

XLVI. A MYSTERIOUS NIGHT IN LONDON

"No time to lose," said Harry, "come along."

He called a cab: in an undertone mentioned the number of a house in some street to the driver; we jumped in, and were off.

As we rattled over the boisterous pavements, past splendid squares, churches, and shops, our cabman turning corners like a skater on the ice, and all the roar of London in my ears, and no end to the walls of brick and mortar; I thought New York a hamlet, and Liverpool a coal-hole, and myself somebody else: so unreal seemed every thing about me. My head was spinning round like a top, and my eyes ached with much gazing; particularly about the comers, owing to my darting them so rapidly, first this side, and then that, so as not to miss any thing; though, in truth, I missed much.

"Stop," cried Harry, after a long while, putting his head out of the window, all at once--"stop! do you hear, you deaf man? you have passed the house--No. 40 I told you--that's it--the high steps there, with the purple light!"

The cabman being paid, Harry adjusting his whiskers and mustache, and bidding me assume a lounging look, pushed his hat a little to one side, and then locking arms, we sauntered into the house; myself feeling not a

little abashed; it was so long since I had been in any courtly society.

It was some semi-public place of opulent entertainment; and far surpassed any thing of the kind I had ever seen before.

The floor was tessellated with snow-white, and russet-hued marbles; and echoed to the tread, as if all the Paris catacombs were underneath. I started with misgivings at that hollow, boding sound, which seemed sighing with a subterraneous despair, through all the magnificent spectacle around me; mocking it, where most it glared.

The walls were painted so as to deceive the eye with interminable colonnades; and groups of columns of the finest Scagliola work of variegated marbles--emerald-green and gold, St. Pons veined with silver, Sienna with porphyry--supported a resplendent fresco ceiling, arched like a bower, and thickly clustering with mimic grapes. Through all the East of this foliage, you spied in a crimson dawn, Guide's ever youthful Apollo, driving forth the horses of the sun. From sculptured stalactites of vine-boughs, here and there pendent hung galaxies of gas lights, whose vivid glare was softened by pale, cream-colored, porcelain spheres, shedding over the place a serene, silver flood; as if every porcelain sphere were a moon; and this superb apartment was the moon-lit garden of Portia at Belmont; and the gentle lovers, Lorenzo and Jessica, lurked somewhere among the vines.

At numerous Moorish looking tables, supported by Caryatides of turbaned

slaves, sat knots of gentlemanly men, with cut decanters and taper-waisted glasses, journals and cigars, before them.

To and fro ran obsequious waiters, with spotless napkins thrown over their arms, and making a profound salaam, and hemming deferentially, whenever they uttered a word.

At the further end of this brilliant apartment, was a rich mahogany turret-like structure, partly built into the wall, and communicating with rooms in the rear. Behind, was a very handsome florid old man, with snow-white hair and whiskers, and in a snow-white jacket--he looked like an almond tree in blossom--who seemed to be standing, a polite sentry over the scene before him; and it was he, who mostly ordered about the waiters; and with a silent salute, received the silver of the guests.

Our entrance excited little or no notice; for every body present seemed exceedingly animated about concerns of their own; and a large group was gathered around one tall, military looking gentleman, who was reading some India war-news from the Times, and commenting on it, in a very loud voice, condemning, in toto, the entire campaign.

We seated ourselves apart from this group, and Harry, rapping on the table, called for wine; mentioning some curious foreign name.

The decanter, filled with a pale yellow wine, being placed before us, and my comrade having drunk a few glasses; he whispered me to remain

where I was, while he withdrew for a moment.

I saw him advance to the turret-like place, and exchange a confidential word with the almond tree there, who immediately looked very much surprised,--I thought, a little disconcerted,--and then disappeared with him.

While my friend was gone, I occupied myself with looking around me, and striving to appear as indifferent as possible, and as much used to all this splendor as if I had been born in it. But, to tell the truth, my head was almost dizzy with the strangeness of the sight, and the thought that I was really in London. What would my brother have said? What would Tom Legare, the treasurer of the Juvenile Temperance Society, have thought?

But I almost began to fancy I had no friends and relatives living in a little village three thousand five hundred miles off, in America; for it was hard to unite such a humble reminiscence with the splendid animation of the London-like scene around me.

And in the delirium of the moment, I began to indulge in foolish golden visions of the counts and countesses to whom Harry might introduce me; and every instant I expected to hear the waiters addressing some gentleman as "My Lord," or "four Grace." But if there were really any lords present, the waiters omitted their titles, at least in my hearing.

Mixed with these thoughts were confused visions of St. Paul's and the Strand, which I determined to visit the very next morning, before breakfast, or perish in the attempt. And I even longed for Harry's return, that we might immediately sally out into the street, and see some of the sights, before the shops were all closed for the night.

While I thus sat alone, I observed one of the waiters eyeing me a little impertinently, as I thought, and as if he saw something queer about me. So I tried to assume a careless and lordly air, and by way of helping the thing, threw one leg over the other, like a young Prince Esterhazy; but all the time I felt my face burning with embarrassment, and for the time, I must have looked very guilty of something. But spite of this, I kept looking boldly out of my eyes, and straight through my blushes, and observed that every now and then little parties were made up among the gentlemen, and they retired into the rear of the house, as if going to a private apartment. And I overheard one of them drop the word Rouge; but he could not have used rouge, for his face was exceedingly pale. Another said something about Loo.

At last Harry came back, his face rather flushed.

"Come along, Redburn," said he.

So making no doubt we were off for a ramble, perhaps to Apsley House, in the Park, to get a sly peep at the old Duke before he retired for the night, for Harry had told me the Duke always went to bed early, I sprang

up to follow him; but what was my disappointment and surprise, when he only led me into the passage, toward a staircase lighted by three marble Graces, unitedly holding a broad candelabra, like an elk's antlers, over the landing.

We rambled up the long, winding slope of those aristocratic stairs, every step of which, covered with Turkey rugs, looked gorgeous as the hammer-cloth of the Lord Mayor's coach; and Harry hied straight to a rosewood door, which, on magical hinges, sprang softly open to his touch.

As we entered the room, methought I was slowly sinking in some reluctant, sedgy sea; so thick and elastic the Persian carpeting, mimicking parterres of tulips, and roses, and jonquils, like a bower in Babylon.

Long lounges lay carelessly disposed, whose fine damask was interwoven, like the Gobelin tapestry, with pictorial tales of tilt and tourney. And oriental ottomans, whose cunning warp and woof were wrought into plaited serpents, undulating beneath beds of leaves, from which, here and there, they flashed out sudden splendors of green scales and gold.

In the broad bay windows, as the hollows of King Charles' oaks, were Laocoon-like chairs, in the antique taste, draped with heavy fringers of bullion and silk.

The walls, covered with a sort of tartan-French paper, variegated with bars of velvet, were hung round with mythological oil-paintings, suspended by tasseled cords of twisted silver and blue.

They were such pictures as the high-priests, for a bribe, showed to Alexander in the innermost shrine of the white temple in the Libyan oasis: such pictures as the pontiff of the sun strove to hide from Cortez, when, sword in hand, he burst open the sanctorum of the pyramid-fane at Cholula: such pictures as you may still see, perhaps, in the central alcove of the excavated mansion of Pansa, in Pompeii--in that part of it called by Varro the hollow of the house: such pictures as Martial and Seutonius mention as being found in the private cabinet of the Emperor Tiberius: such pictures as are delineated on the bronze medals, to this day dug up on the ancient island of Capreas: such pictures as you might have beheld in an arched recess, leading from the left hand of the secret side-gallery of the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth.

In the principal pier was a marble bracket, sculptured in the semblance of a dragon's crest, and supporting a bust, most wonderful to behold. It was that of a bald-headed old man, with a mysteriously-wicked expression, and imposing silence by one thin finger over his lips. His 'marble mouth seemed tremulous with secrets.

"Sit down, Wellingborough," said Harry; "don't be frightened, we are at home.--Ring the bell, will you? But stop;"--and advancing to the

mysterious bust, he whispered something in its ear.

"He's a knowing mute, Wellingborough," said he; "who stays in this one place all the time, while he is yet running of errands. But mind you don't breathe any secrets in his ear."

In obedience to a summons so singularly conveyed, to my amazement a servant almost instantly appeared, standing transfixed in the attitude of a bow.

"Cigars," said Harry. When they came, he drew up a small table into the middle of the room, and lighting his cigar, bade me follow his example, and make myself happy.

Almost transported with such princely quarters, so undreamed of before, while leading my dog's life in the filthy forecastle of the Highlander, I twirled round a chair, and seated myself opposite my friend.

But all the time, I felt ill at heart; and was filled with an undercurrent of dismal forebodings. But I strove to dispel them; and turning to my companion, exclaimed, "And pray, do you live here, Harry, in this Palace of Aladdin?"

"Upon my soul," he cried, "you have hit it!--you must have been here before! Aladdin's Palace! Why, Wellingborough, it goes by that very name."

Then he laughed strangely: and for the first time, I thought he had been quaffing too freely: yet, though he looked wildly from his eyes, his general carriage was firm.

"Who are you looking at so hard, Wellingborough?" said he.

"I am afraid, Harry," said I, "that when you left me just now, you must have been drinking something stronger than wine."

"Hear him now," said Harry, turning round, as if addressing the bald-headed bust on the bracket,--"a parson 'pon honor!--But remark you, Wellingborough, my boy, I must leave you again, and for a considerably longer time than before:--I may not be back again to-night."

"What?" said I.

"Be still," he cried, "hear me, I know the old duke here, and--"

"Who? not the Duke of Wellington," said I, wondering whether Harry was really going to include him too, in his long list of confidential friends and acquaintances.

"Pooh!" cried Harry, "I mean the white-whiskered old man you saw below; they call him the Duke:--he keeps the house. I say, I know him well, and he knows me; and he knows what brings me here, also. Well; we have

arranged every thing about you; you are to stay in this room, and sleep here tonight, and--and--" continued he, speaking low--"you must guard this letter--" slipping a sealed one into my hand--"and, if I am not back by morning, you must post right on to Bury, and leave the letter there;--here, take this paper--it's all set down here in black and white--where you are to go, and what you are to do. And after that's done--mind, this is all in case I don't return--then you may do what you please: stay here in London awhile, or go back to Liverpool. And here's enough to pay all your expenses."

All this was a thunder stroke. I thought Harry was crazy. I held the purse in my motionless hand, and stared at him, till the tears almost started from my eyes.

"What's the matter, Redburn?" he cried, with a wild sort of laugh--"you are not afraid of me, are you?--No, no! I believe in you, my boy, or you would not hold that purse in your hand; no, nor that letter."

"What in heaven's name do you mean?" at last I exclaimed, "you don't really intend to desert me in this strange place, do you, Harry?" and I snatched him by the hand.

"Pooh, pooh," he cried, "let me go. I tell you, it's all right: do as I say: that's all. Promise me now, will you? Swear it!--no, no," he added, vehemently, as I conjured him to tell me more--"no, I won't: I have nothing more to tell you--not a word. Will you swear?"

"But one sentence more for your own sake, Harry: hear me!"

"Not a syllable! Will you swear?--you will not? then here, give me that purse:--there--there--take that--and that--and that;--that will pay your fare back to Liverpool; good-by to you: you are not my friend," and he wheeled round his back.

I know not what flashed through my mind, but something suddenly impelled me; and grasping his hand, I swore to him what he demanded.

Immediately he ran to the bust, whispered a word, and the white-whiskered old man appeared: whom he clapped on the shoulder, and then introduced me as his friend--young Lord Stormont; and bade the almond tree look well to the comforts of his lordship, while he--Harry--was gone.

The almond tree blandly bowed, and grimaced, with a peculiar expression, that I hated on the spot. After a few words more, he withdrew. Harry then shook my hand heartily, and without giving me a chance to say one word, seized his cap, and darted out of the room, saying, "Leave not this room tonight; and remember the letter, and Bury!"

I fell into a chair, and gazed round at the strange-looking walls and mysterious pictures, and up to the chandelier at the ceiling; then rose, and opened the door, and looked down the lighted passage; but only heard the hum from the roomful below, scattered voices, and a hushed ivory

rattling from the closed apartments adjoining. I stepped back into the room, and a terrible revulsion came over me: I would have given the world had I been safe back in Liverpool, fast asleep in my old bunk in Prince's Dock.

I shuddered at every footfall, and almost thought it must be some assassin pursuing me. The whole place seemed infected; and a strange thought came over me, that in the very damasks around, some eastern plague had been imported. And was that pale yellow wine, that I drank below, drugged? thought I. This must be some house whose foundations take hold on the pit. But these fearful reveries only enchanted me fast to my chair; so that, though I then wished to rush forth from the house, my limbs seemed manacled.

While thus chained to my seat, something seemed suddenly flung open; a confused sound of imprecations, mixed with the ivory rattling, louder than before, burst upon my ear, and through the partly open door of the room where I was, I caught sight of a tall, frantic man, with clenched hands, wildly darting through the passage, toward the stairs.

And all the while, Harry ran through my soul--in and out, at every door, that burst open to his vehement rush.

At that moment my whole acquaintance with him passed like lightning through my mind, till I asked myself why he had come here, to London, to do this thing?--why would not Liverpool have answered? and what did he

want of me? But, every way, his conduct was unaccountable. From the hour he had accosted me on board the ship, his manner seemed gradually changed; and from the moment we had sprung into the cab, he had seemed almost another person from what he had seemed before.

But what could I do? He was gone, that was certain;-would he ever come back? But he might still be somewhere in the house; and with a shudder, I thought of that ivory rattling, and was almost ready to dart forth, search every room, and save him. But that would be madness, and I had sworn not to do so. There seemed nothing left, but to await his return. Yet, if he did not return, what then? I took out the purse, and counted over the money, and looked at the letter and paper of memoranda.

Though I vividly remember it all, I will not give the superscription of the letter, nor the contents of the paper. But after I had looked at them attentively, and considered that Harry could have no conceivable object in deceiving me, I thought to myself, Yes, he's in earnest; and here I am--yes, even in London! And here in this room will I stay, come what will. I will implicitly follow his directions, and so see out the last of this thing.

But spite of these thoughts, and spite of the metropolitan magnificence around me, I was mysteriously alive to a dreadful feeling, which I had never before felt, except when penetrating into the lowest and most squalid haunts of sailor iniquity in Liverpool. All the mirrors and marbles around me seemed crawling over with lizards; and I thought to

myself, that though gilded and golden, the serpent of vice is a serpent still.

It was now grown very late; and faint with excitement, I threw myself upon a lounge; but for some time tossed about restless, in a sort of night-mare. Every few moments, spite of my oath, I was upon the point of starting up, and rushing into the street, to inquire where I was; but remembering Harry's injunctions, and my own ignorance of the town, and that it was now so late, I again tried to be composed.

At last, I fell asleep, dreaming about Harry fighting a duel of dice-boxes with the military-looking man below; and the next thing I knew, was the glare of a light before my eyes, and Harry himself, very pale, stood before me.

"The letter and paper," he cried.

I fumbled in my pockets, and handed them to him.

"There! there! there! thus I tear you," he cried, wrenching the letter to pieces with both hands like a madman, and stamping upon the fragments. "I am off for America; the game is up."

"For God's sake explain," said I, now utterly bewildered, and frightened. "Tell me, Harry, what is it? You have not been gambling?"

"Ha, ha," he deliriously laughed. "Gambling? red and white, you mean?-- cards?--dice?--the bones?--Ha, ha!--Gambling? gambling?" he ground out between his teeth--"what two devilish, stiletto-sounding syllables they are!"

"Wellingborough," he added, marching up to me slowly, but with his eyes blazing into mine--"Wellingborough"--and fumbling in his breast-pocket, he drew forth a dirk--"Here, Wellingborough, take it--take it, I say--are you stupid?--there, there"--and he pushed it into my hands. "Keep it away from me--keep it out of my sight--I don't want it near me, while I feel as I do. They serve suicides scurvily here, Wellingborough; they don't bury them decently. See that bell-rope! By Heaven, it's an invitation to hang myself--and seizing it by the gilded handle at the end, he twitched it down from the wall.

"In God's name, what ails you?" I cried.

"Nothing, oh nothing," said Harry, now assuming a treacherous, tropical calmness--"nothing, Redburn; nothing in the world. I'm the serenest of men."

"But give me that dirk," he suddenly cried--"let me have it, I say. Oh! I don't mean to murder myself--I'm past that now--give it me"--and snatching it from my hand, he flung down an empty purse, and with a terrific stab, nailed it fast with the dirk to the table.

"There now," he cried, "there's something for the old duke to see to-morrow morning; that's about all that's left of me--that's my skeleton, Wellingborough. But come, don't be downhearted; there's a little more gold yet in Golconda; I have a guinea or two left. Don't stare so, my boy; we shall be in Liverpool to-morrow night; we start in the morning"--and turning his back, he began to whistle very fiercely.

"And this, then," said I, "is your showing me London, is it, Harry? I did not think this; but tell me your secret, whatever it is, and I will not regret not seeing the town."

He turned round upon me like lightning, and cried, "Red-burn! you must swear another oath, and instantly."

"And why?" said I, in alarm, "what more would you have me swear?"

"Never to question me again about this infernal trip to London!" he shouted, with the foam at his lips--"never to breathe it! swear!"

"I certainly shall not trouble you, Harry, with questions, if you do not desire it," said I, "but there's no need of swearing."

"Swear it, I say, as you love me, Redburn," he added, imploringly.

"Well, then, I solemnly do. Now lie down, and let us forget ourselves as

soon as we can; for me, you have made me the most miserable dog alive."

"And what am I?" cried Harry; "but pardon me, Redburn, I did not mean to offend; if you knew all--but no, no!--never mind, never mind!" And he ran to the bust, and whispered in its ear. A waiter came.

"Brandy," whispered Harry, with clenched teeth.

"Are you not going to sleep, then?" said I, more and more alarmed at his wildness, and fearful of the effects of his drinking still more, in such a mood.

"No sleep for me! sleep if you can--I mean to sit up with a decanter!--let me see"--looking at the ormolu clock on the mantel--"it's only two hours to morning."

The waiter, looking very sleepy, and with a green shade on his brow, appeared with the decanter and glasses on a salver, and was told to leave it and depart.

Seeing that Harry was not to be moved, I once more threw myself on the lounge. I did not sleep; but, like a somnambulist, only dozed now and then; starting from my dreams; while Harry sat, with his hat on, at the table; the brandy before him; from which he occasionally poured into his glass. Instead of exciting him, however, to my amazement, the spirits seemed to soothe him down; and, ere long, he was comparatively calm.

At last, just as I had fallen into a deep sleep, I was wakened by his shaking me, and saying our cab was at the door.

"Look! it is broad day," said he, brushing aside the heavy hangings of the window.

We left the room; and passing through the now silent and deserted hall of pillars, which, at this hour, reeked as with blended roses and cigar-stumps decayed; a dumb waiter; rubbing his eyes, flung open the street door; we sprang into the cab; and soon found ourselves whirled along northward by railroad, toward Prince's Dock and the Highlander.