation had again come, and the young man's mind was overshadowed by the powers of darkness.

"Ten dollars clear gain on that transaction," said he to himself, as he drew open the money-drawer in which he had deposited the cash paid to him by his late customer.

For some time his thoughts were busy, while his fingers toyed with the gold and bills in the drawer. Two five-dollar pieces were included in the payment just received.

"Jasper, surely, ought to be satisfied with one of these." Thus he began to argue with himself. "I drove the bargain; am I not entitled to a fair proportion of the profit? It strikes me so. What wrong will it be to him? Wrong? Humph! Wrong? The wrong has been done already; but it falls not on his head.

"If I am to do this kind of work for him,"—the feelings of Claire now commenced running in a more disturbed channel; there were deep contractions on his forehead, and his lips were shut firmly,—"this kind of work, I must have a share of the benefit. If I am to sell my soul, Leonard Jasper shall not have the whole price."

Deliberately, as he spoke this within himself, did Claire take from the drawer a five-dollar gold piece, and thrust it into his pocket.

"Mine, not his," were the words with which he approved the act. At the same instant Jasper entered. The young man's heart gave a sudden bound, and there was guilt in his face, but Jasper did not read its true expression.

"Well, Edward," said he, cheerfully, "what luck did you have with the old lady? Did she make a pretty fair bill?"

"So-so," returned Claire, with affected indifference; "about thirty dollars."

"Ah! so much?"

"Yes; and, what is better, I made her pay pretty strong. She was from the country."

"That'll do." And Jasper rubbed his hands together energetically. "How much over and above a fair percentage did you get?"

"About five dollars."

"Good, again! You're a trump, Edward."

If Edward Claire was relieved to find that no suspicion had been awakened in the thoughts of Jasper, he did not feel very strongly flattered by his approving words. The truth was, at the very moment he was relating what he had done, there came into his mind, with a most startling distinctness, the dream of his wife, and the painful feelings it had occasioned.

"What folly! What madness! Whither am I going?"

These were his thoughts now, born of a quick revulsion of feeling.

"It is your dinner-time, Edward. Get back as soon as possible. I want to be home a little earlier than usual to-day."

Thus spoke Mr. Jasper; and the young man, taking up his hat, left the store. He had never felt so strangely in his life. The first step in crime had been taken; he had fairly entered the downward road to ruin. Where was it all to end? Placing his fingers, almost without thought, in his pocket, they came in contact with the gold-piece obtained by a double crime—the robbery both of a customer and his employer. Quickly, as if he had touched a living coal, was the hand of Claire withdrawn, while a low chill crept along his nerves. It required some resolution for the young man to meet his pure-hearted, clear-minded wife, whose quick intuitions of good or evil in others he had over and over again been led to remark. Once, as he moved along, he thrust his hand into his pocket, with the suddenly-formed purpose of casting the piece of money from him, and thus cancelling his guilt. But, ere the act was accomplished, he remembered that in this there would be no restoration, and so refrained.

Edward Claire felt, while in the presence of his young wife, that she often looked into his face with more than usual earnestness. This not only embarrassed but slightly fretted him, and led him to speak once in a way that brought tears to her eyes.

Not a minute longer than necessary did Claire remain at home. The fact that his employer had desired him to return to the store as quickly as possible, was an all-sufficient reason for his unusual hurry to get away.

The moment the door closed upon him, his wife burst into tears. On her bosom lay a most oppressive weight, and in her mind was a vague, troubled sense of approaching evil. She felt that there was danger in the path of her husband; but of its nature she could divine little or nothing. All day her dream had haunted her; and now it reproduced itself in her imagination with painful distinctness. Vainly she strove to drive it from her thoughts; it would not be gone. Slowly the hours wore on for her, until the deepening twilight brought the period when her husband was to return again. To this return her mind looked forward with an anxiety that could not be repressed.

The dreaded meeting with his wife over, Claire thought with less repugnance of what he had done, and was rather inclined to justify than condemn himself.

"It's the way of the world," so he argued; "and unless I do as the world does, I must remain where I am—at the bottom of the ladder. But why should I stay below, while all around me are struggling upward? As for what preachers and moralists call strictly fair dealing, it may be all well enough in theory, pleasant to talk about, and all that; but it won't do in practice, as the world now is. Where each is grasping all that he can lay his hands on, fair or foul, one must scramble with the rest, or get nothing. That is so plain that none can deny the proposition. So, Edward Claire, if you wish to rise above your present poor condition, if you wish to get rich, like your enterprising neighbours, you must do as they do. If I go in for a lamb, I might as well take a sheep: the morality of the thing is the same. If I take a large slice off of a customer, why shall not a portion of that slice be mine; ay, the whole of it, if I choose to make the appropriation? All Jasper can fairly ask, is a reasonable profit: if I, by my address, get more than this, surely I may keep a part thereof. Who shall say nay?"

Justifying himself by these and similar false reasonings, the young man thrust aside the better suggestions, from which he was at first inclined to retrace the false step he had taken; and wilfully shutting his eyes, resolved to go forward in his evil and dangerous course.

During the afternoon of that day a larger number of customers than usual were in, and Claire was very busily occupied. He made three or four large sales, and was successful in getting several

dollars in excess of fair profit from one not very well skilled in prices. In making an entry of this particular transaction in the memorandum sales-book, the figures recorded were three dollars less than the actual amount received. So, on this, the first day of the young man's lapse from honesty, he had appropriated the sum of eight dollars—nearly equal to his entire week's salary! For such a recent traveller in this downward road, how rapid had already become his steps!

Evening found him again alone, musing and debating with himself, ere locking up the store and returning home. The excitement of business being over, his thoughts flowed in a calmer current; and the stillness of the deserted room gave to his feelings a hue of sobriety. He was not altogether satisfied with himself. How could he be? No man ever was satisfied with himself, when seclusion and silence found him after his first departure from the right way. Ah, how little is there in worldly possessions, be it large or small, to compensate for a troubled, self-accusing spirit! how little to throw in the balance against the heavy weight of conscious villany!

How tenderly, how truly, how devotedly had Edward Claire loved the young wife of his bosom, since the hour the pulses of their spirits first beat in joyful unity! How eager had he ever been to turn his face homeward when the shadows of evening began to fall! But now he lingered—lingered, though all the business of the day was over. The thought of his wife created no quick impulse to be away. He felt more like shunning her presence. He even for a time indulged a motion of anger toward her for what he mentally termed her morbid sensitiveness in regard to others' right—her dreamy ideal of human perfection.

"We are in the world, and we must do as it does. We must take it as it is, not as it should be."

So he mused with himself, in a self-approving argument. Yet he could not banish the accusing spirit; he could not silence the inward voice of warning.

Once there came a strong revulsion. Good impulses seemed about to gain the mastery. In this state of mind, he took from his pocket his ill-gotten gains, and threw them into the money-box, which had already been placed in the fire-closet.

"What good will that do?" said he to himself, as the wave of better feelings began to subside. "All the sales-entries have been made, and the cash balanced; Jasper made the balance himself. So the cash will only show an excess to be accounted for; and from this may come suspicion. It is always more hazardous to go backward than forward—(false reasoner!)—to retrace our steps than to press boldly onward. No, no. This will not mend the matter."

And Claire replaced the money in his pocket. In a little while afterward, he left the store, and took his way homeward.

CHAPTER IV

As on the previous evening, Mrs. Claire was alone for some time later than usual, but now with an anxious, almost fearful looking for her husband's return. Suddenly she had taken the alarm. A deep, brooding shadow was on her heart, though she could not see the bird of night from whose wings it had fallen. Frequently, during the afternoon, tears had wet her cheek; and when an old friend of her mother's, who lived in the country, and who had come to the city in order to make a few purchases, called to see her, it was with difficulty she could hide her disturbed feelings from observation.

The absent one came in at last, and with so much of the old, frank, loving spirit in his voice and manner, that the troubled heart of Mrs. Claire beat with freer pulsations. And yet something about her husband appeared strange. There was a marked difference between his state of mind now, and on the evening before. Even at dinner-time he was silent and abstracted.

In fact, Edward Claire was, for the first time, acting a part toward his wife; and, as in all such cases, there was sufficient over-action to betray the artifice, or, at least, to awaken a doubt. Still, Edith was greatly relieved by the change, and she chided herself for having permitted doubt and vague questionings to find a harbour in her thoughts.

During tea-time, Claire chatted freely, as was his custom; but he grew serious as they sat together, after the table was cleared away, and Edith had taken her sewing. Then, for the first time, he thought out of himself sufficiently to remember his visit to the house of death in the morning, and he said—

"I witnessed something this morning, dear, that has made me feel sad ever since."

"What was that, Edward?" inquired the wife, looking instantly into his face, with a strongly manifested interest.

"I don't think you knew Mr. Elder or his family—Ruben Elder?"

"I have heard the name, nothing more."

"Mr. Elder died last week."

"Ah! What family did he leave?"

"A wife and one child."

Mrs. Claire sighed.

"Did he leave them comfortably off in the world?" she asked, after a brief silence.

"I don't know; but I'm afraid, he's not left much, if any thing. Mr. Jasper has been appointed the executor."

"Mr. Jasper!"

"Yes. This morning he called to see Mrs. Elder, and found her in a very low state. In fact, she died while he was there."

"Edward! Died?"

"Yes, died; and her only child, a sweet little girl, not five years old, is now a friendless orphan."

"How very sad!"

"Sad enough, Edith, sad enough. Mr. Jasper, who has no taste for scenes of distress, wished me to look after the funeral arrangements; so I went to the house, and attended to matters as well as I could. Ah me! It has cast a gloom over my feelings that I find it hard to cast off."

"Did you see the child?" inquired Mrs. Claire, the mother's impulse giving direction to her thoughts.

"Yes; and a lovely child it is. Poor thing!"

"There are near relatives, I presume?"

"None; at least, so Jasper says."

"What is to become of the child?"

"Dear above knows! As for her legal guardian, she has nothing to hope from his humanity. She will naturally find a home somewhere—a home procured for money. But her future comfort and well-being will depend more on a series of happy accidents than on the good-will of the hard-hearted man to whose tender mercies the dying parents have committed her."

"Not happy accidents, Edward," said Mrs. Claire, with a tender smile; "say, wise providences. There is no such thing as chance."

"As you will, dear," returned the husband, with a slight change in his tone. "I would not call that providence wise by which Leonard Jasper became the guardian of a friendless child."

"This is because you cannot see the end from the beginning, Edward. The Lord's providence does not regard merely the external comfort and well-being of his creatures; it looks far beyond this, and regards their internal interests. It permits evil and suffering to-day, but only that good, a higher than earthly good, may come on the morrow. It was no blind chance, believe me, my husband, that led to the appointment of Mr. Jasper as the guardian of this poor child. Eternal purposes are involved therein, as surely as God is infinitely wise and good. Good to one, perhaps to many, will grow out of what now seems a deeply to be regretted circumstance."

"You're a happy reasoner, Edith. I wish I could believe in so consoling a philosophy."

"Edward!" There was a change in Mrs. Claire's voice, and a look blending surprise with a gentle rebuke in her countenance. "Edward, how can you speak so? Is not mine the plain Christian doctrine? Is it not to be found everywhere in the Bible?"

"Doubtless, Edith; but I'm not one of the pious kind, you know."

Claire forced a smile to his face, but his wife looked serious, and remarked—

"I don't like to hear you talk so, Edward. There is in it, to me, something profane. Ah, my dear husband, in this simple yet all-embracing doctrine of providence lies the whole secret of human happiness. If our Creator be infinite, wise, and good, he will seek the well-being of his creatures, even though they turn from him to do violence to his laws; and, in his infinite love and wisdom, will so order and arrange events as to make every thing conspire to the end in view. Both bodily and mental suffering are often permitted to take place, as the only agencies by which to counteract hereditary evils that would otherwise destroy the soul."

"Ah, Edie! Edie!" said Claire, interrupting his wife, in a fond, playful tone, "you are a wise preacher, and as good as you are wise. I only wish that I could see and feel as you do; no doubt it would be better for me in the end. But such a wish is vain."

"Oh, say not so, dear husband!" exclaimed Edith, with unexpected earnestness; "say not so! It hurts me almost like words of personal unkindness."

"But how can I be as good as you are? It isn't in me."

"I am not good, Edward. There is none good but God," answered the wife solemnly.

"Oh yes, yes! You are an angel!" returned Claire, with a sudden emotion that he could not control. "And I—and I—"

He checked himself, turned his face partly away to conceal its expression, sat motionless for a moment, and then burying his face on the bosom of his wife, sobbed for the space of nearly a minute, overcome by a passion that he in vain struggled to master.

Never had Edith seen her husband so moved. No wonder that she was startled, even frightened.

"Oh, Edward, dear Edward! what ails you?" were her eager, agitated words, so soon as she could speak. "What has happened? Oh, tell me, my husband, my dear husband!"

But Claire answered not, though he was gaining some control over his feelings.

"Oh, Edward! won't you speak to me? Won't you tell me all your troubles, all your heart? Am I not your wife, and do I not love you with a love no words can express? Am I not your best and closest friend? Would I not even lay down my life for your good? Dear Edward, what has caused this great emotion?"

Thus urged, thus pleaded the tearful Edith. But there was no reply, though the strong tremor which had thrilled through the frame of Claire had subsided. He was still bowed forward, with his face hid on her bosom, while her arm was drawn lovingly around him. So they remained for a time longer. At length, the young man lifted himself up, and fixed his eyes upon her. His countenance was pale and sad, and bore traces of intense suffering.

"My husband! my dear husband!" murmured Edith.

"My wife! my good angel!" was the low, thrilling response; and Claire pressed his lips almost reverently upon the brow of his wife.

"I have had a fearful dream, Edith!" said he; "a very fearful dream. Thank God, I am awake now."

"A dream, Edward?" returned his wife, not fully comprehending him.

"Yes, love, a dream; yet far too real. Surely, I dreamed, or was under some dire enchantment. But the spell is gone—gone, I trust, for ever."

"What spell, love? Oh, speak to me a plainer language!"

"I think, Edith," said the young man, after remaining thoughtfully silent for some time, "that I will try and get another place. I don't believe it is good for me to live with Leonard Jasper. Gold is the god he worships; and I find myself daily tempted to bend my knee in the same idolatry."

"Edward!" A shadow had fallen on the face of Edith.

"You look troubled at my words, Edith," resumed the young man; "yet what I say is true, too true. I wish it were not so. Ah! this passage through the world, hard and toilsome as it is, has many, many dangers."

"If we put our trust in God, we need have no fear," said Edith, in a gentle yet earnest and penetrating voice, laying her hand lovingly on the hot forehead of her husband, and gazing into his eyes.

"Nothing without can harm us. Our worst enemies are within."

"Within?"

"Yes, love; within our bosoms. Into our distrusts and unsatisfied desires they enter, and tempt us to evil."

"True, true," said Claire, in an abstracted manner, and as if speaking to himself.

"What more do we want to make us happy?" asked Edith, comprehending still more clearly her husband's state of mind.

Claire sighed deeply, but made no answer.

"More money could not do it," she added.

"Money would procure us many comforts that we do not now possess," said the young man.

"I doubt this, Edward. It might give more of the elegancies of life; but, as I have often said, these do not always produce corresponding pleasure. If they come, without too ardent seeking, in the good pleasure of Providence, as the reward of useful and honest labour, then they may increase the delights of life; but never otherwise. If the heart is set on them, their acquirement will surely end in disappointment. Possession will create satiety; and the mind too quickly turns from the good it has toiled for in hope so long, to fret itself because there is an imagined higher good beyond. Believe me, Edward, if we are not satisfied with what God gives us as the reward of useful toil to-day, we will not be satisfied with what he gives to-morrow."

"Perhaps you are right, Edith; I believe you are. My mind has a glimpse of the truth, but to fully realize it is hard. Ah, I wish that I possessed more of your trusting spirit!"

"We are both cared for, Edward, by the same infinite love—cared for, whether we doubt and fear, or trust confidingly."

"It must be so. I see it now, I feel it now—see it and feel it in the light of your clearer intuitions. Ah, how different from this pure faith is the faith of the world! Men worship gold as their god; they trust only in riches."

"And their god is ever mocking them. To-day he smiles upon his votary, and to-morrow hides his face in darkness. To-day he gives full coffers, that are empty to-morrow. But the true riches offered so freely to all by the living God are blessed both in the getting and in the keeping. These never produce satiety, never take to themselves wings. Good affections and true thoughts continually nourish and re-create the mind. They are the soul's wealth, the perennial fountains of all true enjoyment. With these, and sufficient for the body's health and comfort, all may be happy: without them, the riches of the world have no power to satisfy."

A pause ensued, during which the minds of both wandered back a little.

"If you feel," said Edith, recalling the words of her husband, "that there is danger in remaining where you are"—

"That was hastily spoken," Edward Claire interrupted his wife, "and in a moment of weakness. I must resist the evil that assaults me. I must strive with and overcome the tempter. I must think less of this world and its riches; and in my thoughts place a higher value upon the riches without wings of which you have spoken to me so often."

"Can you remain where you are, and be out of danger?" asked Edith.

"There is danger everywhere."

"Ay; but in some positions more imminent danger. Is it well to court temptation?"

"Perhaps not. But I cannot afford to give up my place with Jasper."

"Yet, while remaining, you will be strongly tempted."

"Jasper is dishonest at heart. He is ever trying to overreach in dealing, and expects every one in his employment to be as keen as himself."

"Oh, Edward, do not remain with him a day longer! There is death to the spirit in the very atmosphere around such a man. You cannot serve such a master, and be true to yourself and to God. It is impossible."

"I believe you are right in that, Edith; I know you are right," said the young man, with a strong emphasis on the last sentence. "But what am I to do? Five hundred dollars a year is little enough for our wants; I have, as you know, been dissatisfied with that. I can hardly get as much in another situation. I know of but one opening, and that is with Melleville."

"Go back to him, Edward," said his wife.

"And get but four hundred a year? It is all he can pay."

"If but three hundred, it were a situation far to be preferred to the one you now hold."

"A hundred dollars a year, Edith, taken from our present income, would deprive us of many comforts."

"Think of how much we would gain in true inward enjoyment, Edward, by such a change. Have you grown happier since you entered the store of Mr. Jasper?"

The young man shook his head sadly, and murmured, "Alas! no."

"Can anything compensate for the anguish of mind we have both suffered in the last few hours, Edward?"

There was a quick flushing of the face, as Edith said this.

"Both suffered!" exclaimed Edward, with a look of surprise.

"Ay, both, love. Can the heart of my husband feel a jar of discord, and mine not thrill painfully? Can he be in temptation, without an overshadowing of my spirit? Can he be in darkness, and I at the same time in light? No, no; that were impossible. You have been in great peril; I knew that some evil threatened you, even before you confessed it with your lips. Oh, Edward, we have both tasted, in the last few hours, a bitterer cup than has yet been placed to our lips. May we not be called upon to drink it to the very dregs!"

"Amen!" fell solemnly from the lips of Edward Claire, as a cold shudder crept along his nerves. If there had been any wavering in his mind before, there was none now. He resolved to make

restitution in the morning, and, as soon as opportunity offered, to leave a place where he was so strongly tempted to step aside from the path of integrity. The virtue of his wife had saved him.

CHAPTER V

"Edward," said Mr. Jasper, on the next morning, soon after he came to the store, "Was any time fixed for the funeral yesterday?"

"I believe not."

"That was an oversight. It might as well take place to-day as to-morrow, or a week hence, if there are no intimate friends or relatives to be thought of or consulted. I wish you would take the forenoon to see about this troublesome matter. The undertaker will, of course, do every thing according to your directions. Let there be as little expense as possible."

While they were yet speaking, the undertaker came in to make inquiry as to the funeral arrangements to be observed.

"Is the coffin ready?" asked Jasper, in a cold, business manner.

"It is," was the reply.

"What of the ground? Did you see to her husband's funeral?"

"Yes. I have attended to all these matters. Nothing remains but to fix the time, and notify the clergyman."

"Were you at the house this morning?" asked Jasper.

"I was."

"Who did you find there?"

"One or two of the neighbours were in."

"No near relatives of the deceased?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Was any thing said about the time for burying Mrs. Elder?"

"No. That matter, I suppose, will rest with you."

"In that case, I see no reason for delay," said Jasper. "What end is served?"

"The sooner it is over the better."

"So I think. Suppose we say this afternoon?"

"Very well. The time might be fixed at five. The graveyard is not very distant. How many carriages shall I order?"

"Not many. Two, I should think, would be enough," replied Jasper. "There will not be much left, I presume; therefore, the lighter the funeral expenses the better. By the way, did you see the child, when you were there this morning?"

"No, sir."

"Some neighbour has, in all probability, taken it."

"Very likely. It is a beautiful child."

"Yes—rather pretty," was Jasper's cold response.

"So young to be left alone in the world. Ah, me! But these things will happen. So, you decide to have the funeral at five this afternoon?"

"Yes; unless something that we do not now know of, interferes to prevent. The quicker a matter like this is over the better."

"True. Very well."

"You will see to every thing?"

"Certainly; that is my business. Will you be at the house this afternoon?"

"At the time of the funeral?"

"Yes."

"I think not. I can't do any good."

"No,—only for the looks of the thing."

The undertaker was already beginning to feel the heartless indifference of Jasper, and his last remark was half in irony, half in smothered contempt.

"Looks! Oh! I never do any thing for looks. If I can be of any service, I will be there—but, if not, not. I'm a right up-and-down, straight-forward man of the world, you see."

The undertaker bowed, saying that all should be as he wished.

"You can step around there, after a while, Edward," said Jasper, as soon as the undertaker had retired. "When you go, I wish you would ascertain, particularly, what has been done with the child. If a neighbour has taken her home, make inquiry as to whether she will be retained in the family; or, better still, adopted. You can hint, in a casual way, you know, that her parents have left property, which may, some time or other, be valuable. This may be a temptation, and turn the scale in favour of adoption; which may save me a world of trouble and responsibility."

"There is some property left?" remarked Claire.

"A small house or two, and a bit of worthless land in the mountains. All, no doubt, mortgaged within a trifle of their value. Still, it's property you know; and the word 'property' has a very attractive sound in some people's ears."

A strong feeling of disgust toward Jasper swelled in the young man's heart, but he guarded against its expression in look or words.

A customer entering at the moment, Claire left his principal and moved down behind the counter. He was not very agreeably affected, as the lady approached him, to see in her the person from whom he had taken ten dollars on the previous day, in excess of a reasonable profit. Her serious face warned him that she had discovered the cheat.

"Are you the owner of this store?" she asked, as she leaned upon the counter, and fixed her mild, yet steady eyes, upon the young man's face.

"I am not, ma'am," replied Claire, forcing a smile as he spoke. "Didn't I sell you a lot of goods yesterday?"

"You did, sir."

"I thought I recognised you. Well, ma'am, there was an error in your bill—an overcharge."

"So I should think."

"A overcharge of five dollars."

Claire, while he affected an indifferent manner, leaned over toward the woman and spoke in a low tone of voice. Inwardly, he was trembling lest Jasper should become cognizant of what was passing.

"Will you take goods for what is due you; or shall I hand you back the money?" said he.

"As I have a few more purchases to make, I may as well take goods," was replied, greatly to the young man's relief.

"What shall I show you, ma'am?" he asked, in a voice that now reached the attentive ears of Jasper, who had been wondering to himself as to what was passing between the clerk and customer.

A few articles were mentioned, and, in a little while, another bill of seven dollars was made.

"I am to pay you two dollars, I believe?" said the lady, after Claire had told her how much the articles came to. As she said this, Jasper was close by and heard the remark.

"Right, ma'am," answered the clerk.

The customer laid a ten-dollar bill on the counter. Claire saw that the eyes of Jasper were on him. He took it up, placed it in the money-drawer, and stood some time fingering over the change and small bills. Then, with his back turned toward Jasper, he slipped a five dollar gold piece from his pocket. This, with a three dollar bill from the drawer, he gave to the lady, who received her change and departed.

Other customers coming in at the moment, both Jasper and his clerk were kept busy for the next hour. When they were alone again, the former said—

"How large a bill did you sell the old lady from the country, who was in this morning?"

"The amount was seven dollars, I believe."

"I thought she said two dollars?"

"She gave me a ten-dollar bill, and I only took three from the drawer," said the young man.

"I thought you gave her a piece of gold?"

"There was no gold in the drawer," was replied, evasively.

Much to the relief of Claire, another customer entered, thus putting an end to the conference between him and Jasper.

The mind of the latter, ever suspicious, was not altogether satisfied. He was almost sure that two dollars was the price named for the goods, and that he had seen a gold coin offered in change. And he took occasion to refer to it at the next opportunity, when his clerk's positive manner, backed by the entry of seven dollars on the sales' book, silenced him.

As for Claire, this act of restitution, so far as it was in his power to make it, took from his mind a heavy burden. He had, still, three dollars in his possession that were not rightfully his own. It was by no means probable that a similar opportunity to the one just embraced would occur. What then was it best for him to do? This question was soon after decided, by his throwing the money into the cash-drawer of Jasper.

On his way home to dinner that day, Claire called into the store of a Mr. Melleville, referred to in the conversation with his wife on the previous evening. This gentleman, who was somewhat advanced in years, was in the same business with Jasper. He was known as a strictly upright dealer—"Too honest to get along in this world," as some said. "Old Stick-in-the-mud," others called him. "A man behind the times," as the new-comers in the trade were pleased to say. Claire had lived with him for some years, and left him on the offer of Jasper to give him a hundred dollars more per annum than he was getting.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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