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The Vast Abyss The Story of Tom Blount, his Uncles and his Cousin Sam:

Содержание

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Chapter One

"I wish I wasn't such a fool!"

Tom Blount said this to himself as he balanced that self upon a high stool at a desk in his uncle's office in Gray's Inn. There was a big book lying open, one which he had to study, but it did not interest him; and though he tried very hard to keep his attention fixed upon its learned words, invaluable to one who would some day bloom into a family solicitor, that book would keep on forming pictures that were not illustrations of legal practice in the courts of law. For there one moment was the big black pond on Elleston Common, where the water lay so still and deep under the huge elms, and the fat tench and eels every now and then sent up bubbles of air, dislodged as they disturbed the bottom.

At another time it would be the cricket-field in summer, or the football on the common in winter, or the ringing ice on the

winding river, with the skates flashing as they sent the white powder flying before the wind.

Or again, as he stumbled through the opinions of the judge in "Coopendale *versus* Drabb's Exors.," the old house and garden would stand out from the page like a miniature seen on the ground-glass of a camera; and Tom Blount sighed and his eyes grew dim as he thought of the old happy days in the pleasant home. For father and mother both had passed away to their rest; the house was occupied by another tenant; and he, Tom Blount, told himself that he ought to be very grateful to Uncle James for taking him into his office, to make a man of him by promising to have him articled if, during his year of probation, he proved himself worthy.

"I wouldn't mind its being so dull," he thought, "or my aunt not liking me, or Sam being so disagreeable, if I could get on – but I can't. Uncle's right, I suppose, in what he says. He ought to know. I'm only a fool; and it doesn't seem to matter how I try, I can't get on."

Just then a door opened, letting in a broad band of sunshine full of dancing motes, and at the same time Samuel Brandon, a lad of about the same age as Tom, but rather slighter of build, but all the same more manly of aspect. He was better dressed too, and wore a white flower in his button-hole, and a very glossy hat. One glove was off, displaying a signet-ring, and he brought with him into the dingy office a strong odour of scent, whose source was probably the white pocket-handkerchief prominently

displayed outside his breast-pocket.

"Hullo, bumpkin!" he cried. "How's Tidd getting on?"

"Very slowly," said Tom. "I wish you'd try and explain what this bit means."

"Likely! Think I'm going to find you in brains. Hurry on and peg away. Shovel it in, and think you are going to be Lord Chancellor some day. Guv'nor in his room?"

"No; he has gone on down to the Court. Going out?"

"Yes; up the river – Maidenhead. You heard at the breakfast, didn't you?"

Tom shook his head.

"I didn't hear," he said sadly.

"You never hear anything or see anything. I never met such a dull, chuckle-headed chap as you are. Why don't you wake up?"

"I don't know; I do try," said Tom sadly.

"You don't know! – you don't know anything. I don't wonder at the governor grumbling at you. You'll have to pull up your boots if you expect to be articled here, and so I tell you. There, I'm off. I've got to meet the mater at Paddington at twelve. I say, got any money?"

"No," said Tom sadly.

"Tchah! you never have. There, pitch into Tidd. You've got your work cut out, young fellow. No letters for me?"

"No. Yes, there is – one."

"No! – yes! Well, you are a pretty sort of a fellow. Where is it?"

"I laid it in uncle's room."

"What! Didn't I tell you my letters were not to go into his room? Of all the – "

Tom sighed, though he did not hear the last words, for his cousin hurried into the room on their right, came back with a letter, hurried out, and the door swung to again.

"It's all through being such a fool, I suppose," muttered the boy. "Why am I not as clever and quick as Sam is? He's as sharp as uncle; but uncle doesn't seem a bit like poor mother was."

Just then Tom Blount made an effort to drive away all thoughts of the past by planting his elbows on the desk, doubling his fists, and resting his puckered-up brow upon them, as he plunged once more into the study of the legal work.

But the thoughts would come flitting by, full of sunshiny memories of the father who died a hero's death, fighting as a doctor the fell disease which devastated the country town; and of the mother who soon after followed her husband, after requesting her brother to do what he could to help and protect her son.

Then the thought of his mother's last prayer came to him as it often did – that he should try his best to prove himself worthy of his uncle's kindness by studying hard.

"And I do – I do – I do," he burst out aloud, passionately, "only it is so hard; and, as uncle says, I am such a fool."

"You call me, Blount?" said a voice, and a young old-looking man came in from the next office.

"I! – call? No, Pringle," said Tom, colouring up.

"You said something out loud, sir, and I thought you called."

"I – I – "

"Oh, I see, sir; you was speaking a bit out of your book. Not a bad way to get it into your head. You see you think it and hear it too."

"It's rather hard to me, I'm afraid," said Tom, with the puzzled look intensifying in his frank, pleasant face.

"Hard, sir!" said the man, smiling, and wiping the pen he held on the tail of his coat, though it did not require it, and then he kept on holding it up to his eye as if there were a hair or bit of grit between the nibs. "Yes, I should just think it is hard. Nutshells is nothing to it. Just like bits of granite stones as they mend the roads with. They won't fit nowhere till you wear 'em and roll 'em down. The law is a hard road and no mistake."

"And – and I don't think I'm very clever at it, Pringle."

"Clever! You'd be a rum one, sir, if you was. Nobody ever masters it all. They pretend to, but it would take a thousand men boiled down and double distilled to get one as could regularly tackle it. It's an impossibility, sir."

"What!" said Tom, with plenty of animation now. "Why, look at all the great lawyers!"

"So I do, sir, and the judges too, and what do I see? Don't they all think different ways about things, and upset one another? Don't you get thinking you're not clever because you don't get on fast. As I said before, you'd be a rum one if you did."

"But my cousin does," said Tom.

"Him? Ck!" cried the clerk, with a derisive laugh. "Why, it's my belief that you know more law already than Mr Sam does, and what I say to you is – Look out! the guv'nor!"

The warning came too late, for Mr James Brandon entered the outer office suddenly, and stopped short, to look sharply from one to the other – a keen-eyed, well-dressed man of five-and-forty; and as his brows contracted he said sharply —

"Then you've finished the deed, Pringle?" just as the clerk was in the act of passing through the door leading to the room where he should have been at work.

"The deed, sir? – no, not quite, sir. Shan't be long, sir."

"You shall be long – out of work, Mr Pringle, if you indulge in the bad habit of idling and gossiping as soon as my back's turned."

Pringle shot back to his desk, the door swung to, and Mr James Brandon turned to his nephew, with his face looking double of aspect – that is to say, the frown was still upon his brow, while a peculiarly tight-looking smile appeared upon his lips, which seemed to grow thinner and longer, and as if a parenthesis mark appeared at each end to shut off the smile as something illegal.

"I am glad you are mastering your work so well, Tom," he said softly.

"Mastering it, uncle!" said Tom, with an uneasy feeling of doubt raised by his relative's look. "I – I'm afraid I am getting on very slowly."

"But you can find time to idle and hinder my clerk."

"He had only just come in, uncle, and – "

"That will do, sir," said the lawyer, with the smile now gone. "I've told you more than once, sir, that you were a fool, and now I repeat it. You'll never make a lawyer. Your thick, dense brain has only one thought in it, and that is how you can idle and shirk the duty that I for your mother's sake have placed in your way. What do you expect, sir? – that I am going to let you loaf about my office, infecting those about you, and trying to teach your cousin your lazy ways? I don't know what I could have been thinking about to take charge of such a great idle, careless fellow."

"Not careless, uncle," pleaded the lad. "I do try, but it is so hard."

"Silence, sir! Try! – not you. I meant to do my duty by you, and in due time to impoverish myself by paying for your articles – nearly a hundred pounds, sir. But don't expect it. I'm not going to waste my hard-earned savings upon a worthless, idle fellow. Lawyer! Pish! You're about fit for a shoeblack, sir, or a carter. You'll grow into as great an idiot as your father was before you. What my poor sister could have seen in him I don't – "

Bang!

Chapter Two

The loudly-closed door of the private office cut short Mr James Brandon's speech, and he had passed out without looking round, or he would have seen that his nephew looked anything but a fool as he sat there with his fists clenched and his eyes flashing.

"How dare he call my dear dead father an idiot!" he said in a low fierce voice through his compressed teeth. "Oh, I can't bear it – I won't bear it. If I were not such a miserable coward I should go off and be a soldier, or a sailor, or anything so that I could be free, and not dependent on him. I'll go. I must go. I cannot bear it," he muttered; and then with a feeling of misery and despair rapidly increasing, he bent down over his book again, for a something within him seemed to whisper – "It would be far more cowardly to give up and go."

Then came again the memory of his mother's words, and he drew his breath through his teeth as if he were in bodily as well as mental pain; and forcing himself to read, he went on studying the dreary law-book till, in his efforts to understand the author, his allusions, quotations, footnotes, and references, he grew giddy, and at last the words grew blurred, and he had to read sentences over and over again to make sense of them, which slid out of his mind like so much quicksilver.

Lunch-time came, and Pringle crept through the place where he was seated, glanced at Mr Brandon's door, stepped close up,

and whispered —

"I'm going to get my dinner. Don't look downhearted about a wigging, Mr Tom. It's nothing when you're used to it."

"Ahem!" came from the inner office, and Pringle made a grimace like a pantomime clown, suggesting mock horror and fear, as he glided to the outer door, where he turned, looked back, and then disappeared; while, as soon as he was alone, Tom took out a paper of sandwiches, opened it, and began to eat, it being an understood thing that he should not leave the office all day.

But those sandwiches, good enough of their kind, tasted as if they were made of sawdust, and he had hard work to get them down, and then only by the help of a glass of water from the table-filter, standing at the side of the office – kept, Pringle said, to revive unfortunate clients whose affairs were going to the bad. Every now and then a cough was heard from the inner office, and Tom hurried over his meal in dread lest his uncle should appear before he had finished. Then, as soon as the last was eaten, and the paper thrust into the waste-basket, the boy attacked his book once more, and had hardly recommenced when the inner office door opened, and his uncle appeared, looking at him sharply – ready, Tom thought, to find fault with him for being so long over his midday meal.

But there was nothing to complain about.

"I'm going to have my lunch," he said sharply, "and I may not come back, though all the same I may. Mind that man Pringle goes on with his work, and don't let me have any fault to find

about your reading. When you go home tell them to give you something to eat, for there will be no regular dinner to-day, as I shall be out. Take home any letters that may come, in case I don't look in."

"All right, uncle."

"And don't speak in that free-and-easy, offhand, unbusiness-like manner. Say 'Yes, sir,' and 'No, sir,' if you are not too stupid to remember."

He put on his hat and went out, leaving the boy feeling as if a fresh sting had been planted in his breast, and his brow wrinkled up more than ever, while his heart grew more heavy in his intense yearning for somebody who seemed to care for him, if ever so little.

Five minutes later Pringle came back, looking shining and refreshed. As he entered he gave Tom an inquiring look, and jerked his head sidewise toward the inner office.

Tom was not too stupid to understand the dumb language of that look and gesture.

"No," he replied. "He went out five minutes ago, and said that very likely he wouldn't be back."

"And that you were to take any letters home after office hours?"

"Yes; how did you know?"

"How did I know!" said the clerk with a chuckle; "because I've been caught before. That means that he'll be sure to look in before very long to see whether we are busy. You'd better read

hard, sir, and don't look up when he comes. Pst! 'ware hawk!"

He slipped into the little office, and his stool made a scraping noise, while, almost before Tom had settled down to his work, the handle of the outer door turned and his uncle bustled in.

"Here, did I leave my umbrella?" he said sharply.

"I did not see it, uncle – sir," replied Tom, jumping from his stool.

"Keep your place, sir, and go on with your work. Don't be so fond of seizing any excuse to get away from your books. Humph, yes," he muttered, as he reached into his room and took up the ivory-handled article from where it stood.

The next moment he was at the door of the clerk's office.

"By the way, Pringle, you had better go and have that deed stamped this afternoon if you get it done in time."

"Yes, sir," came back sharply, and the lawyer frowned, turned round, and went out once more.

The outer door had not closed a minute before the inner one opened, and Pringle's head appeared, but with its owner evidently on the alert, and ready to snatch it back again.

"Good-bye! Bless you!" he said aloud. "Pray take care of yourself, sir. You can bob back again if you like, but I shan't be out getting the deed stamped, because, as you jolly well know, it won't be done before this time to-morrow."

Pringle looked at Tom, smiled, and nodded.

"You won't tell him what I said, Mr Tom, I know. But I say, don't you leave your stool. You take my advice. Don't you give

him a chance to row you again, because I can see how it hurts you."

Tom's lip quivered as he looked wistfully at the clerk.

"It's all right, sir. You just do what's c'rect, and you needn't mind anything. I ain't much account, but I do know that. I wouldn't stay another month, only there's reasons, you see, and places are easier to lose than find, 'specially when your last guv'nor makes a face with the corners of his lips down when any one asks for your character. Pst! look out. Here he is again."

For there was a step at the door, the handle rattled, and as Pringle disappeared, a quiet, grave-looking, middle-aged man stepped in.

"Do, Tom!" he said, as with an ejaculation of surprise the boy sprang from his stool and eagerly took the extended hand, but dropped it again directly, for there did not seem to be any warmth in the grasp. "Quite well, boy?"

"Yes, Uncle Richard," said Tom, rather sadly.

"That's right. Where's my brother?"

"He has gone out, sir, and said he might not return this afternoon."

"Felt I was coming perhaps," said the visitor. "Here, don't let me hinder you, my lad; he won't like you to waste time. Getting on with your law reading?"

The boy looked at him wistfully, and shook his head.

"Eh? No? But you must, my lad. You're no fool, you know, and you've got to be a clever lawyer before you've done."

Tom felt disposed to quote his other uncle's words as to his folly, but he choked down the inclination.

"There, I won't hinder you, my lad," continued the visitor. "I know what you busy London people are, and how we slow-going country folk get in your way. I only want to look at a Directory, – you have one I know."

"Yes, sir, in the other office. I'll fetch it."

The quiet, grey-haired, grave-looking visitor gave a nod as if of acquiescence, and Tom ran into the inner office, where he found that Pringle must have heard every word, for he was holding out the London Directory all ready.

"He must hear everything too when uncle goes on at me," thought Tom, as he took the Directory and returned Pringle's friendly nod.

"Tell him he ought to give you a tip."

Tom frowned, shook his head, and hurried back with the great red book.

"Hah, that's right, my boy," said the visitor. "There, I don't want to bother about taking off my gloves and putting on my spectacles. Turn to the trades, and see if there are any lens-makers down."

"Yes, sir, several," said Tom, after a short search.

"Read 'em down, boy."

Tom obeyed alphabetically till he came to D, and he had got as far as Dallmeyer when his visitor stopped him.

"That will do," he said. "That's the man I want. Address?"

Tom read this out, and the visitor said —

"Good; but write it down so that I don't forget. It's so easy to have things drop out of your memory."

Tom obeyed, and the visitor took up the slip of paper, glanced at it, and nodded.

"That's right. Nice clear hand, that one can read easily."

"And Uncle James said my writing was execrable," thought Tom.

"Good-bye for the present, boy. Tell your uncle I've been, and that I shall come on in time for dinner. Bye. Be a good boy, and stick to your reading."

He nodded, shook hands rather coldly, and went out, leaving Tom looking wistfully after him with the big Directory in his hands.

"They neither of them like me," he said to himself, feeling sadly depressed, when he started, and turned sharply round.

"On'y me, Mr Tom," said the clerk. "I'll take that. Directories always live in my office. I say, sir."

"Yes, Pringle."

"I used to wish I'd got a lot of rich old uncles, but I don't now. Wouldn't give tuppence a dozen for 'em. Ketched again! – All right, Mr Tom, sir; I'll put it away."

For the door opened once more, and their late visitor thrust in his head.

"Needn't tell your uncle I shall come to-night."

Pringle disappeared with the Directory, and Uncle Richard

gazed after him in a grim way as he continued —

"Do you hear? Don't tell him I shall come; and you needn't mention that I said he wouldn't want me, nor to his wife and boy neither. Bye."

The door closed again, and the inner door opened, and Pringle's head appeared once more.

"Nor we don't neither, nor nobody else don't. I say, Mr Tom, I thought it was the governor. Ever seen him before?"

"Only twice," said Tom. "He has been abroad a great deal. He only came back to England just before dear mother – "

Tom stopped short, and Pringle nodded, looked very grave, and said softly —

"I know what you was going to say, Mr Tom."

"And I saw him again," continued the lad, trying to speak firmly, "when it was being settled that I was to come here to learn to be a lawyer. Uncle James wanted Uncle Richard to bring me up, but he wouldn't, and said I should be better here."

"Well, perhaps you are, Mr Tom, sir," said Pringle thoughtfully. "I don't know as I should care to live with him."

"Nor I, Pringle, for – Here, I say, I don't know why I tell you all this."

Pringle grinned.

"More don't I, sir. P'r'aps it's because we both get into trouble together, and that makes people hang to one another. Steps again. Go it, sir."

The clerk darted away, and Tom started leading once more;

but the steps passed, and so did the long, dreary afternoon, with Tom struggling hard to master something before six o'clock came; and before the clock had done striking Pringle was ready to shut up and go.

"You'll take the keys, sir," he said. "Guv'nor won't come back now. I've got well on with that deed, if he asks you when he comes home. Good-evening, sir."

"Good-evening, Pringle," said Tom; and ten minutes later he was on his way to his uncle's house in Mornington Crescent, where he found dinner waiting for him, and though it was only cold, it was made pleasant by the handmaid's smile.

Tom began a long evening all alone over another law-book, and at last, with his head aching, and a dull, weary sense of depression, he went up to the bedroom which he shared with his cousin, jumped into his own bed as soon as he could to rest his aching head, and lay listening to a street band playing airs that sounded depressing and sorrowful in the extreme, and kept him awake till he felt as if he could never drop off, and cease hearing the rumble of omnibuses and carts.

Then all at once Mr Tidd came and sat upon his head, and made it ache ten times worse, or so it seemed – Mr Tidd being the author of one of the books his uncle had placed in his hands to read.

He tried to force him off, but he would not stir, only glared down at him laughing loud, and then mockingly, till the torture seemed too much to be borne; and in an agony of misery and

despair he tried to escape from the pressure, and to assure his torturer that he would strive hard to master the book. But not a word could he utter, only lie there panting, till the eyes that glared looked close down into his, and a voice said —

"Now then, wake up, stupid. Don't be snoring like that."

Chapter Three

Tom Blount started up in bed confused and staring. He was only half awake, and it was some time before he could realise that it was his cousin, who had come back from his trip boisterous and elated, and who had been playing him some trick as he lay there asleep.

"Well, what are you staring at, old torpid?" cried Sam, as he now began to divest himself slowly of his coat and vest.

"I – that is – have been asleep," stammered Tom.

"Asleep? Yes, and snoring loud enough to bring the plaster off the ceiling. Why, you must have been gorging yourself like a boa-constrictor, and been sleeping it off. Come, wake up, bumpkin, you're half stupid now."

"I'm quite awake, Sam. Had a pleasant day? I say, were you sitting on my head?"

"Was I doing what?" cried Sam. "No, I wasn't; but you want some one to sit upon you to bring you to your senses. Wake up; I want to talk."

Tom tried to rub the last traces of his drowsiness out of his eyes, and now sat up watching his cousin, who, after taking off collar and tie, unfastened his braces, and then, as if moved by a sudden thought, he tied the aforesaid suspenders about his waist. Then, grinning to himself, he stooped down, untied his Oxford shoes, pushed them off, took up one, and shouting

"*Play*!" bowled it sharply at Tom where he sat up in bed on the other side of the room.

It was a bad shot, for the shoe whizzed by the lad's side, and struck the scroll-work of the iron bedstead with a sharp rap, and fell on the pillow.

"Play again!" cried Sam, and he sent the second shoe spinning with a vicious energy at the still confused and sleepy boy.

This time the aim was excellent, and Tom was too helpless to avoid the missile, which struck him heavily, the edge of the heel catching him on the chin, and making him wince.

"Well played – well bowled!" cried Sam, laughing boisterously. "I say, bumpkin, that's the way to wake you up."

Tom's face grew dark, and the hand which he held to his injured face twitched as if the fingers were trying to clench themselves and form a fist for their owner's defence; but the boy did not stir, only sat looking at his cousin, who now struck an attitude, made two or three feints, and then dashed forward hitting out sharply, catching Tom in the chest, and knocking him backward so heavily that it was his crown now that struck the scroll-work of the bed.

"That's your sort, countryman," cried Sam. "How do you like that style?"

"Don't! Be quiet, will you," said the boy in a suffocated voice, as he sat up once more.

"What for?" cried Sam. "Here, get up and have a round with the gloves. I feel as if I can hit to-night. It's the rowing. My arms

are as hard as wood."

"No; be quiet," said Tom huskily. "They'll hear you downstairs."

"Let 'em," said Sam, chuckling to himself as he dragged open a drawer, and brought out a couple of pairs of boxing-gloves, two of which he hurled with all his might like a couple of balls at his cousin's head.

But the boy was wide-awake now, and caught each glove in turn, letting it fall afterwards upon the bed before him.

"Now then, shove 'em on," cried Sam, as he thrust his own hands into the gloves he held. "Look sharp, or I'll knock you off the bed."

"No, no," cried Tom; "don't be so absurd. How can I when I'm undressed?"

"Put on your trousers then. D'yer hear? Be quick now, or you'll have it."

"You'll have uncle hear you directly if you don't be quiet."

"You'll have him hear you go off that bed lump if you don't jump out and get ready. Now then, are you going to begin?"

"No," said Tom sturdily. "I'm going to sleep."

He snuggled down in his place and drew the clothes up to his ear, but they did not stay there, for Sam began his attack, bounding forward and bringing the padded gloves *thud*, *thud*, down upon his cousin's head, as if bent upon driving it down into the pillow.

Tom sat up again quickly with his teeth set, and his eyes

flashing.

"Will you be quiet?" he cried in a low, half-suffocated voice.

"Will you put on those gloves?" cried Sam.

"No; I'm not going to make such a fool of myself at this time of night," said Tom.

"Lie down then," cried Sam, and hitting out again cleverly he knocked his cousin back on to the pillow, following it up with other blows, each having the same result, for Tom struggled up again and again.

"Now, will you get up?" cried Sam.

"No," said Tom hoarsely; and down he went once more.

"You'd better jump up and do as I tell you, or it will be the worse for you."

"You'd better leave me alone before you get my temper up."

"Temper, bumpkin? Yes, you'd better show your teeth. Take that, and that, and that."

Tom did take them – heavy blows delivered with the soft gloves, but all falling hard enough to inflict a good deal of pain, and make the boy draw his breath hard.

"That's your sort," continued Sam, who danced about by the side of the bed, skilfully delivering his blows upon his defenceless cousin, and revelling in the pleasure he found in inflicting pain. "That'll knock some sense into your thick head, and so will that, and that, and that, and – Oh!"

Sam had gone too far, for after trying all he could to avoid the blows, Tom suddenly gathered himself together and shot out

of bed full at his cousin's breast, sending him down heavily in a sitting position first and then backwards, so that his head struck heavily against the iron leg of his own bedstead.

Then, thoroughly up now, Tom flung himself upon his cousin, tore off his gloves, and stuffed them under his bed-clothes, and was looking for the others, when he was sent down in turn by Sam.

"You savage beast!" cried the latter. "I'll teach you to do that;" and flinging himself on Tom's chest, he nipped him with his knees, and began to belabour him with his fists.

Then a fierce struggle began. Sam was jerked off, and for a few moments there was an angry up-and-down wrestle, ending in Sam becoming the undermost, with Tom occupying his position in turn, and holding his cousin down just as the bedroom door was opened, and Mr James Brandon entered in his dressing-gown, and holding up a candle above his head.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he cried angrily, as Tom sprang up and darted into bed.

"Yes, you may well say that, father," cried Sam, rising slowly, and beginning to try and fasten the neck of his shirt, but vainly, for the button-hole was torn and the button off. "If that country wild beast is to stop here I shan't sleep in the same room."

Sam's father turned to Tom, who now lay in bed staring, mentally stunned by the tone his cousin had taken.

"What is the meaning of this?" he cried. "How dare you, sir!"

"Why, he began at me, uncle, while I was asleep, and – "

"Silence, sir! I will not have the calm and repose of my house disturbed by such disgraceful conduct. Past twelve o'clock, you ought to be asleep, and here is a regular riot in the place."

"There, I told you how it would be," said Sam in an ill-used, remonstrative tone.

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom, but no more, for a hot feeling of indignation forced him to be silent, stung as he was by the injustice of the disturbance being laid at his door.

"*Oh*! indeed!" cried his uncle. "It is scandalous, sir. Out of charity and compassion for your forlorn state, I give you a home and brilliant prospects, and you set yourself to work in every way possible to make me repent my kindness. It is abominable. You make friends with the servants; you are idle and stupid and careless beyond belief; and when you come back at night to my peaceful quiet home, you must introduce your low, blackguardly habits, and begin quarrelling and fighting with your cousin."

"I can't speak – I won't speak," said Tom to himself, as he set his teeth hard. "And as for Sam, I'll – "

He had not time to say to himself what he would do to his cousin, for his uncle had worked himself up now to deliver a sounding tirade upon his base, disgraceful conduct, finding plenty of epithets suitable as he considered for the occasion, and making the poor lad writhe as he lay there, hot and panting beneath the undeserved reproaches till he was quite out of breath; while, to make matters worse, Sam put in a word or two in a murmuring tone – "He knew how it would be," and "It was of

no use for him to speak," and the like. And all the time Tom's indignation made him feel more stubbornly determined to hold his peace.

"It's of no use for me to complain," he thought. "Uncle hates me, and he will not believe, and it's too hard to bear."

"Once for all, sir," cried his uncle, "remember this – if you stay here there must be a marked improvement in your conduct, both as to your work at the office and your behaviour in my house. I won't have it – do you hear? I won't have it. That sulky way too won't go down with me. Here you, Sam, undress and get to bed, and if he interferes with you again, call me at once; but if I do come up, unwilling as I should be, I shall feel called upon, out of my duty to his mother, to read him a very severe lesson, such as his schoolmaster should have read him years ago. Now silence, both of you; and as for you, sir, bear in mind what I have said, for, as you ought to know by this time, I am a man of my word."

The door was shut loudly, and the resounding steps were heard, followed by the banging of the bedroom door on the next floor.

"There, now you know, bumpkin," said Sam, with a sneering laugh.

Tom sat up in bed as if a spring had been touched.

"You sneak!" he cried.

"What?"

"I say you sneak – you miserable, cowardly sneak!"

"Look here," cried Sam, "you say another word and I'll call

the guv'nor, and you know what he meant; he'll give you a good licking, and serve you right."

"Oh!" muttered Tom between his teeth, while his cousin went on quietly undressing.

"That would soon bring you to your senses. I wanted to be friendly with you, and have just a bit of a game, but you must turn nasty, and it just serves you right."

"Oh!" muttered Tom again.

"I thought that would quiet you, my lad. He'd bring up his old rattan, and loosen that stiff hide of yours. There, go to sleep, bumpkin, and think yourself lucky you got off so well."

A minute later the candle was extinguished, and Sam jumped into bed, to fall asleep directly, but Tom lay with his head throbbing till the pale dawn began to creep into the room; and then only did he fall into a troubled doze, full of unpleasant dreams one after the other, till it was time to rise, get his breakfast alone, and hurry off to the office. For breakfast was late, and aunt, uncle, and cousin did not put in an appearance till long after Tom had climbed upon his stool in Gray's Inn.

Chapter Four

That day and many following Tom sat over his books or copying, musing upon the injustice of the treatment he was receiving, and feeling more and more the misery of his new life. He looked with envy at nearly every boy he met, and thought of the happy, independent life they seemed to lead. But he worked hard all the same.

"I won't give up," he would say through his set teeth. "Uncle shall see that if I'm not clever I can persevere, and master what I have to learn."

But in spite of his determination he did not progress very fast, for the simple reason that he expected to learn in a few months the work of many years.

The weeks did not pass without plenty of unpleasant encounters with his cousin, while pretty well every day there was a snubbing or downright bullying from his uncle.

"But never you mind, Mr Tom," Pringle would say; "things always come right in the end."

One of Tom's greatest troubles was his home life, and the evident aversion shown to him by his aunt. She had received him coldly and distantly at the first, and her manner did not become warmer as the months wore on. Possibly she had once been a sweet, amiable woman, but troubles with her husband and son had produced an acidity of temper and habit of complaining

which were not pleasant for those with whom she lived. Her husband escaped, from the fact that she held him in fear, while Sam was too much idolised to receive anything but the fondest attentions.

Tom's perceptions were keen enough, and he soon saw for himself that his uncle repented his generosity in taking him into his home; while his aunt's feeling for him was evidently one of jealousy, as if his presence was likely to interfere with her darling's prospects.

She resented his being there more and more; and though Tom tried hard to win her love and esteem, he found at the end of six months that he was as far from his object as ever.

"I'm only in the way there," he often said to himself; "I wish I could live always here at the office."

But as he thought this he looked round with a slight shiver, and thought of how dreary it would be shut up there with the law-books, tin boxes, and dusty papers, and he gave up the idea.

Often of a night it was like a temptation to him – that intense longing to be free; and he would sit with a book before him, but his mind wandering far away, following the adventures of boys of his own age who had gone away to seek their fortunes, and if they had not found all they sought, had at least achieved some kind of success.

And how grand it would be, he thought, with his cheeks flushing, to be independent, and work his own way without encountering day by day his uncle's sour sneers and reproaches,

his aunt's cold looks, and his cousin's tyranny.

"I could make my way, I know I could," he thought, and the outlook grew day by day more rosy. Those were pleasant paths, he told himself, that he wanted to tread, and it never occurred to him that if he went among strangers they might be harder than his uncle.

But the outcome of these musings was always the same: there was the stern figure of Duty rising before him to remind him of his promise to his mother, and with his brow knitting, his hands would clench beneath table or desk as he softly muttered to himself —

"I'm going to be a lawyer, and I will succeed."

But it has been written by a wise man, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will," and Tom Blount was soon to find out its truth.

Matters had been going very badly at Mornington Crescent, and the boy's life was harder than ever to bear, for, presuming upon his patience, Sam Brandon was more tyrannical than ever. Words failing to sting sufficiently, he had often had recourse to blows, and these Tom had borne patiently, till, to his cousin's way of thinking, he was about as contemptible a coward as ever existed.

One morning at the office Sam was seated opposite to his cousin writing, Pringle was busily employed in the other room, and Tom was putting stamps on some letters, when his eye lit upon one standing edgewise against a gum-bottle between him

and his cousin.

Just then Mr Brandon bustled in looking very stern and angry, and he gave a sharp look round the office. Then his eyes lit upon Tom and his task.

"What letters are those?" he said.

"The tithe notices, sir, you told me to fill up and direct from the book," replied Tom.

"Humph! yes, quite right. Oh, by the way, Samuel, did you post that letter to Mr Wilcox yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes, father," said Sam promptly; and as he raised his eyes he saw his cousin's gazing at the letter standing on edge between them.

Sam turned pale as he now met Tom's keen look.

It was all momentary, in the interval of Mr Brandon's first words and his next question. "Then how is it that Mr Wilcox has not received it, and been on to me at home full of anxiety about not having my answer to an important question?"

"I don't know, father," said Sam sharply.

"Are you sure you posted the letter?"

"Oh yes, father. No; I recollect now: some one came in on business, to ask for you, and I told Tom Blount here to take it directly. Oh!" he cried, "I say, it is too bad. Why, you didn't take it, Tom. Here's the letter, father, all the time."

He took up and held out the unfortunate missive, shaking his head at Tom the while.

"You never told me to take any letter yesterday," said Tom

quietly.

"Oh – my! What a lie, to be sure!" cried Sam, as if perfectly astounded. "Pringle must have heard me at the time."

"Of course," said his father, speaking with his lips tightly compressed, so that his voice sounded muttering and indistinct. Then aloud – "Here, Pringle."

Scroop went Pringle's stool, and he hurried in. "You call, sir?"

"Yes. What time was it when you heard Mr Samuel tell his cousin to go out and post a letter?"

"Never heard anything of the kind, sir, at any time."

"That will do," said his employer.

"Row on," thought Pringle. "I hope he isn't going to catch it again."

Then as the door closed Mr Brandon, whose countenance was flushed and his eyes angry-looking, turned upon his son.

"Do you think I am blind, sir?" he said sharply.

"No, father: I don't know what you mean."

"Then I'll tell you, sir. I mean that you have told me a miserable falsehood – a disgraceful falsehood."

"I haven't, father. I told Tom here to take the letter;" and he gave his cousin a fierce look which evidently said, "Say I told you, or it will be the worse for you," and he accompanied the look with a sharp kick under the desk, which took effect on Tom's shin, rousing him to a pitch of fury and obstinate determination.

"Oh, you haven't, eh?" said Mr Brandon. "Tom, did your cousin tell you to post that letter?"

"Yes, you know I did," cried Sam.

"No, uncle."

"I did. You've forgotten it, or else you're saying that out of spite," cried Sam desperately.

"I haven't forgotten it, and I'm not saying what I did out of spite," said Tom firmly. "Indeed I spoke the truth, uncle."

"Yes; I believe you," said Mr Brandon.

"Shall I go and post the letter now, sir?"

"No; it is too late. Here, Samuel, come into my room."

Mr Brandon walked into his room, while Sam got down slowly from his stool, leaning over toward his cousin the while.

"I'll serve you out for this," he whispered, and then crossed to his father's room.

There was a low murmur of voices from within as soon as the door was closed; but that door fitted too closely for any of the conversation to be heard. Not that Tom was listening, for he was feeling a kind of pity for his cousin's position, and more warmly towards his uncle for his simple act of justice than he had felt for months.

Just then there was a faint creaking sound, and looking behind him, it was to see that the inner office door was open, and Pringle standing there framed as it were, and going through a pantomimic performance expressive of his intense delight, grimacing, rubbing his hands, and laughing silently. Then he gesticulated and pointed toward the private office, and rubbed his hands again, till there was a sound in the private room, and

he darted back and closed the door.

All this was meant for Tom's amusement, and as congratulation; but the boy did not feel in the least elated, but sat waiting for his cousin's return, fully intending to offer him his hand and whisper, "I am sorry – but you should have told the truth."

A good half-hour passed before Sam came out, looking very red in the face; but when he took his place on his stool, Tom did not reach across to offer his hand, for his cousin's face repelled him, and he felt that something would come of all this – what he could not tell. Still there was one gratifying thing left: his uncle had taken his word before that of his cousin, and this little thing comforted him during the remainder of that unpleasant day.

Before the afternoon was half over Mr Brandon came to his door and called Sam, who went in, and then took his hat and went away, to Tom's great relief, for it was far from pleasant to be sitting at a double desk facing one who kept on darting scowling looks full of threatenings.

An hour later Mr Brandon left, after sending Pringle upon some errand, and for the rest of the afternoon the boy had the office to himself.

Chapter Five

In due time Tom locked up the safe and strong-room, saw that no important papers were left about, and started for Mornington Crescent in anything but the best of spirits, for he did not look forward with any feeling of pleasure to his next meeting with his cousin. Upon reaching home he found from divers signs that company was expected to dinner; for the cloth was laid for five, the best glass was on the table, there were flowers and fruit, and sundry fumes from the kitchen ascended into the hall, suggesting extra preparations there as well.

Tom had hardly reached this point when his cousin came out of the library scowling.

"Here, bumpkin," he cried, "you're to look sharp and put on your best things. It's not my doing, I can tell you, but the pater says you're to come in to dinner."

"Who's coming?" said Tom.

"What's that to you? Pretty cheeky that. I suppose you ought to have been asked whether we might have company."

"Oh, no," said Tom, good-temperedly; "I only wanted to know."

"Did you? Well, you won't know till dinnertime. Now then, don't stand staring there, but go and wash that dirty face, and see if you can't come down with your hands and nails fit to be seen."

"Clean as ever yours are," was on Tom's lips; but he

remembered his cousin's trouble of that morning, pitied him, and felt that he had some excuse for feeling irritable and strange.

"Well, go on; look sharp," said Sam, manoeuvring so as to get behind his cousin.

"All right; I'm going," replied Tom, who was suspicious of something coming after his cousin's promise of revenge; and he wanted to remain facing any danger that might be threatening. But he felt that he could not back away, it would look so cowardly, and, daring all, he went slowly to the pegs to hang up his overcoat.

"Get on, will you," cried Sam; "don't be all night. We don't want to wait for you."

"Oh, I shan't be long," said Tom quietly; "I'll soon be down."

He was on the mat at the foot of the stairs as he said this, conscious the while that Sam was close behind; and he was in the act of stepping up, when he received so savage a kick that he fell forwards on to the stairs, striking his nose violently, and creating a sensation as if that member had suddenly been struck off.

"You got it that time, did you?" said Sam, with a satisfied chuckle. "You generally play the wriggling eel, but I was too quick for you, my lad."

Sam said no more, for his triumph was only short-lived. He was looking triumphantly at his cousin as the lad got up heavily, feeling his nose to find out whether it was there. The next instant Sam was feeling his own, for he had at last gone too far. Tom had borne till he could bear no more; and in the anguish of that

kick he had forgotten company, dressing for dinner, everything but the fact that Sam was there, and quick as lightning he struck him full in the face.

This satisfied him – acting like a discharging rod for his electric rage?

Nothing of the kind: there was a supreme feeling of pleasure in striking that blow. It, was the outlet of any amount of dammed-up suffering; and seeing nothing now but his cousin's malignant face, Tom followed up that first blow with a second, till, throwing his remaining strength into a blow intended for the last, it took effect, and Sam went over backwards, flung out his right hand to save himself, and caught and brought down a great blue china jar, which shivered to pieces on the floor, covering Sam with fragments, and giving him the aspect of having been terribly cut, for his nose was bleeding freely.

So was Tom's, as he caught a glimpse of himself in the glass of the hall table, while his lip had received a nasty cut, and in the struggle the stains had been pretty well distributed over his face.

But he had no time to think of that, for the crash had alarmed those up-stairs as well as down, and hurrying steps were heard.

The first to arrive was the cook, who, on reaching the head of the kitchen stairs, uttered a kind of choking gasp as she saw Sam lying apparently insensible among the ruins of the china jar.

"Oh, Master Tom, what have you been and done?" she cried.

"Been and done?" came like an angry echo from the landing above, where Mr Brandon had arrived. But before he could say

more there was a piercing shriek, he was pushed aside, and Mrs Brandon rushed down the remaining stairs crying wildly —

"Oh, my darling boy! my darling boy! He has killed him – he has killed him!"

She dropped upon her knees by where Sam lay, apparently insensible; but uttered a cry of pain and sprang up again, for the broken china was full of awkward corners.

"Oh, James! James! look what that wicked wretch has done!"

"Look, woman! Do you think I'm blind? That vase was worth fifty pounds, if it was worth a penny."

"I – I wasn't thinking about the ch-ch-ch-china," sobbed Mrs Brandon, "but about my darling Sam. Oh, my boy! my boy! don't say you're dead!"

"Don't you make an exhibition of yourself before the servants," cried her husband angrily. "Here you, sir: I always knew that you'd make me repent. How came you to break that vase?"

"I didn't, sir," said Tom quietly; "Sam caught hold of it as he was falling."

Sam was lying insensible the moment before, but this was reviving.

"I didn't, father; he knocked me down, and then seized the vase and dashed it at me."

"Yes, yes," cried Mrs Brandon, as Sam lapsed into insensibility once more. "The wretch has had a spite against his cousin ever since he has been here. Oh, my darling, darling boy!"

Sam uttered a low groan which made his mother shriek and fling herself down by him again.

"Oh, Mary! cook!" she cried, "help – help!"

"Yes, mum," said the former; "shall I bring a dustpan and brush, and take up the bits?"

"No, no! Water – sponge – help!"

"Indeed, indeed, I did not break the vase," pleaded Tom, as his uncle suddenly caught him by the collar and drew a gold-headed malacca cane from the umbrella-stand.

"I'll soon see about that," said Mr Brandon, with a fierce drawing-in of the breath.

"Yes; beat him, beat him well, James, the wretch, the cruel wretch, and then turn him out of the house."

"Don't you interfere," cried Mr Brandon, with a snap. Then to Tom – "I suppose you'll say you were not fighting?"

"Yes, sir, I was fighting; but Sam began at me, and all because I wouldn't screen him to-day."

"Hah! never mind that," said Mr Brandon.

"Don't beat me, sir," pleaded Tom, excitedly. "I can't bear it."

"You'll have to bear it, my fine fellow. Here, come into the library."

"Yes, James, beat the wretch well," cried Mrs Brandon. "Oh, my darling, does it hurt you very much?"

"Oh!" groaned Sam, and his mother shrieked; while a struggle was going on between Tom and his uncle, the boy resisting with all his might.

"He has killed him! he has killed him!" sobbed Mrs Brandon; "and you stand there, cook, doing nothing."

"Well, mum, what can I do? I'm wanted down-stairs. Them soles is a-burning in the frying-pan. You can smell 'em up here."

"Yes; nice preparations for company," said Mr Brandon, stopping to pant, for Tom had seized the plinth at the foot of the balustrade and held on with all his might. "Go down in the kitchen, cook, and see to the dinner."

The cook turned to go, but stopped short and turned back.

"Oh, my darling! my darling!" cried Mrs Brandon.

"Oh-h-h-h!" groaned Sam.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said cook, speaking very loudly, "but please you ain't going to whip Mr Tom, are you?"

"Silence, woman! Go down to your kitchen!" roared her master.

"Yes, sir – directly, sir; but Mr Sam's allus at him, and he begun it to-night, for I heared him."

"Will you go down and mind your own business, woman?"

"Yes, sir; but I can't bear to see you lay your hand on that poor boy, as ain't done nothing to deserve it, and I will speak out, so there."

"Silence, woman!"

"No, sir, nor I won't silence neither; and don't you please call me woman, because I won't take it from nobody, not for no wages. I behaves respectful to you and missus, and expect the same, so there."

"Cook, you leave at a month's end," cried Mrs Brandon. "Oh, Sam, Sam, speak to your broken-hearted mother."

"Cert'ny, mum, and very glad to go," said cook, who was working herself up into a passion. "To-night if you like. No, I won't; I'll go now, as soon as I've packed my boxes; and if Mary's the girl I take her for, she'll go too, and not stand here sweeping up your nasty old china."

"Am I to take you by the shoulders, woman, and bundle you down-stairs?" roared Mr Brandon.

"No, sir, you ain't. Just you dare to touch me, that's all; and what's more, you ain't a-going to beat Master Tom, so there now. I wouldn't stand here and see him punished for what he don't deserve. It's all that Mr Sam, who's ma's spoilt him, and indulged him, till he's grown into a nasty, overbearing, cigarette-smoking wretch, as treats servants as if they was the dirt under his feet."

"Fanny," cried the lawyer, who felt that he was losing dignity in an unequal struggle, "send this woman down-stairs. Now, sir, you let go of that balustrade and come here."

"No," cried Tom, between his teeth; "you shan't beat me for nothing. It was all Sam."

"Come here!" roared his uncle, making a savage drag at the boy, which was intercepted by cook forcing herself between, and trying to shelter him.

"You shan't beat him, not while I'm here," she cried.

"He is not going to beat him," said a quiet, firm, grave voice; and all started to see that "the company," who had been standing

quite unobserved on the upper landing, a silent spectator of the scene, was now coming down.

"Oh, Richard!" cried Mrs Brandon; "look here! The wretch – the wretch!"

"Yes, he does look a pretty object certainly," said the visitor. "Here you, sir, get up and go to your room, and wash yourself. Don't lie groaning there."

"Oh – oh – oh!" cried Mrs Brandon, hysterically, "I didn't mean Sam."

"If you'd go and stop in the drawing-room, Richard, and not interfere, I should feel obliged."

"Nothing would have pleased me better, James," said his brother coldly; "but the riot was getting too loud – I was obliged to come."

"Then, now go and wait. The dinner will be ready soon."

"That it just won't," cried cook viciously; "and if you're a gentleman, though you are master's own brother, you'll come and help me."

"There is no need," said Uncle Richard, in his quiet way. "Mr Brandon is not going to beat his nephew. He was very angry, no doubt, but that's all over now; and as to the dinner, my dear madam, while I act the peacemaker, I hope you will bear in mind that I am very hungry, and should be very glad of some of the good things you were preparing, when in your genuine, womanly way you felt yourself called upon to defend this boy."

"Look here, Richard," began Mr Brandon.

"Tut – tut – tut, man, be quiet. Tom, my lad, go up-stairs to your room and make yourself decent. Fanny, my good girl, you are spoiling an expensive dress put on in my honour. Mary, my child, there are two or three sharp pieces of the broken vase here. Would you mind? Thank you. These things are very sharp. Now you, Sam, jump up, and go and wash yourself. Do you hear?"

"Confound it all, Richard!" began Mr Brandon.

"Tut – tut, quiet, man!" said Uncle Richard; "there's nothing the matter with the fellow."

"He's half killed – dangerously hurt," protested Mrs Brandon.

"Not he, my dear Fanny. I saw him watching the proceedings with one eye open. Come, Sam, no nonsense. Get up, and go to your room; and don't you dare to interfere with Tom, because if you do I shall come up myself. Let me see; I think I have a bit of a hold on you, have I not?"

Sam's eyes both opened widely, and he rose to his feet, then directed an imploring look at his uncle, who drew back, pointed up the stairs, and the lad shivered slightly as he went slowly by him, and began to ascend.

"Hang it all, Richard, is this house mine or is it yours?" said James Brandon.

"Mine," said his brother – "while I am your guest, of course. Thank you, Jem, I'll take my cane, if you please. It is a favourite old malacca – a presentation."

He took the cane quietly from his brother's hand and replaced it in the stand, with the result that cook uttered a titter and hurried

down-stairs, followed by Mary, bearing a dustpan full of broken sherds.

"Come, that's better," said Uncle Richard, disregarding his brother's angry gesture. "Now, my dear Fanny, let me take you to the drawing-room. The storm's over, and the sun is coming out. Don't let's spoil my visit because the boys fell out and broke a vase."

"No, no, Richard," said Mrs Brandon, half hysterically, as she yielded at once and took her brother-in-law's arm. "But you don't know. That boy has the temper of a demon."

"What, Sam?"

"No, *no*, No! That boy Thomas. We haven't had a day's peace since he came into the house. And now a fifty-pound vase broken. Oh! the wicked boy."

"I didn't do it, aunt. It was Sam," came from the head of the staircase.

"Ah! Silence there, sir!" shouted Uncle Richard. "How dare you stand there listening! Be off, and make yourself decent for dinner."

"Richard!" cried Mrs Brandon, in a tone of remonstrance, "you surely would not have that boy down to dinner now!"

"Why not, my dear sister?" he said, as they reached the drawing-room floor.

"After breaking that vase?"

"Never mind the vase, Fanny."

"And nearly killing his cousin?"

"Nonsense, my dear, partial, motherly judge. Lookers-on see most of the game," said Uncle Richard good-humouredly. "I was looking on from the landing for some time, and from what I saw, I have no hesitation in saying that Master Tom got as good as he gave."

"But oh, Richard!"

"Tut – tut! Listen to me, my dear. Boys will quarrel and fight sometimes. I can remember a good many sets-to with Jem when we were young. These two have fought, and it's all over."

"But you really don't know," began Mrs Brandon.

"Oh yes, I do. Master Tom is not perfect. There, there, forget it all now; and let me send you a vase to replace the one broken. By the way, I hope they will not be long with that dinner."

"Oh no, it will not be long now – that is, if that insolent woman will condescend to send us up some."

"But she will," said Uncle Richard good-humouredly. "If she does not, and the worst comes to the worst, we'll storm her kitchen and finish the cooking ourselves. I'm a good cook in my way. Bachelors have their whims."

"Ah, you don't know what London servants are."

"No," said Uncle Richard, smiling pleasantly at the flurried lady, who was still troubled by the domestic storm through which she had just passed. "Mrs Fidler is a very good old soul in her way, and the maid has been with me some time now, and has evidently made up her mind to stop. I don't give them much trouble, except with my fads."

"And do you still go on with – with those – those – "

"Crazes?" said Uncle Richard smilingly. "To be sure I do. Ah, here's James. Well, old fellow, is it all right again?"

"Right again?" said Mr Brandon, who had just entered the room; "no, it is not. But there, I'm sorry there should be all this disturbance when you are here. It all comes of being charitable in the course of duty. But there, I'll say no more."

"That's right," said Uncle Richard, just as Mary entered the room with —

"If you please, ma'am, dinner is served."

"Hah!" cried Uncle Richard, rising to offer his arm to his sister-in-law. "But the boys are not down."

"No; and they are not coming," said Mr Brandon angrily.

"Oh, James dear!" protested Mrs Brandon.

"My dear Jem!" said Uncle Richard, smiling, "I put in my petition. The fight is over, so now let's have peace and – dinner."

"Oh, very well," said Mr Brandon. "Mary, go and tell Mr Samuel that we are waiting dinner for him."

"And, Mary, you will convey the same message to Mr Thomas," said Uncle Richard.

"Yes, sir," said the girl, with a smile; and before her master could protest she was gone.

Five minutes elapsed, during which Uncle Richard seemed to have forgotten his dinner in eager explanation of some piece of mechanism that he was making, and about which he had come up to town. At the end of that time Tom entered nervously, looking

as if he had had his share of cuts and bruises; but to his great satisfaction no one said a word; and then Sam came in, looking very puffy about the eyes, and with one side of his mouth drawn down into a peculiar swollen smile.

"Oh!" exclaimed his mother, and she rose to fly to his side; but Uncle Richard was prepared for her, and took her hand to draw through his arm.

"That's right," he cried. "I am awfully hungry;" and he led her out of the room, followed by Mr Brandon, while Tom and Sam followed in silence down the stairs, each intent upon the plans he had in his breast, and fully determined to carry them out.

Chapter Six

It was a capital dinner, but Sam felt that he could not eat a bit for mental troubles, while his cousin felt the same from bodily reasons connected with a terrible stiffness at one angle of his lower jaw.

Consequently Sam made a very poor dinner, to his mother's grief; but Tom ate heartily and enjoyed everything, forgetting his cares for the time being, as he listened in astonishment to the way in which his cold, grave uncle could brighten up, and keep the whole table interested by his conversation relating to discoveries in the world of science, especially in connection with light, and researches in what he spoke of as "The Vast Abyss."

Then came tea in the drawing-room, and on the part of the two boys an early movement in the direction of bed.

Tom was on his guard as soon as they were alone, fully expecting that his cousin would in some way renew hostilities, the more especially as neither Mr nor Mrs Brandon had had an opportunity of speaking to them with warning or appeal.

But Sam did not even look at him, undressing himself in sulky silence, throwing his clothes here and there, and plunging into bed and turning his face to the wall as he began to make his plans respecting a campaign he intended to carry out for the destruction of his cousin's peace, without running risks of getting himself injured as he had been that night.

"For," said Sam to himself, "everything seems to be against me. I only forgot that letter, and instead of helping a fellow out of a hole that beastly young sneak betrayed me. Then when I meant to pay him out, all the luck was on his side; and lastly, old moony Uncle Dick must turn upon me about that money affair. But wait a bit, I'll pay him back, and then he may tell the guv'nor if he likes. What did he say when I went and told him what a hole I was in over that account, and was afraid the guv'nor would know; – that it was embezzlement, and a criminal offence, and that if I had done such a thing for a regular employer, I might have found myself in the felon's dock? Rubbish! I only borrowed the money for a few weeks, and meant to pay it back. He shall have it again; and let him tell the old man if he dares. A coward, to throw that in my teeth! Wonder if they'll ask him what he meant. But all right, Master Tom Blount, you shall pay for this."

Meantime the object of his threatenings had undressed in silence too, extinguished the light, remembered by his bedside the old mother-taught lesson, and added a prayer for pardon in regard for that which he had made up his mind to do. Then, as his head pressed the pillow, he lay thinking of all that had taken place since he had been at his uncle's, and came finally to the conclusion that he could bear no more.

"I can't help being a fool," he said to himself, dolefully. "I have tried, but all these law things slip out of my head as fast as I read them. Of course it makes uncle bitter and angry, when he has tried to help me, and would go on trying if it was not for Sam."

Then the long, weary time of his stay came up, and in succession the series of injuries and petty annoyances to which he had been subjected by his cousin passed before him, strengthening his determination.

But in spite of all these, he would have fought down the desire so strong upon him if it had not been for the past evening's scene. Even as he lay in bed his face flushed, and he quivered with shame and indignation. For here it all was vividly before his mind's eye. What had he done to deserve it? Nothing. He had spoken the truth, and declined to take his cousin's lapse upon his own shoulders about that letter; and then on getting home Sam had turned upon him, and any boy, Tom argued, would have done as he did, and struck back. He'd have been a mean-spirited coward if he had not.

"No, I can't stand it," he muttered, with his head beneath the clothes. "He was going to beat me in spite of all I said, and it was too horrible. I wouldn't have minded so much if I had been in the wrong, but even then it was too cruel before aunt – before the servants, and with Sam lying there shamming to be so bad, and watching all the time in his delight. No, I won't alter my mind in the morning. Poor father used to say, 'Sleep on it, my lad;' but I can't sleep on this. I must go now before things get worse."

He threw the clothes from his face and lay listening, to try and make out whether his cousin was awake. He was not, for a heavy stuffy breathing could be heard, consequent upon Sam's mouth being open, a peculiar puffy swelling about the nose preventing

him from breathing in the usual way.

This brought a gleam of mental sunshine into Tom's sad and blackened horizon. Naturally a bright, merry lad, for months past he had not had a hearty laugh; but now, as he recalled his cousin's appearance, the smile broadened, and for a few moments he shook with suppressed laughter.

But the mirth passed away directly, for the matter was too serious, and he now lay with knitted brows, listening to his cousin's breathing, and continuing his plans.

He would wait another hour, and then begin.

He waited for some time listening till the last sound had died out in the house, thinking that he must move about very silently, for his uncle's room was beneath, and the servants were only separated from them by a not too thick wall.

"Poor cook! poor Mary!" he thought. "I should like to kiss them and say good-bye. How brave cook was; and she is sure to lose her place for taking my part. Aunt and uncle will never forgive her. How I wish I had a home of my own and her for housekeeper. But perhaps I shall never have one now, for what am I going to do when I go?"

That was the great puzzle as he lay there gazing at the window-blind, faintly illumined by the gas-lamps in the Crescent. What was he to do? Soldier? – No; he was too young, and wanting in manly aspect. Sailor? – No. He would like to go to sea, and have adventures; but no, if his father and mother had lived it would have given them pain to know that he had run away to enlist, or

get on board some coasting vessel.

No; he could not do that. It might be brave and daring, but at the same time he had a kind of feeling that it would be degrading, and he would somehow do better than either of those things, and try and show his uncles, both of them, and Sam too, that if he was a fool, he was a fool with some good qualities.

But it was quite an hour since it had struck twelve, and it was time to act. The first thing was to test Sam's sleep – whether he was sound enough to enable him to make his preparations unheard.

What would be the best thing to do? came again. How could he get work without a character? What answer could he give people who asked him who he was, and whence he came?

No answer came, think hard as he would. All was one black, impenetrable cloud before him, into which he had made up his mind to plunge, and what his future was to be he could not tell. But let it be what it would, he mentally vowed that it should be something honest, and he would not let the blackness of that cloud stay him. No; his mind was fully made up now. This was his last night at his uncle's house, and he would take his chance as to where he would next lay his head.

"I shall be free," he muttered half aloud; "now I am like a slave."

It was time to act. Not that he meant to leave the house that night. No; his mind was made up. He would pack a few things in the little black bag in which he took his law-books to and fro,

place it ready in the hall as usual, and go in to his breakfast; and when he started for the office, just call in and say good-bye to Pringle, who would not hinder him. On the contrary, he would be sure to give him advice, and perhaps help him as to his future.

"Poor old Pringle won't say stay," he muttered; and reaching out of bed, he felt in his trousers pocket on the chair for a halfpenny. He could not spare it, but it was the only missile he could think of then, and he held it poised ready to throw as he listened to his cousin's heavy breathing.

He threw the coin forcibly, so that it struck the wall just above Sam's head, and fell upon his face.

There was no movement, and the heavy, guttural breathing went on.

Tom waited a few minutes, and then slipped out of bed, crossed to his cousin's side, and gave the iron bedstead a slight shake, then a hard one. Next he touched his shoulder, and finished by laying a cold hand upon his hot brow.

But the result was always the same – the heavy, hoarse breathing.

Satisfied that he might do anything without arousing his cousin, he returned to his own bed, slipped on his trousers, and sat down to think.

There was the bag of books on the top of his little chest of drawers, and he had only to take them out, lay them down, and after carefully pulling out the drawer, pack the bag full of linen, and add an extra suit. It would be a tight cram, but he would want

the things, and they would prove very useful.

But there was a hitch here. All these things were new, his old were worn-out, and his uncle had paid for all these in spite of his aunt's suggestion, that there were a good many of Sam's old things that might be altered to fit.

He stumbled over this. They were not his; and at last, in a spirit of proud independence, he ignored his own services to his uncle, and stubbornly determined that he would take nothing but the clothes in which he stood.

"And some day I'll send the money to pay for them," he said proudly, half aloud.

"Gug – gug – gug – ghur-r-r-r," came from his cousin's bed as if in derision.

But Tom's mind was made up, and undressing once more he lay down to think, but did not, for, quite satisfied now as to his plans, no sooner had his head touched the pillow than, utterly wearied out, he dropped asleep.

It seemed to him that he had only just closed his eyes, when, in a dreamy way, he heard the customary tapping at his door, followed by a growl from Sam, bidding Mary not make "that row."

Then Tom was wide-awake, thinking of his over-night plans.

And repentant?

Not in the least. He lay there thinking fiercely, only troubled by the idea of what he would do as soon as he had made his plunge penniless into that dense black cloud – the future.

But there was no lifting of the black curtain. He could see his way to the office to bid Pringle good-bye. After that all was hidden.

At the end of a quarter of an hour he jumped up and began to dress, while Sam lay with his back to him fast asleep, or pretending.

It did not matter, for he did not want to speak to him; and after dressing, and duly noting that there was only a scratch or two, no swelling about his face, he went down with his bag of books to the breakfast-room, to read as usual for an hour before his uncle and aunt came down.

In the hall he encountered the cook, who had to "do" that part of the housework, and she rose from her knees to wish him so hearty a good-morning, that a lump rose in Tom's throat, there was a dimness in his eyes, and his hand went out involuntarily for a silent good-bye.

To his surprise a pair of plump arms were flung round him, and he received two hearty kisses, and then there was a warm whisper in his ear —

"Don't you mind a bit, my dear. You didn't deserve it; and as for Mr Sam, he's a beast."

"Thank you, cook," said Tom huskily, "thank you. Good-bye."

"What! Oh no, it ain't good-bye neither, my dear. They'd like me to go, and so I won't. I'll stop just to spite them, so there!"

Cook went off to seize a door-mat, carry it out on the front steps, and then and there she banged it down, and began to thump

it with the head of the long broom, as if in imagination she had Sam beneath her feet.

"She didn't understand me," said Tom to himself, as he hurried into the breakfast-room, feeling that after all it would be very painful to go, but not shaken in his determination.

"Morning, Mr Tom," said Mary, who looked bright and cheerful in her clean print dress, as she made pleasant morning music by rattling the silver spoons into the china saucers. "Ain't it a nice morning? The sun's quite hot."

"Yes, a beautiful morning," said Tom sadly, as he gave the girl a wistful look, before going into a corner, sitting down and opening *Tidd's Practice* for what his cousin called a grind.

Then with a sigh he went on reading, giving quite a start when Mary had finished her preparations for breakfast, and came to whisper —

"Cook ain't going, sir; she says she wouldn't go and leave you here alone for nothing, and I won't neither."

Tom felt as if he could not speak, and he had no need to, for the maid slipped out of the room, and the next minute Uncle Richard entered to nod to him gravely.

"Morning, my lad," he said rather sternly. "That's right – never waste time."

How cold and repellent he seemed: so different to his manner upon the previous night, when the boy had felt drawn towards him. The effect was to make Tom feel more disposed than ever to carry out his plan, and he was longing for the breakfast to be

over, so that he could make his start for the office.

But it wanted half-an-hour yet, and the boy had just plunged more deeply into his book, when Uncle Richard said —

"And so you don't like the law, Tom?"

The boy started, for there was a different ring in the voice now. It sounded as if it were inviting his confidence, and he was about to speak, when his elder went on —

"To be sure, yes; you told me so last time I saw you."

"I have tried, sir, very hard," said Tom apologetically; "but it seems as if my brains are not of the right shape to understand it."

"Humph, perhaps not," said his uncle, gazing at him searchingly; and Tom coloured visibly, for it seemed to him that those penetrating eyes must be reading the secret he was keeping. "And you don't like your cousin Sam either?"

Tom was silent for a few moments.

"Why don't you answer my question, sir?"

"I was thinking, uncle, that it is Cousin Sam who does not like me."

"How can he when you knock him down, and then dash china vases at him, sir?"

"I suppose I did knock him down, uncle, but not until he had kicked and struck me. Throw vases at him!" cried the boy indignantly; "I wouldn't be such a coward."

"Humph!" grunted his uncle, taking up the morning paper that Mary had just brought in; and without another word he sat back in his chair and began to read, while Tom, with his face still

burning, turned once more to his book, with a strange elation beginning to take the place of the indignation he felt against his uncle, for it had suddenly occurred to him that this was the last time he would have to make his head ache over the hard, brain-wearying work. Then the elation died out again, for what was to be his future fate?

He was musing over this, and wondering whether after all he dare trust Pringle, when the door suddenly opened, Uncle Richard rustled and lowered the paper, and Mrs Brandon entered the room, looking wonderfully bright and cheerful.

"Good-morning, Richard," she cried; "I am so sorry I am late. James will be down directly. Good-morning, Tom."

Tom jumped in his chair at this pleasantly cordial greeting, and stared dumbfounded at his aunt.

"Not a bit late," said Uncle Richard, after a glance at his watch. "You are very punctual. Hah, here is James."

For at that moment Mr Brandon, looking clean-shaven and pleasant, entered the room.

"Morning, Dick," he cried; "what a lovely air. Ah, Tom, my boy, got over the skirmish?"

Tom babbled out something, and felt giddy. What did it mean? Could they have divined that he was about to run away, and were going to alter their treatment; or had Uncle Richard, who seemed again so grave and cold, been taking his part after he had gone to bed?

But he had very little time for dwelling upon that; the question

which troubled him was, How could he go away now?

The thoughts sent him into a cold perspiration, and he glanced anxiously at the clock, to see that it was a quarter past eight, and that in fifteen minutes, according to custom, he must start for the office – for the office, and then – where?

Just then Mary entered with the breakfast-tray, and, chatting pleasantly, all took their seats. Mary whisked off two covers, to display fried ham and eggs on one, hot grilled kidneys on the other.

Tom grew hotter and colder, and asked himself whether he was going out of his mind, for there was no thin tea and bread-and-butter that morning.

"Tea or coffee, Tom?" said his aunt; and Tom's voice sounded hoarse as he chose the latter.

He was just recovering from this shock when his uncle said —

"Ham and eggs or kidneys, Tom? There, try both – they go well together."

"Thank you, uncle," faltered the boy; and he involuntarily looked up at Uncle Richard, who sat opposite to him, and saw that, though his face was perfectly stern and calm, his eyes were fixed upon him with a peculiar twinkling glitter.

"Bread, my boy?" he said quietly, and he took up a knife and the loaf.

"Try a French roll, Tom," said his aunt, handing the dish.

"How can I run away?" thought Tom, as he bent over his breakfast to try and hide his agitation, for his breast was torn by

conflicting emotions, and it was all he could do to continue his meal. "It's of no use," he said to himself, as the conversation went on at the table; and though he heard but little, he knew that it was about the guest departing that morning for his home in Surrey.

"Yes," said Uncle Richard, "I must get back, for I'm very busy."

"And not stay another night?" said Aunt Fanny sweetly.

"No, not this visit, thanks. I'll get back in good time, and astonish Mrs Fidler. Hallo, squire, you're late; Tom has half finished the kidneys."

"Morning, uncle," said Sam sourly; "I didn't know it was so late. I've got a bad headache this morning, ma."

"Have you, dear? – I am so sorry. But never mind, I've a nice strong cup of tea here, and I'll ring for some dry toast."

"No, don't, ma," said Sam, scowling at Tom, and looking wonderingly at his cousin's plate. "I'll have coffee and a hot roll."

"But they will be bad for your head, love."

Sam made no reply, but felt his plate, which was nearly cold, and then held it out to his father for some kidneys.

"Oh, Sam, my darling, don't have kidneys, dear. I'm sure they'll be bad for you."

"No, they won't, ma," he said pettishly; and his father helped him liberally.

Uncle Richard went on with his breakfast, making believe to see nothing, but Tom noticed that his keen eyes glittered, and that nothing escaped him. Those eyes were wonderful, and fascinated

the boy.

Suddenly, just as he had made a very poor breakfast, the clock on the chimney-piece gave a loud *ting*. It was the half-hour, and Tom rose quickly after a hasty glance at his uncle and aunt. He had had breakfast for the last time, and feeling that this change of treatment was only due to his Uncle Richard's presence, he was more determined than ever to go.

"Good-bye, Uncle Richard," he said firmly, but there was a husky sound in his voice.

"No, no, sit down, Tom," was the reply. "We won't say good-bye yet."

Sam stopped eating, with a bit of kidney half-way to his mouth, and stared.

"Yes, sit down, Tom," said Mr Brandon, giving a premonitory cough, after a glance at his wife. "The fact is, my lad, your uncle and I had a little conversation about you after you were gone to bed last night."

Tom, who had subsided into his chair, took hold of the table-cloth, and began to twist it up in his agitation, as a peculiar singing noise came in his ears; and as he listened he kept on saying to himself – "Too late – too late; I must keep to it now."

"Yes, a very long talk," said Uncle Richard.

"Very," acquiesced his brother; "and as we – as he – "

"As *we*, James," said Uncle Richard.

"Exactly – could not help seeing that you do not seem cut out for the law – er – hum – do not take to it – he has been kind

enough to say that he will give you a trial with him down in the country."

Tom's head, which had been hanging down, was suddenly raised, and the words were on his lips to say No, he could not go, when he met the keen, bright, piercing eyes fixed upon his, and those words died away.

"He has not definitely decided as to what he will put you to, but means to test you, as it were, for a few months."

The singing in Tom's ears grew louder.

Go with that cold stern man, who had never seemed to take to him? It would be like jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire. Impossible! He could not – he would not go.

"There," said Mr Brandon in conclusion, after a good deal more, of which Tom heard not a word; "it is all settled, and you will go down with your uncle this morning, so you had better pack up your box as soon as we leave the table. Now what have you to say to your uncle for his kindness?"

"No: I will not go," thought Tom firmly; and once more he raised his eyes defiantly to that searching pair, which seemed to be reading his; but he did not say those words, for others quite different came halting from his lips – "Thank you, Uncle Richard – and – and I will try so hard."

"Of course you will, my boy," said the gentleman addressed, sharply. "But mind this, the country's very dull, my place is very lonely, all among the pine-trees, and you will not have your cousin Sam to play with."

"Haw haw!"

This was a hoarse laugh uttered by the gentleman in question.

"I beg your pardon, Sam?" said Uncle Richard, raising his eyebrows.

"I didn't speak, uncle," said Sam, "but I will, and I say a jolly good job too, and good riddance of bad rubbish."

"Sam, dear, you shouldn't," said his mother, in a gentle tone of reproof.

"Yes, I should; it's quite true."

"Hold your tongue, sir."

"All right, father; but we shall have some peace now."

"And I am to have all the disturbance, eh?" said Uncle Richard; "and the china vases thrown at me and smashed, eh?"

Tom darted a quick look at his uncle, and saw that he was ready to give him a nod and smile, which sent a thrill through him.

"You'll have to lick him half-a-dozen times a week," continued Sam.

"Indeed," said Uncle Richard good-humouredly; "anything else?"

"Yes, lots of things," cried Sam excitedly; "I could tell you – "

"Don't, please, my dear nephew," said Uncle Richard, interrupting him; "I could not bear so much responsibility all at once. You might make me repent of my determination."

"And you jolly soon will," cried Sam maliciously; "for of all the – "

"Hush, Sam, my darling!" cried his mother.

"You hold your tongue now, sir," said Mr Brandon; "and I should feel obliged by your making haste down to the office. You can tell Pringle that your cousin is not coming any more."

Tom started, and looked sharply from one to the other.

"Mayn't I go and say good-bye to Pringle, uncle?" he cried.

"No, sir," said his Uncle James coldly; "you will only have time to get your box packed. Your uncle is going to catch the ten fifty-five from Charing Cross."

"Yes," said Uncle Richard; "and you can write to your friend."

"Or better not," said Mr Brandon. "Tom has been rather too fond of making friends of people beneath him. There, my lad, you had better go and be getting ready; and I sincerely hope that you will make good use of your new opportunity."

Tom hardly knew how he got out of the room, for he felt giddy with excitement. Then he was not going to run away, but to be taken down into Surrey by his Uncle Richard – and for what?

Would he behave well to him? He looked cold and stern, but he was not on the previous night. Young as he was, Tom could read that there was another side to his character. Yes, he must go, he thought; and then he came face to face with Mary, who came bustling out of a bedroom.

"La! Master Tom, how you startled me. Not gone to the office?"

"No, Mary. I'm going away for good with Uncle Richard."

"Oh, I am glad! No, I ain't – I'm sorry. But when?"

"This morning – almost directly."

"My! I'll go and tell cook."

Tom reached his room, packed up his things as if in a dream, and bore the box down-stairs, his cousin having left the house some time. Then, still as if in a dream, he found himself in the breakfast-room, and heard Mary told to whistle for a cab.

Ten minutes later his uncle's Gladstone was on the roof side by side with the modest old school box; and after saying good-bye to all, they were going down the steps.

"Jump in first, Tom," said Uncle Richard, "and let's have no silly crying about leaving home."

Tom started, and stared at his uncle with his eyes wonderfully dry then, but the next moment they were moist, for two female figures were at the area gate waving their handkerchiefs; and as the boy leaned forward to wave his hand in return, mingled with the trampling of the horse, and the rattle of the wheels, there came his uncle's voice shouting Charing Cross to the cabman from the kerb, and from the area gate —

"Good-bye, Master Tom, good-bye!"

"Why, the boy's wet-eyed!" said Uncle Richard in a peculiarly sneering voice. "What a young scoundrel you must have been, sir, to make those two servants shout after you like that! There, now for a fresh home, boy, and the beginning of a new life, for your dear dead mother's sake."

"Uncle!" gasped Tom, with the weak tears now really showing in his eyes, for there was a wonderful change in his companion's

voice, as he laid a firm hand upon his shoulder.

"Yes, Tom, your uncle, my boy. I never quarrel with my brother James or his wife, but I don't believe quite all that has been said about you."

All thought of running away to seek his fortune faded out of Tom Blount's brain, as he sat there with his teeth pressed together, staring straight away between the horse's ears, trying hard to be firm.

But after long months of a very wretched life it was stiff work to keep his feelings well within bounds.

Chapter Seven

"Now, Tom, cloak-room; come along. I've got some tackle to take down with us. Only ten minutes before we start. Here, porter, luggage – quick!"

A man came forward with a barrow, and after taking the luggage from the cab, followed to the cloak-room, from whence sundry heavy, peculiar-looking packages and a box were handed out and trundled to the train; and in a few minutes, with his heart beating wildly, and a feeling of excitement making him long to jump up and shout aloud, Tom sat there watching the houses and trees seem to glide more and more swiftly past the windows as the speed increased. For to him it was like being suddenly freed from prison; and instead of the black cloud which had been hanging before his eyes – the blank curtain of the future which he had vainly tried to penetrate – he was now gazing mentally ahead along a vista full of bright sunshine and joy.

There were two other passengers in the carriage, who, like his uncle, were soon absorbed in their papers, and not a word was spoken until these two got out at the first stopping-place, twenty miles from town; and as soon as the porter had given the door that tremendous unnecessary bang so popular with his fraternity, and the train was speeding on again, Uncle Richard threw down his paper with a loud "Hah!" and turned to his nephew.

"Well, Tom," he said, "I don't know what I am to do with you

now I have got you. You don't want to go on with the law?"

"Oh no, sir, I am too stupid," said Tom quickly.

"Why do you say 'sir,' my boy? Will not uncle do for your mother's brother?"

"Uncle James told me always to say 'sir,' sir – uncle I mean."

"Ah, but I'm not your Uncle James, and I like the old-fashioned way. Well, as you are too stupid for the law, I suppose I must try you with something easier – say mathematics."

Tom looked at him aghast.

"A nice pleasant subject, full of calculations. But we shall see. I suppose you will not mind helping me?"

"I shall be glad to, uncle."

"That's right; but you don't know yet what I want you to do. You will have to take your coat off sometimes, work hard, put on an apron, and often get dirty."

"Gardening, uncle? Oh, I shall like that."

"Yes; gardening sometimes, but in other ways too. I do a deal of tinkering now and then." Tom stared.

"Yes, I mean it: with tin and solder, and then I try brass and turning. I have a regular workshop, you know, with a small forge and anvil. Can you blow bellows?"

Tom stared a little harder as he gazed in the clear grey eyes and the calm unruffled countenance, in which there was not the dawn of a smile.

"I never tried," said Tom, "but I feel sure I could."

"And I feel sure you cannot without learning; some of the

easiest-looking things are the hardest, you know. Of course any one can blow forge bellows after a fashion, but it requires some pains to manage the blast aright, and not send the small coal and sparks flying over the place, while the iron is being burned up."

"Iron burned up?" said Tom.

"To be sure. If I put a piece in the forge, I could manage the supply of oxygen so as to bring it from a cherry heat right up to a white, while possibly at your first trial you would burn a good deal of the iron away."

"I did not know that," said Sam.

"And I suppose there are a few other little things you do not know, my boy. There's a deal to learn, Tom, and the worst or best of it is, that the more you find out the more you realise that there is no end to discovery. But so much for the blacksmith's work."

"But you are not a blacksmith, uncle."

"Oh yes, I am, Tom, and a carpenter too. A bad workman I know, but I manage what I want. Then there is my new business too at the mill."

"Steam mill, uncle?"

"Oh no, nor yet water. It's a regular old-fashioned flour-mill with five sails. How shall you like that business?"

Tom looked harder at his uncle.

"Well, boy, do I seem a little queer? People down at Furzebrough say I am."

"No, sir," said Tom, colouring; "but all this does sound a little strange. Do you really mean that you have a windmill?"

"Yes, Tom, now. My very own, my boy. It was about that I came up yesterday – to pay the rest of the purchase-money, and get the deeds. Now we can set to work and do what we like."

Tom tried hard, but he could not help looking wonderingly at his uncle, of whom he had previously hardly seen anything. He knew that he had been in India till about a year before, and that his mother had once spoken of him as being eccentric. Now it appeared that he was to learn what this eccentricity meant.

"Did you learn any chemistry when you were at school, Tom?" said his uncle, after a pause.

"Very little, uncle. There were some lectures and experiments."

"All useful, boy. You know something about physics, of course?"

"Physics, uncle?" faltered Tom, as he began to think what an empty-headed fellow he was.

"Yes, physics; not physic – salts and senna, rhubarb and magnesia, and that sort of thing; but natural science, heat and light, and the wonders of optics."

Tom shook his head.

"Very little, uncle."

"Ah, well, you'll soon pick them up if you are interested, and not quite such a fool as your uncle made out. Do you know, Tom, that windmill has made me think that I never could have been a lawyer."

Tom was silent. Things seemed to be getting worse.

"Four times have I had to come up to town and see my lawyer, who had to see the seller's lawyer over and over again – the vendor I ought to have said. Now I suppose you wouldn't have thought that I was a vendee, would you?"

"Oh yes, I know that," said Sam. "You would be if you bought an estate."

"Come, then, you do know something, my lad. But it has been a tiresome business, with its investigation of titles and rights of usance, and court copyhold fines, and – Bother the business, it has taken up no end of time. But there, it's all over, and you and I can go and make the dust fly and set the millstones spinning as much as we like. Thumpers they are, Tom, three feet in diameter. I wish to goodness they had been discs of glass instead of stone."

"Do you, uncle?" said Tom, for his companion was evidently waiting for an answer.

"Yes; we could have tried some fine experiments with them, whereas they will be useless and unsalable I expect."

To Tom's great relief the conversation reverted to his life at Gray's Inn and Mornington Crescent, for the impression would keep growing upon him that what people said about his uncle's queerness might have some basis. But this opinion was soon shaken as they went on, for he was questioned very shrewdly about his cousin and all that had passed between them, till all at once his companion held out his hand.

"Shake hands, Tom, my boy. We are just entering Furzebrough parish, and I want to say this: – You came to me

with an execrable character – ”

“Yes, uncle; I’m very sorry.”

“Then I’m not, my lad. For look here: I have been questioning you for the last hour, and I have observed one thing – in all your statements about your cousin, who is an abominably ill-behaved young whelp, you have never once spoken ill-naturedly about him, nor tried to run him down. I like this, my lad, and in spite of all that has been said, I believe that you and I will be very good friends indeed.”

“Thank you, uncle,” said Tom, huskily. “I mean to try.”

“I know that, or I wouldn’t have brought you home. There, there, look! quick! before it runs behind that fir clump, that’s the old madman’s windmill.”

Tom turned sharply to the window, and caught sight of a five-sailed windmill some five miles away, on a long wooded ridge.

“See it?”

“Yes, uncle; I just caught sight of it.”

“That’s right; and in five minutes, when we are out of the cutting, you can see Heatherleigh in the opening between the two fir-woods.”

“That’s your house, uncle?”

“Yes, my lad – that’s my house, where I carry on all my diabolical schemes, and perform my incantations, as old Mother Warboys says. You didn’t know what a wicked uncle you had.”

“No, sir,” said Tom, smiling.

“Oh, I’m a dreadful wretch; and you did not know either,

that within five-and-thirty miles of London as the crow flies, there is as much ignorance and superstition as there was a couple of hundred years or so ago, when they burnt people for being witches and wizards, and the like. There, now look; you can just see Heatherleigh there. No; too late – it's gone."

Tom felt puzzled. One minute he was drawn strongly towards his uncle, the next he felt uneasy, for there was something peculiar about him. Then he grew more puzzled as to whether the eccentricity was real or assumed. But he soon had something else to think of, for five minutes after a run through a wild bit of Surrey, that looked gloriously attractive with its sandy cuttings, commons, and fir-trees, to a boy who had been shut up closely for months in London, his uncle suddenly cried, "Here we are!" and rose to get his umbrella and overcoat out of the rack.

"Let's see, Tom," he said; "six packages in the van, haven't we? Mind that nothing is left behind."

The train was slackening speed, and the next minute they were standing on the platform of a pretty attractive station, quite alone amongst the fir-trees. The station-master's house was covered with roses and clematis, and he and the porters were evidently famous gardeners in their loneliness, for there was not a house near, the board up giving the name of the station as Furzebrough Road.

"Shall I take the luggage, sir?" said a man, touching his hat; and at the same moment Tom caught sight of a solitary fly standing outside the railings.

"Yes; six packages. By the way, Mr Day, did a box come down for me?"

This to the station-master, who came up as the train glided off and disappeared in a tunnelled sandhill a hundred yards farther.

"Yes, sir; very heavy box, marked 'Glass, with care.' Take it with you?"

"Yes, and let it be with care. Here, I'll come and pay the rates. Tom, my lad, see that the things are all got to the fly."

Tom nodded; and as his uncle disappeared in the station-master's office, he went to where the two porters were busy with a barrow and the luggage.

They were laughing and chatting with the flyman, and did not notice Tom's approach, so that he winced as he heard one of the porters say —

"Always some fresh contrapshum or another. Regular old lunatic, that's what he is."

"What's he going to do with that old mill?" said the other.

"Shoot the moon they – Is this all, sir?" said the flyman, who caught sight of Tom.

The boy nodded, and felt indignant as well as troubled, for he had learned a little about public opinion concerning his uncle.

"Be careful," he said; "some of those things are glass."

"All right, sir; we'll be careful enough. Look alive, Jem. Where will you have the box as come down by's mornin's goods?"

"On the footboard. Won't break us down, will it?"

"Tchah! not it. On'y about a hundredweight."

By the time the luggage was stowed on and about the fly, Uncle Richard came out, and expressed his satisfaction.

"Rather a lonely place in winter, Tom," he said, as he entered the stably-smelling old fly.

"Yes, but very beautiful," replied Tom. "Have we far to go?"

"Three miles, my lad, to the village, and a quarter of a mile further to the house."

It was a very slow ride, along sandy lanes, through which, as soon as there was the slightest suggestion of a hill, the horse walked; but everything looked lovely on this bright summer day. High banks where ferns clustered, plantations of fir, where brilliantly-plumaged pheasants looked up to see them pass, and every now and then rabbits scuttled up the steep sandy slopes, showing their white cottony tails before they disappeared amongst the bracken, or dived into a hole. Wild-flowers too dotted the sides of the lane, and as Tom sat gazing out of the window, drinking in the country sweets, his uncle nodded and smiled.

"Will it do, my boy?" he said.

"Do!" cried Tom, ecstatically; "it's lovely!"

"Humph! yes. Sun shines – don't rain."

In due time they reached and passed through a pretty flowery village, dotted about by the sides of a green, and with several houses of a better class, all looking as if surrounded by large gardens and orchards. Then, all at once, Tom's companion exclaimed —

"Here's the mill!" and he had hardly glanced at the tall round brick tower, with its wooden movable cap, sails, and fan, all looking weather-beaten and dilapidated, when his uncle exclaimed – "Here we are!" and down on a slope, nearly hidden in trees, he saw the red-tiled gables of a very attractive old English house, at whose gate the fly stopped.

"Drive in, sir?"

"Yes, of course. I'll have the boxes in the stable-yard. Pull up at the door first. But ring, and the gardener will come to help."

The gate was swung back and the fly was led in, now, between two wide grassy borders, with the soft, sandy gravel making hardly a sound beneath the wheels. This drive wound in and out, so that a couple of minutes had elapsed before they came in sight of the front of the house, with its broad porch and verandah.

"Welcome to Heatherleigh, Tom – our home," said his uncle. "Ah, here's Mrs Fidler."

This was as a very grim, serious-looking, grey-haired woman appeared in the porch.

"Back again, Mrs F.," cried Uncle Richard cheerily. "Here, this is my nephew, who has come to stay. Get my telegram?"

"Oh yes, sir, and everything's ready, sir."

Just then a sun-browned man, with a blue serge apron rolled up and tucked in round his waist, came up, touched his hat, and looked at the luggage.

"Morning, David. The box and portmanteau for indoors. The boxes to be very carefully placed in the coach-house. Glass,

mind. Here, driver, give your horse some hay and water; David will see to it, while you go round to the kitchen for a crust of bread-and-cheese. Mind and be careful with those packages."

"Oh yes, sir, certainly," said the man; and he led the horse on amongst the shrubs; while as Tom followed his uncle into the prettily-furnished museum-like hall, he thought to himself —

"I wonder whether uncle knows how they laugh at him behind his back."

"Dinner at two, Mrs Fidler, I suppose?" said Uncle Richard just then.

"Yes, sir, precisely, if *you* please," was the reply.

"That's right. Here, Tom, let's go and see if they have smashed the glass in the packages."

Uncle Richard led the way out through a glass door, and across a velvety lawn, to a gate in a closely-clipped yew hedge. This opened upon a well-gravelled yard, where the rusty-looking old fly was standing, with its horse comfortably munching at the contents of its nose-bag, and David the gardener looking on with a pail of water at his feet.

"Why, David, how was it that the horse was not put in the stable and given a feed?"

"He's having his feed, sir," said the gardener. "Them's our oats. The driver said he'd rather not take him out, because the harness do give so, sir, specially the traces; so he had the nose-bag pretty well filled, and the horse have been going at 'em, sir, tremenjus."

"Boxes all right?"

"Yes, sir; I don't think we've broke anything; but that big chest did come down pretty heavy."

"What?" cried his master; and he hurried into the coach-house to examine the packing-case. "Humph! I hope they have not broken it," he muttered; "I won't stop to open it now. Come, Tom, we'll just walk round the garden, so that you may see my domain, and then I'll show you your room."

The domain proved to be a fairly extensive garden in the most perfect order, and Tom stared at the tokens of abundance. Whether he was gazing at fruit or flowers, it was the same: the crop looked rich and tempting in the extreme.

"We won't stop now, my lad. Let's go and see if Mrs F. has put your room ready."

Uncle Richard led the way, with Tom feasting his eyes upon the many objects which filled him with wonder and delight; and even then it all seemed to be so dreamlike, that he half expected to wake up and find that he had been dozing in the hot office in Gray's Inn.

But it was all real, and he looked with delight at the snug little room, whose window opened upon the garden, from which floated scents and sounds to which he had long been a stranger.

"Look sharp and wash your hands, boy, the dinner-bell will ring in ten minutes, I see, and Mrs Fidler is very particular. Will your room do?"

"Do, uncle!" cried Tom, in a tone which meant the extreme

of satisfaction.

"That's right. You see they've brought up your box. Come down as soon as you are ready."

He went out and closed the door; and, with his head in a whirl, Tom felt as if he could do nothing but stand there and think; but his uncle's words were still ringing in his ears, and hurriedly removing the slight traces of his journey, he took one more look from his window over the soft, fresh, sloping, far-stretching landscape of garden, orchard, fir-wood, and stream far below in the hollow, and then looked round to the right, to see standing towering up within thirty yards, the windmill, with its broken sails and weatherworn wooden cap.

He had time for no more. A bell was being rung somewhere below, and he hurried down, eager to conform to his uncle's wishes.

"This way, Tom," greeted him; and his uncle pointed to the hat-pegs. "You'd better take to those two at the end, and stick to them, for Mrs Fidler's a bit of a tyrant with me – with us it will be now. Place for everything, she says, and everything in its place – don't you, old lady?"

"Yes, sir," said the housekeeper, who was just inside the little dining-room door, in a stiff black silk dress, with white bib and apron, and quaint, old-fashioned white cap. "It saves so much trouble, Master Tom, especially in a household like this, where your uncle is always busy with some new contrivance."

"Quite right," said Uncle Richard. "So take your chair there,

Tom, and keep to it. What's for dinner? We're hungry."

Mrs Fidler smiled as she took her place at the head of the table, and a neat-looking maid-servant came and removed the covers, displaying a simple but temptingly cooked meal, to which the travellers did ample justice.

But Tom was not quite comfortable at first, for Mrs Fidler seemed to be looking very severely at him, as if rather resenting his presence, and sundry thoughts of his being an interloper began to trouble the lad, as he wondered how things would turn out. Every now and then, too, something was said which suggested an oddity about his uncle, which would give rise to all sorts of unpleasant thoughts. Still nothing could have been warmer than his welcome; and every now and then something cropped up which made the boy feel that this was not to be a temporary place of sojourning, but his home for years to come.

"There," exclaimed Uncle Richard, when they rose from the table, "this is a broken day for you, so you had better take your cap and have a good look round at the place and village. Tea at six punctually. Don't be late, or Mrs Fidler will be angry."

"I don't like to contradict you, sir," said the housekeeper, smiling gravely; "but as Master Tom is to form one of the household now, he ought, I think, to know the truth."

"Eh? The truth? Of course. What about?"

"Our way of living here, Master Tom," said the housekeeper, turning to him. "I should never presume to be angry with your uncle, sir; I only carry out his wishes. He is the most precise

gentleman I ever met. Everything has to be to the minute; and as to dusting or moving any of the things in his workshop or labour atory, I – ”

“Oh!” exclaimed Uncle Richard, grinding his teeth and screwing up his face. “My good Mrs Fidler, don’t!”

“What have I done, sir?” exclaimed the housekeeper.

“Say workshop, and leave laboratory alone.”

“Certainly, sir, if you wish it.”

“That’s right. Well, Tom, what are you waiting for?”

“I thought, if you wouldn’t mind, I should like to help you unpack the boxes.”

“Oh, by all means, boy. Come along; but I’m going to have a look over the windmill first – my windmill, Mrs Fidler, now. All settled.”

“I’m very glad you’ve got over the bother, sir.”

“Oh, dear me, no,” said Uncle Richard, laughing; “it has only just began. Well, what is it?”

“I didn’t speak, sir.”

“No, but you looked volumes. What have they been saying now?”

“Don’t ask me, sir, pray,” said the housekeeper, looking terribly troubled. “I can’t bear to hear such a good man as you are – ”

“Tut! stuff, woman. Nothing of the kind, Tom. I’m not a good man, only an overbearing, nigger-driving old indigo planter, who likes to have his own way in everything. Now then, old lady,

out with it. I like to hear what the fools tattle about me; and besides, I want Tom here to know what sort of a character I have in Furzebrough."

"I – I'd really rather not say, sir. I don't want to hear these things, but people will talk to David and cook and Jenny, and it all comes to me."

"Well, I want to hear. Out with it."

"I do wish you wouldn't ask me, sir."

"Can't help it, Mrs Fidler. Come."

"Bromley the baker told cook, sir, that if you were going to grind your own flour, you might bake your own bread, for not a loaf would he make of it."

"Glad of it. Then we should eat bread made of pure wheat-meal without any potatoes and ground bones in it. Good for us, eh, Tom?"

"Better, uncle," said the boy, smiling.

"Well, what next?"

"Doctor told David out in the lane that he was sure you had a bee in your bonnet."

"To be sure: so I have; besides hundreds and thousands in the hives. Go on."

"And Jane heard down the village that they're not going to call it Pinson's mill any more."

"Why should they? Pinson's dead and gone these four years. It's Richard Brandon's mill now."

"Yes, sir, but they've christened it Brandon's Folly."

"Ha, ha! So it is. But what is folly to some is wisdom to others. What next? Does old Mother Warboys say I am going to hold wizards' sabbaths up in the top storey, and ride round on the sails o' windy nights?"

"Not exactly that, sir," said Mrs Fidler, looking sadly troubled and perplexed; "but she said she was sure you would be doing something uncanny up there, and she hoped that no evil would descend upon the village in consequence, for she fully expected that we should be smitten for your sins."

"Did she tell you this?"

"No, sir; she said it to Mr Maxted."

"Told the vicar?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what did he say?"

"She says he insulted her, sir, and that she'll never go into his church any more. She's been telling every one so – that he called her a silly, prejudiced old woman."

"Is that all?"

"It's all I can remember, sir."

"And enough too. Look here, Tom, you had, I think, better call David, and tell him to put the pony in and drive you back to the station. I'm sure you would rather go back to your uncle James, and be happy with your cousin Sam."

Tom smiled.

"You can't want to stay here."

"Are you going up to the mill now, uncle?" said Tom, with a

quaint look.

"Oh yes, directly, if you are going to risk it. Ready?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Then come on."

Chapter Eight

Uncle Richard frowned and looked very serious, but he uttered a low chuckle as he led the way into a snug little room, half-library, half-museum. A long, heavy chest stood on one side, formed of plain, dark-coloured wood; but upon its being opened, Tom saw that it was all beautifully polished ornamental wood inside, and full of drawers, trays, and fittings for bright saws, hammers, chisels, and squares.

"My old tool-chest, Tom. I used to have that at Sattegur in my bungalow, and do most of my carpentering myself, for the natives there are not much of hands when you want anything strong. When you want a tool – bradawl, gimlet, pincers, anything – here they all are." He opened and shut drawers rapidly as he spoke. "Nails, screws, tacks, you'll know where to find them, only put things back when done with. What did I come for? Oh, a rule. Here we are." He took a new-looking boxwood rule from its place, closed the lid, and then led the way out into the garden, up a flight of steps formed of rough pieces of tree, and leading in a winding way through a shrubbery to a doorway in a wall. Passing through this, they were in a narrow lane, and close to the yard which enclosed the great brick tower of the mill.

"Nice and handy for conveying the flour-sacks to and fro, Tom, eh?" said Uncle Richard, smiling. "Now then, let's have another inspection of the new old property."

He took out a bunch of old keys, unlocked the gate, and entered; and then they crossed the yard, which was littered with old wood, and with here and there a worn-out millstone leaning against the walls, two extra large ones bound with rusty iron standing up like ornaments on either side of the mill-tower door, one above whitened with ancient flour, having evidently been used for loading carts drawn up close beneath.

"Splendid place, eh, Tom?" said Uncle Richard, as he unlocked the door, which uttered a low groan as its unoiled hinges were used, and a peculiar odour of old mildewed flour came from within. "We shall have a place now in case of invasion or civil war, ready for retreat and defence. We can barricade the lower doors, and hurl down the upper and nether millstones on the enemies' heads, set the mill going, and mow them down with the sails, and melt lead ready to pour down in ladlefuls to make them run from the scalding silver soup. A grand tower for practising all those old barbaric delights."

"Yes, sir," said Tom uneasily, for his uncle looked at him penetratingly, as if expecting an answer.

"Is he serious, or only joking me?" thought Tom the next moment. "He must be a little wrong. Got windmills in his head, like Don Quixote."

"Yah! yah! Who shot the moon?" came in a coarse yell from outside the gate.

Tom started, flushed, and turned round angrily, with his fists involuntarily clenching.

"Yah! yah! old wind-grinders!" cried the voice again, followed by several heavy bangs on the gate, evidently delivered with a stick.

"The impudent scoundrel!" cried Uncle Richard. "Go and tell that fellow that – "

But he got no further, for, taking all this as an insult meant for his uncle, Tom had darted off for the gate, which he threw open, and found himself face to face with a big, shambling, hobbledehoy sort of fellow of about eighteen or nineteen, who stepped back for a yard or two, swinging a heavy stick to and fro, while a mangy-looking cur, with one eye and a very thin tail like a greyhound's, kept close at his heels.

"What is it?" said Tom hotly. "Did you knock at the gate like that?"

"What's it got to do with you?" said the lad, insolently. "Get in, or I'll set the dog at yer."

Tom glanced at the dog and then at its master, and felt as he often had when his cousin Sam had been more than usually vicious.

"I'll jolly soon let yer know if yer give me any o' your mouth. Here, Badger, smell him, boy – ciss – smell him!"

The cur showed his teeth, and uttered a low snarling growl, as its master advanced urging him on; while Tom drew one leg a little back ready to deliver a kick, but otherwise stood his ground, feeling the while that everything was not going to be peaceful even in that lovely village.

But before hostilities could begin, and just as the dog and his master were within a yard, the gate was suddenly snatched open, and Uncle Richard appeared, when the lout turned sharply and ran off along the lane, followed by his dog, the fellow shouting "Yah! yah! yah!" his companion's snapping bark sounding like an imitation.

"Come in, Tom," said Uncle Richard. "I don't want you to get into rows with Master Pete Warboys. Insolent young rascal!"

Tom looked at his uncle inquiringly.

"That's the pest of the village, Tom. Nice young scoundrel. An idle dog, who has had a dozen places and will not stay in them, though he has no Cousin Sam to quarrel with."

Tom winced, for the words were a decided hit at him.

"So he has settled down into a regular nuisance, who does a bit of poaching, steals fruit, breaks windows, and generally annoys every one in the place. If he were not such an ugly, shambling cub some recruiting sergeant might pick him up. As it is, we have to put up with him and his ways."

"Yah!" came from a distance; and Tom's nerves tingled, for he did not like to hear the insult directed at his uncle, however strange he might be.

"There, let's go on with our inspection, my boy," and the gate was closed again, and they walked together up the slope into the mill.

There was not much to see on the ground-floor, save the whitened brick walls, a huge pillar or post in the middle, and a

ladder-like flight of steps on one side, up which Uncle Richard led the way; and as Tom emerged from a trap-door, he found himself in a circular chamber, a little less than the one below, with three windows at the sides, the doorway he had seen from without, and three pairs of millstones placed horizontally, and connected by shafts with the mechanism above the cobwebby and flour-whitened ceiling. There was a flight of steps, too, here, and Tom now noticed that there was a trap-door overhead, formed with two flaps and a hole in the middle, while a similar one was at his feet.

"For sending the sacks up and down," said Uncle Richard. "The floors are thoroughly solid, and made of good stuff. Excellent," he continued. "Let's go up to the top."

He led the way up the second flight of steps into the next chamber, which was wonderfully like the floor below, minus the millstones; but the roof, instead of being a flat ceiling of boards and beams, was a complication of rafters, ties, posts, and cog-wheels, while at one side was the large pivot passing out through well-greased and blackened bearings, which bore the five sails of the mill, balanced to a great extent by the projecting fan, which, acted upon by the wind, caused the whole of the wooden cap which formed the top to revolve.

"There's the way out to repair the sails, or oil the great fan," said Uncle Richard, pointing to a little sloping doorway in the curved cap roof. "Think the place will do? It's a good fifteen feet from the floor to the curve."

"Do, sir?"

"Do, *uncle*, please. Yes, do! The whole top revolves easily enough, and will do so more easily when there are no sails or fan."

"Do you mean for defence, uncle?" stammered Tom.

"Defence? – nonsense. Attack, boy. The roof will only want modifying, and a long narrow shutter fitting, one that we can open or close easily from within. The place when cleaned, scraped, painted, and coloured will be all that one could wish, and is strong enough to bear anything. We can mount a monster here."

Tom looked more puzzled than ever. Monster?

"In the floor below make our laboratory, and keep chemicals and plates."

"Yes, uncle," said Tom; for he could understand that.

"And on the ground-floor do our grinding and fining."

"But the millstones are on the floor above," said Tom.

"Yes, I know, my boy, for the present; but I'll soon have them lowered down. There, the place will do splendidly, and Mrs Fidler will be at peace."

Tom did not see how Mrs Fidler could be at peace if the corn was ground on the basement-floor of the mill, but he said nothing.

"Now we'll go down," said Uncle Richard. "I'm more than satisfied. I'll have two or three stout fellows to lower down the stones; the rest we will do ourselves."

He led the way down, locked up the mill again and the outer

gate, and then entered the garden and crossed it to the coach-house, where the packages brought down were waiting.

"Go to the tool-chest and fetch an iron chisel and the biggest hammer," said Uncle Richard. "No, it's screwed down. Bring the two largest screw-drivers."

Tom hurried away, and soon returned, to find that his uncle had opened one of the packages he had brought down, and was untying some brown paper, which proved to contain brass tubes and fittings, with slides and rack-work.

"Know what these are?" said Uncle Richard.

"They look like part of a photographic camera," said Tom.

"A good shot, my lad, but not right. Now for the big chest. I hope they are not broken. Try and get out some of the screws."

These were gradually drawn from the very stout chest, the lid lifted, a quantity of thickly-packed straw removed, and a round package of brown paper was revealed.

"Out with it, Tom," said his uncle. "No, don't trust to the string."

Tom bent down to lift out the package, but failed, and his uncle laughed.

"Let's both try," he said, and getting their fingers down, they lifted out something exceedingly heavy, and bore it to a stout bench. "Now for the other," said Uncle Richard; and after removing more straw, a second package was seen precisely like the first, which on being taken out and opened, proved to be a great solid disc of ground-glass made fairly smooth but quite

opaque.

"Bravo! quite sound," cried Uncle Richard. "Now the other."

This proved also to have borne the journey well, and Tom looked from the two great discs to his uncle.

"Well," said the latter; "do you see what these are for?"

"To grind flour much finer?"

"To grind grandmothers, boy! Nonsense! Not to grind, but to be ground. Out of those Tom, you and I have to make a speculum of tremendous power."

"A looking-glass, sir?" said Tom, feeling rather depressed at his uncle's notion. For what could a sensible man want with looking-glasses made round, and weighing about a hundredweight each?

"Yes, a looking-glass, boy, for the sun and moon, and Jupiter, Venus, Mars, Saturn, and the rest to see their faces in, or for us to see them. I can't afford to give five or six hundred pounds for a telescope, so you and I will make a monster."

"Telescope!" cried Tom, as scales seemed to fall from before his eyes. "Oh, I see!"

"Well, didn't you see before?"

"No, uncle, I couldn't make it out. Then that's what you want the windmill for, to put the telescope in, with the top to turn round any way?"

"To be sure; it will make a splendid observatory, will it not?"

"Glorious, uncle!" cried the boy, whose appearance underwent a complete change, and instead of looking heavy and

dull, his eyes sparkled with animation as he exclaimed eagerly, "How big will the telescope be?"

"A little wider than the speculum – about eighteen inches across."

"And how long?"

"Fifteen feet, boy."

"Yes," cried Tom, excitedly. "And when are you going to begin, uncle?"

"Now, my boy. At once."

Chapter Nine

"Uncle James was always calling me a fool," said Tom the next morning; "and I must be, or I shouldn't have thought poor Uncle Richard half crazy. What a lot of stuff I did get into my head."

He was dressing with his window wide open; the sun was shining warmly, though it was only about six o'clock, and a delicious scent floated in from the garden and the pine-woods beyond.

"Grinding corn and turning miller!" he said, and he burst into a merry fit of laughter, and then stopped short with a hair-brush in his hand, staring at his face in the glass, for he hardly knew it; he looked so different to the sad, depressed lad whose countenance had gazed wearily at him from the mirror when he rose of a morning in London.

"It must be the fresh country air," he said to himself; but all the same he felt that it must be something more, and he hastened to finish dressing and go down, so as to have a good look round before breakfast punctually at eight.

"Seems like coming out for a holiday, or being at home again," he thought, as he went down-stairs softly, wondering whether he could easily get out, but to find that the front door was wide open, and hear the servants busy in the kitchen; while, as he stepped out on to the lawn, he suddenly heard the musical sound of a scythe being sharpened, and the next minute he was alongside of

David, who had just begun to sweep the keen implement round and lay the daisies low.

"Mornin', sir, mornin'. Going to be reg'lar hot day. – Eh? Want to get up into the pine-woods. Best go straight to the bottom of the garden, and out into the field, and then strike up to your left."

Tom hurried through the bright grounds, followed the directions, and in a few minutes he was climbing a slope of rough common-land, here velvety short turf full of wild thyme, which exhaled its pungent odour as his feet crushed its dewy flowers, there tufted with an exceedingly fine-growing, soft kind of furze, beyond which were clumps of the greater, with its orange and yellow blooms, and rough patches of pale-bloomed ling and brilliant yellow broom.

Beyond this wide strip the closely-growing fir-trees began, forming a dense, dark-green wood.

It was for this that he was aiming; but as he reached the edge, he turned to stand in the bright sunshine looking down at the village.

There was the square-towered, ivy-covered church, with its clock-face glistening, and the hands pointing to twenty minutes past six. Beyond it, what seemed to be an extensive garden beside the churchyard, and the ivy-covered gables of a house that he immediately concluded was the Vicarage. Other attractive cottage-like houses were dotted about. Then he caught sight of the green, with its smaller places. Another more pretentious place or two, and as his eyes swept round, he reached, close at hand,

his uncle's home – his home now, with the windmill towering above it just on the top of the ridge.

"What nonsense!" he said half aloud; and then he burst into a merry laugh, which ceased as he heard what sounded like a mocking echo, and a long-tailed black and white bird flew out of a fir-tree, with the sun glistening upon its burnished green and purple tail feathers. "Why it's a magpie!" he cried, and another flew out to follow the first.

As he stood watching them, his eyes rested upon a flashing of water here and there, showing where a stream ran winding through the shallow valley; while a couple of miles beyond it he could trace the railway now by a heavy goods train panting slowly along, with the engine funnel leaving a long train of white flocculent steam behind.

"Oh, it's lovely," he said softly. "Who could help being happy down here!"

There was rather a swelling in his throat, for he felt the change for a few moments. But the next minute the exploring desire was strong upon him, and he plunged in amongst the bronze, pillar-like stems of the fir-trees, and began wandering on and on in a kind of twilight, flecked and cut by vivid rays of sunshine, which came through the dense, dark-green canopy overhead. The place was full of attractions to such a newly-released prisoner, and his eyes were everywhere, now finding something to interest him in the thick soft carpet of pine-needles over which his feet glided. Then he caught sight of a squirrel which ran up a fir-tree, and

stopped high up to watch the intruder. Then he came to an open place where trees had been felled; the stumps and chips dotted the ground, and bluebells had sprung up abundantly, along with patches of briar and heath revelling in the sunshine.

Here the sandy ground was showing soft and yellow in places, where it had been lately turned over, and in a minute or two he knew what by, for a rabbit sprang up from close to his feet, ran some fifty yards, and disappeared in a burrow; while from the trees beyond came a series of harsh cries, and he caught sight of half-a-dozen jays jerking themselves along, following one another in their soft flight, and showing the pure white patch just above their tails.

"There must be snakes and hedgehogs, and all kinds of wild things here," thought Tom, with all a boy's eagerness for country sights and sounds; "and look at that!"

He obeyed his own command, stopping short to watch, as he heard first a peculiar squealing sound, and directly after saw another rabbit come loping into sight, running in and out among the pine stumps, and keeping up the pitiful squealing sound as it ran.

"Must have been that," he thought; and he was about to run after it, when he suddenly saw something small and elongated appear among the bluebells. For a moment it appeared to be a large snake making its way unnaturally in an undulating, vertical way, instead of horizontally; but he directly after made out that it was a weasel in pursuit of the rabbit, going steadily

along, evidently hunting by scent, and the next minute it had disappeared.

"I must not go much further," thought Tom after a while. "I ought to be back punctually to breakfast, and get my boots cleaned first."

He looked down at them, to see that the dew and sand had taken off all the polish, and stepping out now, he hurried for a mound, intending to make it the extent of his journey, and walk back from there to the village.

The mound was pine-crowned, and he had nearly reached the top, noting that the sand was liberally burrowed by rabbits, when all at once one of the little white-tailed creatures darted over the top into sight and rushed towards him; there was another rush, a big dog came into sight, overtook the rabbit before it could take refuge in a hole; there was a craunch, a squeal, and the dog was trotting back with the little animal drooping down on each side from its steel-trap jaws, quite dead.

"Poor rabbit," muttered Tom. "Why, it's that boy's dog."

He increased his pace, following the dog up the sandy mound; while the animal paid no heed to him, but went steadily on, with its thin, greyhound-like, bony tail hanging in a curve, till reaching the highest part of the eminence, the forepart with the rabbit disappeared, and then the tail curved up for a moment in the air and was gone.

Tom Blount felt interested, and hurried up now over the sand and fir-needles, till his head was above the top of the slope; and

the next minute he was looking down at the back of the dog's master, as he was calmly stuffing the body of the defunct rabbit inside the lining of his coat, a slit in which served for a pocket. The dog was looking on, and just in front lay another rabbit, while a couple of yards away there was a hole scratched beneath the root of a tree, and the clean yellow sand scattered all about over the fir-needles.

The next moment Tom's sharp eyes detected that a couple of holes near at hand were covered with pieces of net, one of which suddenly began to move, and the dog drew its master's attention by giving a short low bark.

The warning had its effect, for the lad rose from his knees, stepped to the hole, and picked up something which Tom saw at once to be a long, reddish, writhing ferret. This snaky animal the lad thrust into his breast, stuffed the little piece of net into his pocket, picked up three more scraps from the mouths of other holes, and finally took the rabbit from the ground to pack inside his jacket lining, when the dog caught sight of Tom, and gave a sharp, angry bark.

The boy looked round, saw that he was observed, and started to run. But realising the next moment who it was, he hesitated, stopped, and hurriedly getting the second rabbit out of sight, put on a defiant air.

Tom smiled to himself.

"Poaching, or he wouldn't have begun to run. – I say," he said aloud, "whose wood is this?"

"What's that got to do with you?" cried the lad insolently. "'Tain't yours. And just you lookye here, if I ketches you sneaking arter and watching me again, I'll give you something as'll make that other side o' your face look swelled."

Tom involuntarily raised his hand to a tender spot on his right cheek, left from his encounter with his cousin, and the lad grinned.

"No, not that side, t'other," said the fellow. "Now then, just you hook it. You 'ain't no business here."

"As much business as you have," said Tom stoutly, for the lad's manner made his blood begin to flow more freely.

"No, you 'ain't; you're only a stranger, and just come."

"Anybody must have a right to come through here so long as he isn't poaching."

The lad gave a sharp look round, and then turned menacingly to Tom, with his fist doubled, and thrust his face forward.

"Just you say as I've been poaching agen, and I'll let you know."

His manner was so menacing that the dog read war, and set up a few hairs on the back of his neck, and uttered a low snarl.

"Yes, and I'll set the dog at yer too. Who's been poaching? Just you say that again."

"You look as if you had," said Tom stoutly, but with a very uncomfortable feeling running through him, for the dog's teeth were white and long, and looked just the kind to get a good hold of a running person's leg.

"Oh, I do, do I?" said the lad. "I'll soon let you know about that. Just you tell tales about me, and I'll half smash yer. I don't know as I won't now."

His manner was more menacing than ever, and Tom was beginning to feel that he would be compelled to place himself upon his defence, and signalise his coming to Furzebrough with another encounter, when, faintly-heard, came the striking of a church clock, borne on the soft morning breeze, arousing Tom to the fact that he must be a good way on towards an hour's walk back to his uncle's, and bringing up memories of his punctuality.

"Mustn't be late the first morning," he thought, just as the young rabbit poacher gave him a thrust back with his shoulder, and turning sharply he darted among the trees, and began to run toward his new home.

"Yah! coward!" was yelled after him, and a lump of sandy iron-stone struck him full in the back, making him wince; but he did not stop, only dodged in and out among the pine-trees, taking what he believed to be the right direction for the village. Then he ran faster, for he heard his assailant's voice urging on the dog.

"Ciss! Fetch him, Bob!" and glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the mongrel-looking brute was in full pursuit, snarling and uttering a low bark from time to time.

Tom's first and natural instinct was to run faster, in the hope that the dog would soon weary of the pursuit, and faster he did run, suffering from an unpleasant feeling of fear, for it is by no means pleasant to have a powerful, keen-toothed dog at

your heels, one that has proved its ability to bite, and evidently intending to repeat the performance.

Tom ran, and the dog ran, and the latter soon proved that four legs are better for getting over the ground than two; for the next minute he was close up, snapping at the boy's legs, leaping at his hands, and sending him into a profuse perspiration.

"Ciss! fetch him down, boy!" came from a distance, and the dog responded by a bark and a snap at Tom's leg, which nearly took effect as he ran with all his might, and made him so desperate that he suddenly stopped short as the dog made a fresh snap, struck against him, and then from the effort rolled over and over on the ground.

Before it could gather itself up for a fresh attack Tom, in his desperation, stooped down and picked up the nearest thing to him – to wit, a good-sized fir-cone, which he hurled at the dog with all his might. It was very light, and did not hit its mark, but the young poacher's dog was a bad character, and must have known it. Certainly it had had stones thrown at it before that morning, and evidently under the impression that it was about to have its one eye knocked out or its head split, it uttered a piercing whining cry, tucked its thin tail between its legs, and began to run back toward its master as fast as it could go, chased by another fir-cone, which struck the ground close by it, and elicited another yelp.

Tom laughed, and at the same time felt annoyed with himself.

"Why didn't I do it at first?" he said; "and that isn't the worst of

it – that fellow will think I ran away because I was afraid of him."

This last thought formed the subject upon which Tom dwelt all the way back, and he was still busy over an argument with himself as to whether he had been afraid of the young poacher or no, when, after missing the way two or three times among the firs, he caught sight of the church clock pointing to a quarter to eight.

"Just time to get in," he said, as he increased his pace; and then – "Yes, I suppose it was afraid of him, for he is a good deal bigger and stronger than I am."

"Hullo, Tom! been for a walk?" saluted him, as he was hurrying at last along the lane which divided his uncle's grounds from the new purchase.

Tom looked up quickly, and found that Uncle Richard was looking over the wall of the mill-yard.

"That's right," continued his uncle. "What do you think of the place?"

"Glorious!" said Tom.

"Hungry?"

"Terribly, uncle."

"That's right. Come along, Mrs Fidler's waiting for us by now."

Chapter Ten

Directly after breakfast Tom followed his uncle to the coach-house, and from there up a ladder fastened to the side into the loft, where he looked around wonderingly, while his companion's face relaxed into a grim smile.

"It was originally intended for botanical productions, Tom," he said; "for a sort of *hortus siccus*, if you know what that means."

"*Hortus*– garden; *siccus*– I don't know what that means, uncle, unless it's dry."

"That's right, boy. Glad you know some Latin beside the legal. Dry garden, as a botanist calls it, where he stores up his specimens. But only a few kinds were kept here: hay, clover, oats, and linseed, in the form of cake. Now, you see, I've turned it into use for another science."

"Astronomy, uncle?"

"To be sure; but it's *very* small and inconvenient. But wait till we get the windmill going."

"Is this your telescope?" cried Tom.

"Yes, Tom; but it's too small. You'll have to work hard on my big one."

"Yes, uncle," said Tom, with quiet confidence, as he eagerly examined the glass with its mounting, and the many other objects about the place, one of which was a kind of trough half full of what seemed to be beautifully clear water, covered with a sheet

of plate-glass.

"There, as soon as you've done we'll go to the mill, for I don't want to lose any time."

"I could stay here for hours, uncle," said Tom. "I want to know what all these things are for, and how you use them; but I'm ready now."

"That's right. The men are coming this morning to begin clearing away."

"So soon, uncle?"

"Yes, so soon. Life's short, Tom; and at my age one can't afford to waste time. Come along."

Tom began thinking as he followed his uncle, for his words suggested a good deal, inasmuch as he had been exceedingly extravagant with the time at his disposal, and much given to wishing the tedious hours to go by.

"Here they are," said Uncle Richard; for there was the sound of a horse's hoofs, and the crushing noise made by wheels in the lane.

"But I thought you were going to make the place into an observatory yourself, uncle, with me to help you?"

Uncle Richard smiled.

"It would be wasting valuable time, Tom," he said, "even if we could do it; but we could not. I've thought it over, and we shall have to content ourselves with making the glass."

On reaching the mill-yard it was to find half-a-dozen people there with ladders, scaffold-poles, ropes, blocks, and pulleys.

There was a short consultation, and soon after the men began work, unbolting the woodwork of the sails, while others began to disconnect the millstones from the iron gearing.

This business brought up all the idlers of the village, who hung about looking on – some in a friendly way, others with a sneering look upon their countenances, as they let drop remarks that contained anything but respect for the owner of the place. But though they were careful not to let them reach Uncle Richard's ears, it seemed to Tom that more than once an extra unpleasant speech was made expressly for him to hear; and he coloured angrily as he felt that these people must know why the mill was being dismantled.

The work went on day after day, and first one great arm of the mill was lowered in safety, the others following, to make quite a stack of wood in a corner of the yard, but so arranged that one side touched the brickwork, as there was no need to leave room now for the revolution of the sails.

By this time the building had assumed the appearance of a tower, whose sides curved up to the wooden dome top, and the resemblance was completed as soon as the fan followed the sails.

Meanwhile the iron gearing connected with the stones had been taken down inside; then the stones had followed, being lowered through the floors into the basement, and from thence carefully rolled, to be leaned up against the wall.

"Hah!" said Uncle Richard, "at the end of a week," as he went up to the top-floor of the mill with his nephew.

"Is it only a week, uncle?" said Tom. "Why, it seems to me as if I had been here for a month."

"So long and tedious, boy?"

"Oh no, uncle," said Tom confusedly. "I meant I seem to have been here so long, and yet the time has gone like lightning."

"Then you can't have been very miserable, my boy?"

"Miserable!" cried Tom.

That was all; and Uncle Richard turned the conversation by pointing to the roof.

"There," he said, "that used to swing round easily enough with the weight of those huge sails, which looked so little upon the mill, but so big when they are down. It ought to move easily now, boy."

Tom tried, and found that the whole of the wooden top glided round upon its pivot with the greatest ease.

"Yes, that's all very well," said his uncle, "but it will have to be disconnected from the mill-post. I shall want that to bear the new glass."

"That?" said Tom, gazing at the huge beam which went down through the floor right to the basement of the mill.

"Yes, boy; that will make a grandly steady stand when wedged tight. To a great extent this place is as good as if it had been built on purpose for an observatory. I shall be glad though when we get rid of the workmen, and all the litter and rubbish are cleared away."

That afternoon a couple of carpenters began work, devoting

themselves at first to the wooden dome-like roof, which they were to furnish from top to bottom with a narrow shutter, so formed that it could be opened to turn right over on to the roof, leaving a long slip open to the sky.

That night, after he had gone up to his bedroom, Tom threw open his window, to sit upon the ledge, reaching out so as to have a good look at the sky which spread above, one grand arch of darkest purple spangled with golden stars. To his right was the tower-like mill, and behind it almost the only constellation that he knew, to wit, Charles's Wain, with every star distinct, even to the little one, which he had been told represented the boy driving the horses of the old northern waggon.

"How thick the stars are to-night," he thought, as he traced the light clusters of the Milky Way, noting how it divided in one place into two. Then he tried to make out the Little Bear and failed, wondered which was the Dog Star, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn, and ended by giving his ear a vicious rub.

"A fellow don't seem to know anything," he thought. "How stupid I must seem to Uncle Richard. But I mean to know before I've done. Hark!"

He listened attentively, for in the distance a nightingale was singing, and the sweet notes were answered from somewhere beyond, and again and again at greater distances still, the notes, though faint, sounding deliciously pure and sweet.

"Who would live in London?" he said to himself; and a curiously mingled feeling of pleasure and sadness came over

him, as he dwelt upon his position now, and how happy life had suddenly become.

"And I thought of running away," he said softly, as he looked down now at the dimly-seen shrubs about the lawn. "Uncle Richard doesn't seem to think I'm such a fool. Wonder whether I can learn all about the stars."

Just then he yawned, for it was past ten, and the house so quiet that he felt sure that his uncle had gone to bed.

"Yes, I'll learn all about them and surprise him," he said. "There are plenty of books in the study. Then I shall not seem so stupid when we begin. What's that?"

He had put out his candle when he opened the casement to look at the stars, so that his room was all dark, and he was just about to close the window, and hurry off his clothes, when a faint clinking sound struck upon his ear.

The noise came from the mill-yard to his right, where he could dimly make out the outlines of the building against the northern sky; and it sounded as if some of the ironwork which had been taken down – bolts, nuts, bands, and rails – and piled against the wall had slipped a little, so as to make a couple of the pieces clink.

"That's what it is," thought Tom, and he reached out to draw in his casement window, when he heard the sound again, a little louder.

"Cat walking over the iron," thought Tom; but the noise came again, only a faint sound, but plain enough in the stillness of the night.

All at once a thought came which sent the blood flushing up into the boy's cheeks, and nailed him, as it were, to the window.

"There's some one in the yard stealing the old iron."

The lad's heart began to beat heavily, and thoughts came fast. Who could it be? Some one who knew where it all was, and meant to sell it. Surely it couldn't be David!

Tom leaned out, gazing in the direction of the sounds, which still continued, and he made out now that it was just as if somebody was hurriedly pulling bolts and nuts out of a heap, and putting them in a bag or a sack.

Hot with indignation, as soon as he had arrived at this point, against whoever it could be who was robbing his uncle, Tom half turned from the window to go and wake him.

No, he would not do that. It must be some one in the village, and if he could find out who, that would be enough, and he could tell his uncle in the morning.

Tom had only been a short time at Furzebrough, but it was long enough to make him know many of the people at sight, and, in spite of the darkness, he fancied that he would be able to recognise the marauder if he could get near enough.

He did not stop to think. There was a heavy trellis-work covered with roses and creepers all over his side of the house, and the sill of his window was not much over ten feet from the flower-beds below.

He had no cap up-stairs, and he was in his slippers, but this last was all the better, and with all a boy's activity he climbed out

of the window, got a good hold of the trellis, felt down with his feet for a place, and descended with the greatest ease, avoided the narrow flower border by a bit of a spring, and landed upon David's carefully-kept grass.

Here for a moment or two he paused.

The gate would be locked at night, and it would be better to get out at the bottom of the garden.

Satisfied with this, he set off at a trot, the velvety grass deadening his steps. Then, getting over the iron hurdle, he passed through a bit of shrubbery, found a thick stick, and got over the palings into the lane.

Here he had to be more cautious, for he wanted to try and make out who was the thief without being seen, and perhaps getting a crack over the head, as he put it, with a piece of iron.

The lane would not do, and besides, the gate would be locked, and the wall awkward to climb.

Another idea suggested itself, and stopping at the end of the mill-yard, he passed into a field, and with his heart increasing its pulsations, partly from exertion, as much as from excitement, he hurried round on tiptoe to the back of the mill-yard, and cautiously raising himself up, peered over the top of the wall, and listened.

To his disappointment, he found that though he could look over the top of the wall, it was only at the mill – all below in the yard was invisible, but the place was all very still now. Not a sound fell upon his ear for some minutes, and then a very faint

one, which sounded like a load being lifted from the top of the wall, but right away down by where he had entered the field.

Tom stole back, bending low the while, but saw nothing, nobody was carrying a burden, and he was getting to be in despair, when all at once there was the sound of a stifled sneeze, evidently from far along the lane.

That was enough. Tom was back in the lane directly, keeping close to the hedge, and following, he believed, some one who was making his way from the village out toward the open country.

At the end of a minute he was sure that some one was about thirty yards in front of him, and perfectly certain directly after that whoever it was had turned off to the right along a narrow path between two hedges which bounded the bottom of his uncle's field.

The path led round to the outskirts of the village, where there were some scattered cottages beyond the church, and feeling sure that the thief – if it was a thief – was making for there, Tom followed silently, guided twice over by a faint sniff, and pausing now and then to listen for some movement which he heard, the load the marauder carried brushing slightly against the hedge.

Then all at once the sounds ceased, and though Tom went on and on, and stopped to listen again and again, he could hear nothing. He hurried on quickly now, but felt that nobody could be at hand, and hurried back, peering now in the darkness to try and make out where the object of his search had struck off from the narrow way.

But in the obscurity he could make out nothing, for he was very ignorant about this track, never having been all along it before; and at last, thoroughly discouraged, he went back, growing more and more annoyed at his ill-success, and wishing he had made a rush and seized the thief at once.

And now, feeling thoroughly tired, as well as damped in his ardour, Tom reached the paling, climbed over into the shrubbery, reached the lawn, over which he walked slowly toward the darkened house, where he paused, and reached over to grasp the stout trellis, and spare David's flower-bed.

It was very easy, almost as much so as climbing a ladder, and in a minute he had reached first one arm and then the other over the window-sill, and was about to climb in, when he almost let go and nearly dropped back into the garden.

For there was a loud scratching noise, a line of light, and a wax-match flashed out, and then burned steadily, lighting up Uncle Richard's stern face and the little bedroom, as he stood a couple of yards back from the window.

"Now, sir, if you please," came in severe tones. "What is the meaning of this?"

Chapter Eleven

It did not mean apples nor pears from the garden, for they were nearly as hard as wood, and it did not mean going out to carry on some game with a companion, for Tom knew no one there.

Uncle Richard was aware of this when he heard Tom stealing down the trellis, and peeped at him from a darkened window. Hence his stern question.

"Oh, uncle!" said Tom, in a subdued voice, "how you frightened me."

"I'm glad of it, sir," said Uncle Richard, holding the little match to the candle and increasing the illumination as Tom climbed in. "I meant to. Now, sir, if you please, explain."

"Yes, uncle," said Tom calmly, and making his uncle frown.

"The impudent young dog!" he said to himself; and then he stood nodding his head, and gradually growing more satisfied that he had after all been right in his estimate of his nephew, though the night's business had rather shaken his faith.

"Then you didn't make out who it was, Tom," he said, when Tom had explained.

"No, uncle; it was very stupid of me, I suppose."

"Very foolish to be guilty of such an escapade."

"Foolish!" said Tom, growing more damped than before; "but he was stealing the ironwork."

"Yes, evidently carrying it off; but it was old iron."

"But it was just as bad to steal old iron as new, uncle," said Tom.

"Ahem! yes, of course, my boy; but you must not be so venturesome. I mean that it was not worth while for you to risk being stricken down for the sake of saving some rubbish. Thieves are reckless when caught."

"I wasn't thinking of saving the old iron, uncle; I wanted to see who it was, so as to be able to tell you. I didn't think of being knocked down."

"Well, perhaps it was all a mistake, Tom," said Uncle Richard, "for it was in the dark."

"Yes, uncle, but I feel sure that some one was helping himself to the pieces of iron."

"Look in the morning, my boy. Get to bed now, and never do such a thing as that again. Good-night."

Uncle Richard nodded to the boy kindly enough and left him, while Tom soon turned in to bed, to lie dreaming that the man came back to fetch more iron, and kept on carrying it off till it was all gone. Then he came back again, lifted the mill sails as if they were mere twigs, and took them away, and lastly he was in the act of picking up one of the millstones, and putting it on his head, when Tom awoke, and found that it was a bright sunshiny morning.

It did not take him very long dressing, by which time it was nearly six, and he hurried down so as to get into the mill-yard before the carpenters came to work.

Sure enough, when he reached the heap of iron in the left-hand corner of the place, it was plain to see that a number of small pieces had been taken away, for not only had the heap been disturbed by some being removed, but the surface looked black, and not rusty like the rest, showing that a new surface had been exposed.

Satisfied that he was right, and there being no embargo placed upon his acting now, Tom went over the ground he had traversed the night before, and upon reaching the corner of the yard close to the lane, he came upon the spot where the bag must have been rested in getting it over; and as ill-luck would have it for the thief, the head of a great nail stuck out from between two bricks, a nail such as might have been used for the attaching of a clothes-line. This head had no doubt caught and torn the bag, for an iron screw nut lay on the top of the bricks.

Tom seized it, leaped the wall, and got into the lane, to find another nut in the road just where his uncle's field ended, and the narrow path went down between the two hedges.

This was a means of tracking, and, eager now to trace the place where the thief must have turned off, Tom went on with his hunt, to find the spot easily enough just at the corner of a potato field, where the hedge was so thin that a person could easily pass through.

"This must have been the place," thought Tom. "Yes, so it is. Hurrah!" he cried, and pressing against the hedge the hawthorn gave way on each side, and he pounced upon a piece of iron lying

on the soft soil between two rows of neatly earthed-up potatoes. Better still, there were the deeply-marked footprints of some one who wore heavy boots, running straight between the next two rows, and following this step by step, Tom found two more nuts before he reached, the hedge on the other side of the field, and passed out into the lane in front of the straggling patch of cottages, from one of which the blue wood smoke was rising, and a little way off an old bent woman was going toward the stream which ran through this part of the village. She was carrying a tin kettle, and evidently on her way to fill it for breakfast.

Tom stopped in this lane undecided as to which way to go, for the thief might just as likely have passed to the left or right of these to another part of the village as have entered one of them.

He looked for the footprints, but they were only visible in the freshly-hoed field. There was not a sign in the hard road, and feeling now that he was at fault, he walked slowly down the lane, and then returned along the path close in front of the cottages. Just as he reached the gate leading into the patch of garden belonging to the one with the open door, and from which came the crackling of burning wood, his attention was taken by the loud yawning of some one within, and a large screw lying upon the crossbar of the palings which separated this garden from the next.

This screw was about four yards from the little gate, and it might have belonged to the occupants, but, as Tom darted in, certain that it was part of the plunder, he saw that it was muddy

and wet, and just in front of him there was its imprint in the damp path, where it had evidently been trampled in and then picked out.

Tom felt certain now; and just then the little gate swung to, giving a bang which brought the yawner to the doorway in the person of the big lad who had shouted after Uncle Richard on the afternoon of Tom's first arrival, and next morning had been caught poaching. In fact, there was a ferrets' cage under the window with a couple of the creatures thrusting out their little pink noses as if asking to be fed.

The boys' eyes met, and there was no sleepiness in the bigger one's eyes as he caught sight of the screw in Tom's hand.

"Here!" he cried, rushing at him and trying to seize the piece of iron; "what are you doing here? That's mine."

"No, it isn't," cried Tom sturdily. "How did it come here?"

"What's that to you? You give that here, or it'll be the worse for you."

"Where did you get it?" cried Tom.

"It's no business of yours," cried the lad savagely. "Give it up, will yer."

He seized Tom by the collar with both hands, and tried then to snatch away the screw, but Tom held on with his spirit rising; and as the struggle went on, in another minute he would have been striking out fiercely, had not there been an interruption in the arrival of the old woman with the newly-filled kettle.

"Here, what's this?" she croaked, in a peculiarly hoarse voice;

and as Tom looked round he found himself face to face with a keen-eyed, swarthy, wrinkled old woman, whose untended grey hair hung in ragged locks about her cheeks, and whose hooked nose and prominent chin gave her quite the aspect of some old witch as fancied by an artist for a book.

"Do you hear, Pete, who's this?" she cried again, before the lad could answer. "What does he want?"

"Says that old iron screw's his, granny."

"What, that?" cried the old woman, making a snatch with her thin long-nailed finger at the piece of iron Tom held as far as he could from his adversary.

She was more successful than the lad had been, for she obtained possession of it, and hurriedly thrust it into some receptacle hidden by the folds of her dirty tea-leaf-coloured dress.

"Mine!" she cried, "mine! Who is he? Want to steal it?"

"Yes. D'yer hear? Be off out of our place, or I'll soon let you know."

"I shall not go," cried Tom, who was now bubbling over with excitement. "You stole the iron from our place – from the mill last night."

The old woman turned upon him furiously.

"The mill," she cried; "who pulled the poor old mill down, and robbed poor people of their meal? No corn, no flour. I know who you are now. You belong to him yonder. I know you. Cursed all of you. I know him, with his wicked ways and sins and doings.

Go away – go away!"

She raised her hands threateningly, after setting down the kettle; and Tom shrank back in dismay from an adversary with whom he could not cope.

"Not till he brings out the iron he came and stole," cried Tom.

"Stole? – who stole? What yer mean?" cried the lad. "Here, let me get at him, granny. He ain't coming calling people stealers here, is he? It's your bit o' iron, ain't it?"

"Yes, mine – mine," cried the old woman; "send him away – send him away before I put a look upon him as he'll never lose."

"D'yer hear? you'd better be off!" cried the lad; and, completely beaten, Tom shrank away, the old woman following him up, with her lips moving rapidly, her fingers gesticulating, and a look in her fiercely wild eyes that was startling. He was ready in his excitement to renew his struggle with the lad, in spite of a disparity of years and size; but the old woman was too much, and he did not breathe freely till he was some distance away from the cottages, and on his way back to Heatherleigh.

The first person he encountered was his uncle, who was down the garden ready to greet him with —

"Morning, Tom, lad; I'm afraid you were right about the iron."

"Yes, uncle; and I found who stole it. I traced it to one of the cottages," and he related his experience.

"Ah!" he said; "so you've fallen foul of old Mother Warboys. You don't believe in witches, do you, Tom?"

"No, uncle, of course not; but she's a horrible old woman."

"Yes, and the simple folk about here believe in her as something no canny, as the Scotch call it. So you think it was Master Pete Warboys, do you?"

"Yes, uncle, I feel sure it was; and if you sent a policeman at once, I dare say he would find the bag of iron."

"Hardly likely, Tom; they would have got rid of it before he came there if I did send one, which I shall not do."

"Not send – for stealing?"

"No, Tom," said Uncle Richard quietly. "Police means magistrates, magistrates mean conviction and prison. Master Pete's bad enough now."

"Yes, uncle; he poaches rabbits."

"I dare say," said Uncle Richard; "and if I sent him to prison, I should, I fear, make him worse, and all for the sake of a few pieces of old iron. No, Tom, I think we'll leave some one else to punish him. You and I are too busy to think of such things. We want to start upon our journey."

"Are we going out, uncle?" said Tom eagerly.

"Yes, boy, as soon as the great glass is made: off and away through the mighty realms of space, to plunge our eyes into the depths of the heavens, and see the wonders waiting for us there."

Tom felt a little puzzled by Uncle Richard's language, but he only said, "Yes, of course," and did not quite understand why Master Pete Warboys, who seemed to be as objectionable a young cub as ever inhabited a pleasant country village, should be allowed to go unpunished.

That day was spent in the mill, where the carpenters were working away steadily; and as the time sped on, the wooden dome-like roof was finished, the shutter worked well, and a little railed place was contrived so that men could go out to paint or repair, while at the same time the railings looked ornamental, and gave the place a finish. Then some rollers were added, to make the whole top glide round more easily; and the great post which ran up the centre of the mill was cut off level with the top chamber floor, and detached from the roof.

"That will be capital for a stand," said Uncle Richard; "and going right down to the ground as it does, gives great steadiness and freedom from vibration."

A few days more, and white-washing and a lining with matchboard had completely transformed the three floors of the mill, a liberal allowance of a dark stain and varnish giving the finishing touches, so that in what had been a remarkably short space of time the ramshackle old mill had become a very respectable-looking observatory, only waiting for the scientific apparatus, which had to be made.

The next thing was the clearing out of the yard, where, under David's superintendence, a couple of labouring men had a long task to cut up old wood and wheel it away, to be stacked in the coach-house and a shed. The great millstones were left – for ornament, Uncle Richard said; and as for the old iron, he said dryly to Tom, as they stood by the heap —

"Seems a pity that so many of these pieces were too heavy

to lift."

"Why; uncle? Two men can lift one."

"Yes," said Uncle Richard; "but one boy can't, or it would all have been cleared away for me."

Tom looked in the dry quaint face, which appeared serious, although the boy felt that his uncle was in one of his humorous moods.

"There must be a strange fascination about stealing, Tom," he continued, "for, you see, quite half of that old iron is gone."

"More," said Tom.

"Yes, more, my boy. Strange what trouble rogues will take for very little. Now, for instance, I should say that whatever might have been its intrinsic worth, whoever stole that old iron could not possibly altogether have sold it for more than five shillings, that is to say, about one shilling per week."

"Is it five weeks since the men began to pull down, uncle?"

"Five weeks yesterday; and that amount could have been earned by an industrious boy in, say, four days, and by a labouring man in two. I'm afraid, Tom, that dishonesty does not pay."

David, who was close by, helping to load the remainder of the old iron into a cart, edged up to Tom as soon as Uncle Richard had gone into the mill.

"Strikes me, Master Tom," he said, "as I could put my hand on him as stole that there old iron."

"Who do you think it was, David?"

"Not going to name no names, sir," said David, screwing up

his lips, and tightening a roll of blue serge apron about his waist. "Don't do to slander your neighbours; but if you was to say it was old Mother Warboys' hulking grandson, I wouldn't be so rude as to contradick you; not as I say it is, mind you, but I've knowed that chap ever since he was a dirty little gipsy whelp of a thing, and I never yet knowed him take anything as was out of his reach."

Tom laughed.

"But I just give him fair warning, Master Tom, that if he comes after my ribstons and Maria Louisas this year – "

"Did he come last year?" said Tom eagerly.

"Never you mind that, Master Tom. I don't say as he did, and I don't say as he didn't; but I will say this, and swear to it: them Maria Louisas on the wall has got eyes in their heads, and stalks as does for tails, but I never see one yet as had legs."

"Nor I neither, David," said Tom, laughing.

"No, sir; but all the same they walked over the wall and out into the lane somehow. So did lots of the ribstons and my king pippins. But tchah! it's no use to say nought to your uncle. If somebody was to come and steal his legs I don't b'lieve he'd holler 'Stop thief!' but when it comes to my fruit, as I'm that proud on it grieves me to see it picked, walking over the wall night after night, I feel sometimes as it's no good to prune and train, and manoor things."

"Ah, it must be vexatious, David!"

"Waxashus is nothing to it, sir. I tell you what it is, sir: it's made me wicked, that it has. There's them times when I've been

going to church o' Sundays, and seen that there Pete Warboys and two or three other boys a-hanging about a corner waiting till everybody's inside to go and get into some mischief. I've gone to my seat along with the singers, sir, and you may believe me when I tell you, I've never heered a single word o' the sarmon, but sat there seeing that chap after my pears and apples all the time."

"Then you do give Pete Warboys the credit of it, David?"

"No, I don't, sir. I won't 'cuse nobody; but what I do say is this, that if ever I'm down the garden with a rake or hoe-handle in my hand, and Pete Warboys comes over the wall, I'll hit him as hard as I can, and ask master afterwards whether I've done right."

"David," said Tom eagerly, "how soon will the pears be ripe?"

"Oh, not for long enough yet, sir; and the worst of it is, if you're afraid of your pears and apples being stole, and picks 'em soon, they s'rivels up and has no taste in 'em."

"Then we must lie in wait for whoever it is, when the fruit is ripe, and catch them."

David shut both of his eyes tight, wrinkled his face up, and shook himself all over, then opened his eyes again, nodded, and whispered solemnly —

"Master Tom, we just will."

Then he went off to the loading of the iron, saw the last load carted out, and was back ready, after shutting the gate, to take his master's orders about turning the mill-yard into a shrubbery and garden.

A week with plenty of help from the labourers completely

transformed the place. Then plenty of big shrubs and conifers were taken up from the garden, with what David called good balls to their roots, and planted here and there, loads of gravel were brought in, the roller was brought into action, and a wide broad walk led with a curve to the mill-door; there was a broad border round the tower itself, and a walk outside that; and Tom and Uncle Richard stood looking at the work one evening in a very satisfied frame of mind.

"There, Tom, now for tying up my money-bag. That's all I mean to spend. Now you and I will have to do the rest."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.