

TRACKED.

PART FIRST.
CHAPTER IX. (Continued.)

When he had posted this epistle, he made, in a listless manner, to cross the road toward Upper Street, Illington. He had not yet acquired that quickness of eye and step necessary for the preservation of life and limb in the London roads. An omnibus had just stopped to put down a passenger; abreast of it, nearer the kerb, stood one of Pickford's vans; consequently, a person passing in front of these obstructions could not be seen by any one driving rapidly from behind them until the person was almost in the centre of the road. To cross in front of this omnibus and wagon at a leisurely pace, without looking once to the right or left, was precisely what Charley did.

At that moment, a basket carriage, containing an elderly gentleman, and a young lady, was driving swiftly down the Essex Road, towards the "Angel." As the youth passed the omnibus, the gentleman's horse came right upon him, and before the driver could pull up, knocked him down. By an effort he succeeded in checking the horse, and thus prevented the wheels passing over the prostrate body. A bystander was at the horse's head in a moment. The young lady gave a shriek, while her father—for such was the relationship between herself and the elderly gentleman—jumped out, and with trembling hands dragged the unfortunate youth from his perilous position.

Blood was flowing profusely from a cut in the head, and he was quite senseless. In an instant a crowd had gathered round; a cabman coming down the road proposed to take him to the hospital.

"No, no!" said the gentleman, with a slight foreign accent. "I will undertake the charge of him myself. It was I who caused the accident; I will take upon myself the consequences. Here, cabman; help me to place him in your cab; I have not room in my little carriage."

So Charley still insensible, was carefully laid in the cab, then the gentleman mounted his steed, and telling the cabman to follow drove quickly away from the scene of the accident.

It happened, fortunately, that his residence was close at hand. He lived in a quiet old-fashioned house, lying back in a recess, and shaded by lime trees, in the quiet neighborhood of Hermes Hill. Arrived there, the poor boy was lifted out of the cab by the driver and the gentleman, whose name was Mr. Lewson, and carried up to a bed-chamber upon the first floor.

In the meantime the young lady, who was about Charley's own age, was in a terrible state of mind.

"You are sure he is not dead papa?" she cried repeatedly. "Oh, I fear he is! See how pale he is! Oh, what a terrible thing it would be if he were to die, and to think that we had killed him!"

"Calm yourself, my darling," answered her father soothingly. "He is not dead, neither do I think his injuries very serious; but as soon as I have examined him, I hope to be able to set your fears at rest."

And Mrs. Wilkins, although kindly, looked to be a positive woman; so Charley was compelled to perform to be silent.

"A very gentlemanly young man," muttered Mr. Lewson to himself as he descended the stairs. "No friends in London, eh?—and looked distressed when I asked the question. Clothes not particularly good. I fear the poor fellow is in distress; a worried look about the eyes. I must find out as soon as I can to do it delicately."

"Well, papa, is it serious?" cried his daughter, running to him with an anxious face.

"Not at all, Blanche, dear; a few days' careful nursing will set him upon his feet again."

"Thank Heaven!" she cried fervently. "If he had died, I should have always felt that we had killed him. It is a lesson against fast driving that I shall not quickly forget," replied her father.

CHAPTER XI.
CHARLEY RECEIVES SOME VERY ASTONISHING NEWS.

Although the injuries he had received were not of a serious nature, they were sufficient to confine Charley to his bed for many days, during which he received the utmost kindness and attention, both from Mr. Lewson and Mrs. Wilkins. For the first two or three days he was forbidden to converse, his physician fearing lest feverish symptoms might be developed by the least excitement. The prohibition being gradually withdrawn as he advanced towards convalescence, he began to talk with his nurse about her master.

Mrs. Wilkins was not by any means a garrulous woman, but on this subject she was always eloquent. From her conversation, the young man learned that his kind host was a foreigner, but of what nation she did not seem exactly to know; she thought he was a Belgian. He was a studious man, who spent the greater portion of his time among his books. She had lived with him a twelvemonth—that is to say, from his first arrival in England. "But he must have been over here before," she said, "for he speaks English just like a native. And I think the country must agree with him, for he looked wretchedly ill and worn when I first saw him; but now, as you can see, he looks quite healthy and strong. There's his daughter, too."

"Has he a daughter?" cried Charley, with increasing interest.

Mr. Lewson, with pretended irritation. "If you go on in this manner, always fancying you discover her secrets and generous motives in every proposition people make to you, you will fall into sad errors. There is nothing to thank me for in the case. I want a secretary; I cannot afford to engage a man at three hundred a year; I think I can get you cheap. All the advantage is on my side. I make a selfish bargain."

But Charley was not to be deceived by such arguments. "But I am a stranger to you," he said; "you know nothing of me; I have placed no confidence in you; I might butterly unworthy of yours."

"Ah, there you go blundering again," said Mr. Lewson; "now you are treading upon my self-conceit, doubting my skill in reading character—my pet vanity. As you say, I know nothing of you, as the world would consider. If you have secrets keep them to yourself; I have no curiosity to know them. I study character from a truer utterance than human speech. I study from the human face divine, 'as one of your poets phrases it.'"

"Sometimes that is a treacherous guide," said Charley.

"Do not indulge in platitudes, the truth of which you have had no opportunity of proving," said Mr. Lewson, testily; "for such is the source of all error. The human countenance is not a treacherous guide, if rightly read. Do not think I am deceived by a good-looking face, or that I form conclusions at first sight. A look, a movement, a play of a single feature, will give me a key by which I will read a man's soul. The most consummate hypocrite that ever lived was never master at all hours of that dial-plate of his mind; the evil within him will at some moment peer out of his eyes or curve his lip, and leave its mark there to be read by those cunning in such calligraphic characters. But no such study is required in reading the faces of the young; your skin is not enough hardened to be moulded into a mask. Your face is like the needle of a telegraphic machine—it is bound to move according to the impulse given it by the current."

"I fear the indications you have sometimes read off have not been to my honor," said Charley, smiling.

"Oh, I have not found perfection in you young gentleman," answered Mr. Lewson, smiling in his turn; "if I had, I should not have felt the least interest in you. I detest colorless people—people made up of negatives. Without evil there can be no good; it is the war between those two principles that evokes the nobility of man. I can see many faults in you; but none that, under proper training and restraint, are likely to prove dangerous to yourself or anybody else."

"I am sure, Mr. Lewson, I do not know how to express my gratitude for this undeserved opinion you have of me," said Charley, with deep feeling.

"There you go again!" cried his friend; "thinking me now because I do not find any hardened wickedness in you. Why don't you thank me because you have two eyes instead of one, or the common number of limbs? It would not be a bit more ridiculous!"

"I see, sir, that you are determined to take no credit for anything, so we will say no more about it," said Charley.

"That's right."

"But there is one subject I must speak upon," continued Charley. "I cannot permit all the confidence to be on your side, and none on mine. I owe you an explanation of my position."

"Stay!" cried Mr. Lewson, peremptorily. "I forbid you to say another word upon the subject. I will not hear any of your secrets; and that you have some, I have also read from the aforesaid indicator; for according to your confidence would be spontaneous, but would be given as a *quid pro quo*. Besides which, for me to listen to such confidences would be tantamount to a declaration on my part that I had a sneaking mistrust of my own Lavaterism—a point upon which, as I said before, I am excessively vain. You have made another blunder, you see."

"But, sir, you do not even know my name—it is Charles—" he hesitated, he disliked to give the name of Gandy.

"That is quite enough," said Mr. Lewson, observing his momentary hesitation. "Mr. Charles will do well enough. I hate half measures. I either trust a man implicitly or not at all. We all have our skeletons closets—I have mine he said gloomily.

"Were I to open it an show you its contents, you might not be inclined to accept my friendship. But let us talk no more of secrets. To-morrow I will permit you to leave your room; then I will introduce you to my daughter Blanche, who most anxiously inquires after your health at least half a dozen times every day, and to whom I shall confide the care of your convalescence."

Charley expressed his gratification at the interest manifested by the young lady in his health, and how he longed to be introduced to her, which indeed he did. And then, Mr. Lewson saying he must go back to study, the young man was left alone.

It was many a day since he had so little light of heart as at that moment. He was saved from the miseries that threatened him, honorable employment was before him, and he had found the noblest and most generous of friends.

He did not regret that Mr. Lewson had refused to receive his confidence. The short time that he had passed in London had aged his mind and tone of thought by years, and now that his imagination had grown cool, he began to perceive how vague and unsatisfactory was the story in which he had so implicitly believed. He felt that, submitted to the cool reasoning of an impartial person, it would crumble to pieces. The only foundation upon which the whole fabric stood

was the word of a disreputable old fisherman known to be an unscrupulous ruffian, who, to render his word even yet more untrustworthy, had sworn revenge against one of the principal persons against whom the story was directed.

But, in a few hours, all these reasonings were to be turned topsy turvy, and all his conclusions reversed.

"Carry Lee must have written by this time," he thought, and he felt curious to hear news from Sandybank. So that same morning he wrote a letter to Mrs. Gripey, saying that on the day he had left her house he had met with a serious accident, which had confined him to his bed ever since. That he should not return to his lodgings, as he was going to remain with a friend. He, at the same time, requested her to send him the clothes which he had left in his bedroom, any letter that might have arrived in his absence, and also any claim she might have upon him for rent. Mrs. Wilkins, having to go into the High Street, Illington, to make some purchases, undertook to be the bearer of this letter.

When she returned, she brought Charley's modest parcel of clothes with her. Mrs. Gripey was very sorry to hear of his accident, and hoped he would come and see her as soon as he was well enough. "She spoke so highly of you," added Mrs. Wilkins, "and said that she was quite satisfied with the week's rent you'd given her, and should not think of making any further charge. And here's a letter for you, Mr. Charles, that came a day or two back."

Charley eagerly took the letter, but blushed scarlet as he saw the big, awkwardly folded sheet of paper, with its crooked writing, guileless of a capital letter. But the exterior was a perfect specimen of calligraphy, when compared with the interior, which rather resembled Chinese characters in their odd shapes and tendency to run from corner to corner of the paper. It was Charley's first essay in the epistolary art, and was certainly an extraordinary composition. It told, in a roundabout way, how his disappearance had been the town talk, how Mrs. Gandy had raged, and how her neighbors had rejoiced. Then came a passage—which eagerly excited Charley's attention—that told how a strange lady had paid a visit to Mrs. Gandy, and how people whispered that they believed it had something to do with his—Charley's—disappearance; how the lady had stayed at the "Star" at Dalkham, where Mrs. Gandy had visited her, and Jack Bilge also. But the most marvelous news of all was yet to come.

Both Jack Bilge and the Gandy had disappeared from Sandybank within three days of the stranger's visit.

Bigge went away without leaving any trace behind him, or saying one word to his wife; and the parish had set the police to work to arrest him upon a charge of deserting his family. Mr. and Mrs. Gandy disappeared the day after, without giving a hint to anybody of their intention. Mrs. Gandy had picked quarrel with Peggy, the servant, upon her wages, and dismissed her upon the spot. The next morning the shop did not open as usual, and by-and-by the neighbors heard from a railway porter that Mr. and Mrs. Gandy had gone to Norwich that morning by the five o'clock train.

Her furniture and stock had been delivered into the hands of a Norwich auctioneer, to be disposed of by public auction. Whether the worthy couple had gone to take up their abode in Norwich was a fact that not the most inquisitive of the Sandybank gossips could discover. The whole town was in a state of ferment at this extraordinary migration of its inhabitants. The letter concluded with the writer's kind love, and a hope that Charley was doing well, and that she should soon hear from him.

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