

TRACKED.

PART FIRST.

CHAPTER IX.

CHARLEY MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

Toward evening on the fourth day after his departure from Sandbank, Charley, weary and footsore, alighted from the top of an omnibus at the "Angel." He had been directed to that spot as being, as it were, the gateway to the northern district.

His first thought now was food and lodging. There was no difficulty about the food question, as edibles of every kind stared at him in every other shop window; but where in that bewildering focus of streets, news boys, and omnibuses, could he find a lodging within his humble means? He timidly asked a lodger if he could direct him to any. The man glanced at the dusty boots and small bundle. "You'd better try down Clerkenwell," he said, jerking his finger towards St. John's Road.

His manner did not encourage Charley to ask further questions. So he vaguely followed the direction of the finger, and wandered down the thoroughfare indicated, and then into some of the streets off it. He already felt that sickness which so soon falls upon the poverty-stricken stranger in the streets of London. The huge Babylon was growing hateful to him. His country instincts of cleanliness shrank from the foul-smelling streets and houses, and the dirty, slatternly people who inhabited them. It seemed to him impossible that he could ever exist in such places or among such people. The picture of the scrupulously clean, if meagrely furnished, home that he had just left rose up pleasantly before him, and even Mrs. Gandy's image did not scare him from the contemplation. He thought of the quiet little town, with the sweet, pure air from the sea, as he dragged himself through the noisy, hot, dusty streets, and unheroically it must sound, he wished himself back there.

There were plenty of bills in the grimy windows, announcing lodgings for single men; but after looking at them irresolutely for a moment, he turned away with disgust. Presently he wandered back into St. John's Road, and just opposite the street out of which he emerged, in the parlor-window of a dingy-looking house he saw a card with "Lodgings" upon it. The house and the thoroughfare were more respectable than he had yet seen; so he summoned up courage to knock at the door.

A big, austere-looking woman answered the knock. Yes, she had bedrooms to let, she said, sharply scrutinizing him. She led the way up two pairs of stairs into a small, bare-looking bedroom, white-washed walls, broken water-jug, a worm-eaten wooden bedstead with spindle posts, a small dressing-table covered with a ragged cloth upon which stood a cracked looking-glass.

This cheerless apartment looked out upon an equally cheerless prospect of black chimney-pots, tiles, and a mouldy water-butt. He could become master of this desirable chamber, and take his meals in the kitchen, for five shillings per week. Charley stared at the price; it was as much as Mrs. Gandy paid for her whole house. But to seek further that night was impossible, so he agreed to take it.

"What reference could he give?" was the next question the landlady asked. Reference! He did not know a soul in London. Then he must pay a week's rent in advance. With a sigh, Charley counted the money into her hand. After which only four and ninepence left between him and destitution! Having provided himself with some supper, that sum was still further diminished.

By the time he had finished his meal, he began to think that the landlady was not quite so repulsive as he had at first imagined; and a little further acquaintance impressed him with the idea that she was rather a kind-hearted woman than otherwise. He had yet to learn that had London lesson—the necessity of suspicion towards strangers—a necessity which causes Londoners to appear so hard to provincials.

There were several other lodgers in the house besides himself. In short every room was an independent establishment. There was a watchmaker and his wife in the parlor, a tailor and his wife and family in the first floor front; other colonies were settled in the back rooms; while the second floor was occupied by Charley and the other male lodgers, who, like him, took their meals in the kitchen—the latter apartment being Mrs. Gripey's the landlady's sleeping, dining, and sitting-room, the former nightly event coming off in a turn-up bedstead that formed a sham chest of drawers during the day. Where the servant—who did all the work of the house—slept was an inscrutable mystery; in the coal house most probably, to judge by her complexion.

While discussing with much gusto his eggs and bacon, Charley was introduced to one of his fellow lodgers—a somewhat extraordinary specimen, in the youth's buxom eyes, of the genus homo.

A light step came tripping down the kitchen stairs, and a not unusual voice was heard humming an opera tune.

"That's him—Pontifex," said the landlady, hastily. "A very nice sort of man—quite the gentleman in his ways—only he ain't very punctual in his payments."

The gentleman thus doubtfully described, entered the kitchen with a gay, jaunty air, politely raised his hat to Mrs. Gripey, wished her good evening, stared at and then bowed to Charley, took from his pocket a rasher of bacon, wrapped in paper, took off his gloves, brought out a gridiron from the cupboard, cleaned it with a piece of paper, placed the rasher of bacon upon it, and—humming "Il Se-

gredo" all the time—superintended the cooking. All this was done with as dainty an air as Louis XV might have worn while cooking some favorite dish for one of his petite soupers.

At the first glance one could perceive that Mr. Pontifex was a gentleman—a broken-down one, it is true; one who might have stained that proudest of all titles, but a gentleman for all that. He was a spare man, of about the middle height, with a closely-shaven face, his hair cut short behind, but arranged in a curly bunch on each temple; there was a redness about the nose, that witnessed to "potations pottle deep;" his teeth were dazzlingly white, and his perpetual smile displayed them to the best advantage. The face was not an altogether attractive one; its pleasant look was supercilious and sarcastic, and however polite he might be, his manner always inspired a suspicion of ridicule. His dress, although seamy in the extreme, was a relic of former splendor. The boots, though now broken down at the heel, had once been of the shiniest of patent leather; the trousers, tightly strapped, though patched at the knees and greasy, might have been cut by Stultz; and the coat, all discolored and shiny as it now was, might have been made by Poole. He wore kid gloves which were chiefly conspicuous for brevity, and even absence of fingers. Linen did not appear to be a weakness of Mr. Pontifex, as all vestige of it was concealed beneath an old-fashioned black satin stock, with an apron.

Never had so strange a figure loomed upon Charley's limited experience, and he could not keep his eyes off it.

"Splendid weather, is it not, sir? Country, I should say, looks magnificent?"

"How does he know I am from the country?" thought Charley; but he answered, "Yes, sir, very."

"I adore the country! What is finer on a bright, dewy morning than a dash across the country astride a fine blood mare?" said Mr. Pontifex, turning his bacon. "That is life. Do you hunt, sir?"

Rather an extraordinary question, thought Charley, who colored up at the idea that his fellow lodger was making fun of him; but the simple look of honest inquiry upon that gentleman's face was quite opposed to such a supposition. Charley modestly disclaimed any indulgence in such an aristocratic luxury.

"Many a fox I've run to earth," said Mr. Pontifex, transferring his bacon from the gridiron to a plate. "That was in days gone by; the fiddle goddess has not smiled upon me lately."

Having eaten a hearty meal, Charley felt sleepy, and intimated a desire to go to bed.

"Another excellent habit, engendered by country life, early hours," put in Mr. Pontifex. "When I used to pass the hunting season with my friend, the Duke of Beaufort, I always went to bed with the rook and rose with the lark; since those days the owl has become my feathered model. Good night, sir; delighted to find that I have so agreeable a neighbor; we sleep in adjoining apartments."

Charley could not reconcile a close intimacy with the Duke of Beaufort with cracked boots and palmed trousers; which obtuseness of ideas probably arose from his inexperience of the ups and downs of mundane affairs.

But more pressing and importunate thoughts drove the memory of Mr. Pontifex out of his head. The grand problem of ways and means—the world of London—was before him. Three shillings in his pocket—no friends—no employment; only the chance of getting some. His ignorance of London prevented him from realizing the full horror of his situation; but he could realize sufficient of it to be very miserable.

In the midst of his gloomy thoughts he fell asleep, and did not wake until late the next morning—until he was aroused by Mr. Pontifex humming his matinal song. Before he had finished dressing there was a tap at the door, and a voice inquired, "May I come in?" Before Charley could answer, the singer, in demitollé, came into the room.

"Good morning, sir," he said, with the pleasantest of smiles; "I hope you have slept well. Mrs. Gripey does not provide us with the most luxurious of couches, proceeding, probably, on the medical view, that hard beds are wholesome. But youth, health, and exercise will find sleep upon the ruggedst of pallets."

During this speech, Mr. Pontifex was casting a rapid glance over Charley's goods and chattels. "By the bye, could you oblige me with the loan of your comb? I broke mine the other day, and I have not replaced it, as I have not been in the neighborhood of my hair-dresser lately. I can only use the combs supplied by one man; strange preference, is it not? But we all have our pet weaknesses. Same with my clothes—only one tailor can fit me."

What a long time must have elapsed since he was in that tailor's neighborhood, thought Charley.

"I really must invest in a new set of shirts," Mr. Pontifex went on, glancing at his dingy and attenuated linen, and carefully arranging the little bunches of side-hair. "I never buy clothing until the old is entirely worn out. My friend, the Marquis of Hookmaster, has the same eccentricity. The swells turn up their noses at us—not that in any way distresses us; all literary men are eccentric; you know."

"Are you an author?" cried Charley, in an awed tone.

"Yes; I have laid oblations upon the altars of Thalia and Melopene, and occasionally follow the occupation of reporter for the newspapers."

An author! If Mr. Pontifex had been a remarkable personage in Charley's eyes before, he was doubly so now. Only to think of his being in the room with a literary man, and that literary man using his comb! Henceforth that comb acquired a sacred interest in his eyes.

Mr. Pontifex, having adjusted his hair to his satisfaction, with a profusion of thanks, tripped back to his room. Charley sat down on the edge of his bed, and fell into a brown study. What was he to do? How was he to live? The romance of his great purpose was fading before the grimness of necessity. It must be kept in abeyance for a time. Food he must have; to obtain it he must work. To obtain that work must be his first care. Where was he to seek for it? For what kind of work should he apply? There was no answer to any of these questions in his mind; and then an awful fear fell upon him—the fear that he should starve and die. Suppose he made a partial confidant of Mr. Pontifex? Left to his own devices, he was helpless as an infant. What better adviser could he possibly find than a man of such extensive experience and knowledge of the world as that gentleman evidently possessed?

So Charley asked Mr. Pontifex if he could step into his room for a few moments, as he wished to ask his advice upon an important subject.

"Delighted, I am sure, at the honor you do me; most happy to afford you any advice that lies within my humble capacity," said Mr. Pontifex, entering in full toilet, and all smiles.

Charley briefly told him that he had run away from home; that he had received a good education, and wished to get employment of some kind—it did not matter to him what, if he could earn a respectable living by it.

Mr. Pontifex listened to this confession with a pursed-up mouth and elevated eyebrows. "Have you no friends in London who would temporarily assist you—who would use their interest to gain you employment?"

"I believe I have some one in the north of London," answered Charley, hesitatingly.

"What part of the north?" "I do not know; I only know it is somewhere in the north."

Mr. Pontifex smiled. "A very vague direction, that," he said. "Why my dear sir, the metropolitan district which the post office distinguishes by the letter N contains at the very least eight hundred thousand inhabitants, and is larger than several of the celebrated capitals of Europe."

"What would be the best means of trying to find them out?" asked Charley, hesitatingly.

"If they are trades or professions, the 'Directory'; if they are gentry, the 'Court Guide,'" replied Mr. Pontifex.

Charley said that they were gentry, and wished to know where he could see a "Court Guide."

"If you will walk with me after breakfast, I think I can take you to a place where you can get a sight of one."

Charley was profuse in his thanks, and felt inspired with new hope. But Mr. Pontifex shook his head, saying, "It is very difficult to find persons in London, except they be public characters, unless you are accurately acquainted with their whereabouts."

"But you can advise me as to how I should proceed to obtain employment?" asked Charley.

"A very difficult thing to get in London without friends or recommendations," replied Mr. Pontifex. "Now there is one piece of good advice I can give you, and you cannot do better than to follow it."

"And what is that?" asked Charley.

"Return home at once; or if there is any difficulty, write first, and ask forgiveness, and give them time to prepare the fatted calf."

Charley's face fell.

"It is impossible for me to take that advice," he said, dejectedly.

"Oh, nonsense; friends overlook the peccadilloes of youth. Perhaps, if we looked in this morning's Telegraph, we should find at the top of the first page, 'If So-and-so will return to his disconsolate parents, all shall be forgiven.'"

Charley shook his head.

"Oh, I hope it is not so bad as all that. By the bye, talking about So-and-so reminds me that I have not the pleasure of knowing your name."

"Call me Charley for the present," he said, coloring.

Beneath his pleasant, vacuous smile Mr. Pontifex was sharply scanning the youth's face.

"My dear young friend," he said kindly, laying his hand upon his arm and speaking in a more natural tone than he had yet used, "humble plea is a very indigestible dish to the young, but it is one of those plates that every man's stomach must get used to, unless an individual is born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Return home again under any circumstances, however disagreeable. Do not remain in London; it is a terrible place for a young man like you. I have no wish to discourage you, but I should ill repay the confidence you have placed in me did I offer any other advice. You will find it almost impossible to obtain any respectable employment. Thousands of young men of known ability with unexceptionable references and good interest, are seeking for it daily, and cannot find it. I repeat, go back home."

"I cannot," answered Charley; "the die is cast, and come what will, I must abide by it."

"So I said when I was a young man and see what has come of it," replied Mr. Pontifex, sadly. "I left my home because I would not be amenable to wholesome authority. I cast myself upon the world with a proud stomach; I would not stoop my haughty head. Since then I have often had metaphorically speaking, to rub my nose in the gutter."

"It is not any rebellion against wholesome authority that brings me here," said Charley; "mine is a peculiar case." His heart was very full; he felt very lonely and desolate; he would have liked to have told Mr. Pontifex the whole story, but the natural reticence of his disposition held back the confession. Some people mark their fortunes by garrulous-

ness, others by a morbid disposition to secrecy—Charley erred on the latter side. He had confided in Mr. Pontifex—Well, he did not.

Mr. Pontifex shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"We all think our own case peculiar and different to any other else's," "But come, if you have finished your toilet let us go down to breakfast."

CHAPTER X.
AN IMPORTANT CHAPTER IN OUR HERO'S LIFE.

The bright-faced and well-dressed youth who descended into Mrs. Gripey's kitchen that morning was a different person to the weary, dull-eyed, travel-stained boy that had taken his tea there on the preceding night.

Mrs. Gripey was quite struck with the change, and remarked upon it. Seated at the table at breakfast was a middle-aged, stably dressed man, with a long grey beard and a foreign cast of face, whom Mr. Pontifex saluted as Herr Kauffman, and introduced to Charley as their fellow-lodger.

The person thus named bowed politely, and acknowledged the introduction.

Charley remarked that he was a sad, grave-looking man, with a remarkably fine forehead and fine blue eyes. He was very quiet and taciturn, the very opposite of Mr. Pontifex in every respect. Before the new-comer commenced their breakfast, he rose from the table, and wishing every one good morning, left the room and the house.

"A very clever fellow, Kauffman," said Mr. Pontifex, as he mixed his cocoa. "A fellow-scribbler, but upon the foreign newspapers; morbid and mysterious; always looking upon the black side of life."

Too full of his new idea to listen to these remarks upon Mr. Kauffman's peculiarities, Charley was only anxious to dispatch his breakfast and rush to consult the, to him, Sybilline leaves of the Court Guide. But Mr. Pontifex was a gourmand, and although his meal consisted simply of a rasher of bacon and an egg, he gave himself up to its enjoyment with as much gusto as though he had had before him a pate de foie gras.

What occupation did Mr. Pontifex follow? The reader may possibly inquire. As the gentleman will occupy an important position in these pages, we will impart what little we know upon the subject.

How Mr. Pontifex really did live was one of the mysteries of London. Of his antecedents, we shall not speak in this place; they will claim our attention fully hereafter.

He sometimes translated plays from the French for the minor theatres, and was an occasional penny-a-liner. These were his only ostensible sources of income, and as they did not on an average produce more than ten shillings a week, there was evidently a large margin left to be filled up with something or by somebody. He borrowed of everybody who had anything to lend, and would lend it; he never paid for anything he could get upon credit, and his time of payment was *siue die*.

Every morning he went as regularly to business as the most methodical of city men. No one clearly understood what his business was; perhaps he was a little foggy himself upon the subject. What writing he did was done in stray holes and corners—in the parlor or billiard-room of a public house. He dined where he could and when he could; he preferred dining with a friend. If neither the friend nor the dinner turned up, he contented himself with a crust of bread and cheese and half a pint of porter; and so he got through the day. The evenings were spent between the minor theatres and public houses frequented by shady actors and authors; and whatever else he lacked he usually contrived to get a plentiful supply of beer and rum. Of course Mr. Pontifex would not be so inconsistent in his rules of life as to pay his landlady, and Charley frequently heard Mrs. Gripey expostulating with him upon the subject; but his imperturbable urbanity and good temper got the best of her.

"Is it not terrible to have one's honor doubted?" he used to say, pathetically, to his friends. "Want of confidence is the pervading sin of vulgar people; if they cannot see their own error, feel it, grasp it, they are wretched. And they are so unreasonable! I say to her, 'My dear madam, I have not got it.' Now, if the poor woman for any reason, such a confession would satisfy her. But it does not. She will ask again for money in the next breath. What can one do with such illogical people?"

But to continue the thread of the narrative. The breakfast was at last dispatched, and Mr. Pontifex, having brushed his almost napless hat with his coat sleeve, and cocked it jauntily on one side of his head, declared himself to be ready, and the two gentlemen left the house together.

But the proposed expedition in search of a "Court Guide" was destined never to be made. Immediately after they left the house Charley noticed a shabby dressed woman on the opposite side of the street, who, keeping a little distance in the rear pursued the same road as themselves—a circumstance which did not attract the attention of his companion.

They had not proceeded more than two or three hundred yards, when she crossed the road; and advancing to Pontifex, who was nearest to the kerb, touched him upon the shoulder. He turned sharply round, and as his eyes fell upon her face the smile died away upon his lips, and was succeeded by an expression of chagrin and dislike.

The woman was not an agreeable-looking personage. Her figure was big and bloated, and shabbily clothed. A battered black bonnet, ornamented with a bunch of tawdry flowers, bung at the back of her head. Her hair was rough and matted, as though it had been a brush or comb had long been strangers. Her features had the pe-

culiar pallor of the habitual drinker; her eyes were dull and heavy; her mouth large and sensual. Drunkard stamped upon every lineament of her face.

"I want a few minutes' conversation with you, Ned."

She spoke in a husky voice; but there was something in its tone at variance with her appearance, something not of gin-drinking and rags.

"Mr. Charles, will you excuse me this morning," said Pontifex, turning to his companion with a pale face, and speaking in a voice that shook a little. "I have some business with this lady. To-morrow morning I shall be most happy."

Charley begged him not to apologize, and seeing that his absence was most eagerly desired, walked up the road again. When he had got a little way, he looked round; but Mr. Pontifex and his strange friend had turned into an off-street, and were no longer to be seen.

Charley's heart was heavy with disappointment, as he stood for a moment to ask himself what he should do now? Suddenly he remembered the promise he had made Carry Lee to send her his address. He would go back to his lodgings and write a few lines. So back he went, and having procured writing materials, sat down and wrote, to say that he had reached London all safe, and that a letter addressed to No. —, St. John's Road, Clerkenwell, would be duly received by him.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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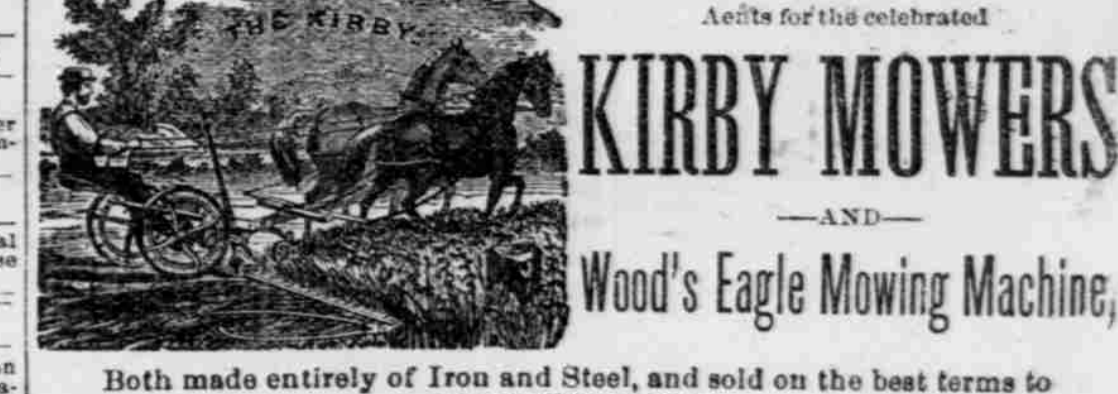
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