AS GOOD AS GOLD.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Returning from her appointment Lucetta saw a man waiting by the lamp nearest to her own door. When she stooped to go in he came and spoke to her. It was Jopp.

He begged her pardon for addressing her. But he had heard that Mr. Farfrae had been applied to by a neighbouring corn-merchant to recommend a working partner; if so, he wished to offer himself. He could give good security, and had stated as much to Mr. Farfrae in a letter; but he would feel much obliged if Lucetta would say a word in his favour to her husband.

"It is a thing I know nothing about," said Lucetta coldly.

"But you can testify to my trustworthiness better than anybody, ma'am," said Jopp. "I was in Jersey several years, and knew you there by sight."

"Indeed," she replied. "But I knew nothing of you."

"I think, ma'am, that a word from you would secure for me what I covet very much," he persisted.

She steadily refused to have anything to do with the affair, and, because of her anxiety to get indoors before her husband should miss her, left him on the pavement.

He watched her till she had vanished, and then went home. When he got there he sat down in the fireless chimney corner looking at the iron dogs. A movement upstairs disturbed him, and Henchard came down from his bedroom, where he seemed to have been rummaging boxes.

"I wish," said Henchard, "you would do me a service Jopp, now, to-night, I mean, if you can. Leave this at Mrs. Farfrae's for her. I should take it myself, of course, but I don't wish to be seen there."

He handed a package in brown paper, sealed. Henchard had been as good as his word.

"Well, how have ye got on to-day?" his lodger asked. "Any prospect of an opening?"

"I am afraid not," said Jopp, who had not told the other of his application to Farfrae.

"There never will be in Casterbridge," declared Henchard decisively. "You must roam farther afield." He then returned to his own part of the house.

Jopp knew there had been something of the nature of wooing between Henchard and the now Mrs. Farfrae; and his vague ideas on the subject narrowed themselves down to these; Henchard had a parcel belonging to Mrs. Farfrae, and he had reasons for not returning that parcel to her in person. What could be inside it? So he went on and on till, animated by resentment at Lucetta's haughtiness, as he thought it, and curiosity to learn if there were any weak sides to this transaction with Henchard, he examined the package. The pen and all its relations being awkward tools in Henchard's hands, he had affixed the seals without an impression, it never occurring to him that the efficacy of such a fastening depended on this. Jopp was far less of a tyro; he lifted one of the seals with his penknife, peeped in at the end thus opened, saw that the bundle consisted of letters; and, having satisfied himself thus far, sealed up the end again by simply softening the wax with the candle, and went off with the parcel as requested.

Coming into the light at the bridge which stood at the end of High Street, he beheld lounging thereon Mother Cuxsom and Nance Mockridge.

"We be just going down Mixen Lane way, to look into Saint Peter's Finger afore creeping to bed," said Mrs. Cuxsom. "There's a fiddle and tambourine going on there. Lord, what's all the world—do ye come along too, Jopp—'twon't hinder ye five minutes."

Jopp had mostly kept himself out of this company, but present circumstances made him somewhat more reckless than usual, and without many words he decided to go to his destination that way.

Mixen Lane was the Adullam of all the surrounding villages. It was the hiding-place of those who were in distress, and in debt, and in trouble of every kind. Farm labourers and other peasants, who combined a little poaching with their farming, and a little brawling and bibbing with their poaching, found themselves sooner or later in Mixen Lane. Rural mechanics too idle to mechanise, rural servants too rebellious to serve, drifted or were forced into Mixen Lane.

Yet this mildewed leaf in the sturdy and flourishing Casterbridge plant lay close to the open country; not a hundred yards from a row of noble elms, and commanding a view across the moor of airy uplands and cornfields, and mansions of the great. A brook divided the moor from the tenements, and to outward view there was no way across it—no way to the houses but round about by the road. But under every householder's stairs there was kept a mysterious plank nine inches wide; which plank was a secret bridge.

Walking along the lane at dusk the stranger was struck by two or three peculiar features therein. One was an intermittent rumbling from the back premises of the inn half-way up; this meant a skittle alley. Another was the extensive prevalence of whistling in the various domiciles—a piped note of some kind coming from nearly every open door. Another was the frequency of white aprons over dingy gowns among the women around the doorways.

Yet amid so much that was bad, needy respectability also found a home. Under some of the roofs abode pure and virtuous souls, whose presence there was due to the iron hand of necessity, and to that alone.

The inn called Saint Peter's Finger was the church of Mixen Lane. It was centrally situate, as such places should be, and bore about the same social relation to the King of Prussia as the latter bore to the Golden Crown. At first sight the inn was so respectable as to be puzzling. But at the corner of the public-house was an alley, a mere slit, dividing it from the next building. Half-way up the alley was a narrow door, shiny and paintless from the rub of infinite hands and shoulders. This was the actual entrance to the inn.

A pedestrian would be seen abstractedly passing along Mixen Lane; and then, in a moment, he would vanish, causing the gazer to blink like Ashton at the disappearance of Ravenswood. The abstracted pedestrian had edged into the slit by the adroit fillip of his person sideways; from the slit he edged into the tavern by a similar exercise of skill.

The company at the King of Prussia were persons of quality in comparison with the company which gathered here; though it must be admitted that the lowest fringe of the King's party touched the crests of Peter's at points. Waifs and strays of all sorts loitered about here.

To this house Jopp and his acquaintances had arrived. The thunder of bowls echoed from the backyard; swingels hung behind the blower of the chimney; and ex-poachers and ex-game keepers, whom squires had persecuted without a cause (in their own view), sat elbowing each other.

"Dos't mind how you could jerk a trout ashore with a bramble, and not ruffle the stream, Charl?" a deposed keeper was saying. "'Twas at that I caught 'ee once, if you can mind?"

"That can I. But the worst larry for me was that pheasant business at Horewood. Your wife swore false that time, Joe,—oh, she did—there's no denying it."

"How was that?" asked Jopp.

"Why—Joe closed with me, and we rolled down together, close to his garden hedge. Hearing the noise, out ran his wife with the oven pyle, and it being dark under the trees she couldn't see which was uppermost. "Where beest thee, Joe, under or top?" she screeched. "Oh—under," says he. She then began to rap down upon my skull, back and ribs with the pyle till we'd roll over again. "Where beest now, dear Joe, under or top?" she'd scream again. By George, 'twas through her I was took! And then when we got up in hall she sware that the cock pheasant was one of her rearing, when 'twas not your bird at all, Joe; 'twas Squire Brown's bird—that's whose 'twas—one that we'd picked off as we passed his wood, an hour afore. It did hurt my feelings to be so wronged! . . . Ah well—'tis over now."

"I might have had ye days afore that," said the keeper. "I was within a few yards of ye dozens of times, with a sight more of birds than that poor one."

"Yes—'tis not our greatest doings that the world gets wind of," said the furmity-woman, who lately settled in this purlieu, sat among the rest. It was she who presently asked Jopp what was the parcel he kept so snugly under his arm.

"Ah, therein lies a grand secret," said Jopp. "It is the passion of love. To think that a woman should love one man so well, and hate another so unmercifully."

"Who's the object of your meditation, sir?"

"One that stands high, in this town. I'd like to shame her! Upon my life 'twould be as good as a play to read her love-letters, the proud piece of silk and wax-work! For 'tis her love-letters that I've got here."

"Love letters? then let's hear 'em, good soul," said Mother Cuxsom. "Lord, de ye mind, Richard, what fools we used to be when we were younger? getting a schoolboy to write ours for us; and giving him a penny, do ye mind, not to tell other folks what he'd put inside, do ye mind?"

By this time Jopp had pushed his finger under the seals, and unfastened the letters, tumbling them over and picking up one here and there at random, which he read aloud. These passages soon began to uncover the secret which Lucetta had so earnestly hoped to keep buried, though the epistles, being allusive only, did not make it altogether plain.

"Mrs. Farfrae wrote that!" said Nance Mockridge. "'Tis a humbling thing for us, as respectable women, that one of the same sex could do it. And now's she's vowed herself to another man!"

"So much the better for her," said the furmity-woman. "Ah, I saved her from a real bad marriage, and she's never been the one to thank me."

"I say, what a good foundation for a skimmity-ride," said Nance.

"True," said Mrs. Cuxsom reflecting. "'Tis as good a ground for a skimmity-ride as ever I knowed; and it ought not to be wasted. The last one seen in Casterbridge must have been ten years ago, if a day."

At this moment there was a shrill whistle, and the landlady said to the man who had been called Charl, "'Tis Jim coming in. Would ye go and let down the bridge for me?"

Without replying Charl and his comrade Joe rose, and receiving a lantern from her went out at the back door and down the garden-path, which ended abruptly at the edge of the stream already mentioned. They asked him if he had had much luck.

"Not much," he said indifferently. "All safe inside?"

Receiving a reply in the affirmative, he went on inwards, the others withdrawing the bridge and beginning to retreat in his rear. Before, however, they had entered the house a cry of "Ahoy" from the moor led them to pause.

The cry was repeated. They pushed the lantern into an out-house, and went back to the brink of the stream.

"Ahoy—is this the way to Casterbridge?" said some one from the other side.

"Not in particular," said Charl. "There's a river afore ye."

"I don't care—here's for through it," said the man in the moor. "I've had travelling enough for to-day."

"Stop a minute, then," said Charl, finding that the man was no enemy. "Joe, bring the plank and lantern; here's somebody that's lost his way. You should have kept along the turnpike road, friend, and not have strook across here."

"I should—as I see now. But I saw a light here, and says I to myself, that's a short cut, depend on't."

The plank was now lowered; and the stranger's form shaped itself from the darkness. He was a middle-aged man, with hair and whiskers prematurely gray, and a broad and genial face. He had crossed on the plank without hesitation, and seemed to see nothing odd in the transit.

"What place is this?" he asked, when they reached the door.

"A public house."

"Oh. Perhaps it will suit me to put up at. Now then, come in and wet your whistle at my expense for the lift-over you have given me."

They followed him into the inn, where the increased light exhibited him as one who would stand higher in an estimate by the eye than in one by the ear.

Apparently surprised at the kind of company which confronted him through the kitchen door, he at once abandoned his idea of putting up at the house; but taking the situation lightly, he called for glasses of the best, paid for them as he stood in the passage, and turned to proceed on his way by the front door. This was barred, and while the landlady was unfastening it the conversation about the skimmington was continued in the sitting-room, and reached his ears.

"What do they mean by a "skimmity-ride?" he asked.

"Oh, sir," said the landlady, "'tis a old foolish thing they do in these parts whe n a man's wife is—well, a bad bargain in any way. But as a respectable householder I don't encourage it."

"Still, are they going to do it shortly? It is a good sight to see, I suppose?"

"Well sir," she simpered, "'tis the funniest thing under the sun! And it costs money."

"Ah! I remember hearing of some such thing. Now I shall be in Casterbridge for two or three weeks to come, and should not mind seeing the performances. Wait a moment." He turned back, entered the sitting room, and said, "Here, good folks; I should like to see the old custom you are talking of, and I don't mind being something towards it—take that." He threw a sovereign on the table and returned to the landlady at the door, of whom, having inquired the way into the town, he took his leave.

"There were more where that one came from," said Charl, when the sovereign had been taken up and handed to the landlady for safe keeping. "By George! we ought to have got a few more while we had him here."

"No, no," answered the landlady. "This is a respectable house, and I'll have nothing done but what's honorable."

"Well," said Jopp; "now we'll consider the business Jopp; "now we'll considget it in train."

"We will," said Nance. "A good laugh warms my heart more than a cordial, and that's the truth on't."

Jopp gathered up the letters, and it being now somewhat late, he did not attempt to call at Farfrae's with them that night. He reached home, sealed them up as before, and delivered the parcel at its address next morning. Within an hour its contents were reduced to ashes by Lucetta, who, poor soul! was inclined to fall down on her knees in thankfulness that at last no evidence remained of the unlucky episode with Henchard in her past. For, innocent as she had been of deliberately lax intentions therein, that episode, if known, was not the less likely to operate fatally between herself and her husband.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Such was the state of things when the current affairs of Casterbridge were interrupted by an event of such magnitude that its influence reached to the lowest social stratum there, stirring the depths of its society so sensibly as to cut into the midst of the preparations for the skimmington.

A royal personage was about to pass through the borough, on his course farther west, to inaugurate an immense engineering work out that way. He had consented to halt half-an-hour or so in the town, and to receive an address from the Corporation of Casterbridge.

The address was prepared on parchment, by an artist, who was handy at ornamental lettering, and was laid on with the best gold-leaf and colors that the sign-painter had in his shop. The Council met on the Tuesday before the appointed day, to arrange the details of procedure. While they were sitting, the door of the Council Chamber standing open, they heard a heavy footstep coming up the stairs. It advanced along the passage, and Henchard entered the room, in clothes of frayed and threadbare shabbiness, the very clothes which he had used to wear in the primal days when he had sat among them.

"I have a feeling," he said, advancing to the table and laying his hand upon the green cloth, "that I should like to join ye in this reception of our illustrious visitor. I suppose I could walk with the rest?"

Embarrassed glances were exchanged by the Council, and Grower nearly ate the end of his quill-pen, so gnawed he it during the silence. Farfrae, the young Mayor, who by virtue of his office sat in the large chair, intuitively caught the sense of the meeting, and as spokesman was obliged to utter it, glad as he would have been that the duty should have fallen to another tongue.

"I hardly see that it would be proper, Mr. Henchard," said he. "The Council are the Council, and as ye are no longer one of the body, there would be an irregularity in the proceeding. If ye were included, why not others?"

"I have a particular reason for wishing to assist at the ceremony."

Farfrae looked round. "I think I have expressed the feeling of the Council," he said.

"Yes, yes," from Dr. Bath, Lawyer Long, Alderman Tubber, and several more.

"Then I am not to be allowed to have anything to do with it officially?"

"I am afraid, so; it is out of the question, indeed. But of course you can see the doings full well, such as they are to be, like the rest of the spectators."

Henchard did not reply to that very obvious suggestion, and, turning on his heel, went away.

"I'll welcome his Royalty, or nobody shall!" he went about saying. "I am not going to be sat upon by Farfrae, or any of the rest of the paltry crew. You shall see."

The eventful morning was bright, a full-faced sun confronting early window-gazers eastward, and all perceived that there was permanence in the glow. Visitors soon began to flock in from county houses, villages, remote copses, and lonely uplands, the latter in oiled boots and tilt bonnets, to see the reception, or if not to see it, at any rate to be near it. There was hardly a workman in the town who did not put a clean shirt on.

Henchard had determined to do no work that day. He primed himself in the morning with a glass of rum, and walking down the street met Elizabeth-Jane, whom he had not seen for a week. "It was lucky," he said to her, "my twenty years had expired before this came on, or I should never have had the nerve to carry it out."

"Carry out what?" said she, alarmed.

"This welcome I am going to give our Royal visitor."

"Shall we go and see it together?" she said.

"See it! I have other fish to fry. You see it. It will be worth seeing!"

She could do nothing to elucidate this, and decked herself out with a heavy heart. As the appointed time drew near she got sight of her stepfather. She thought he was going to the King of Prussia; but no, he elbowed his way through the gay throng to the shop of Woolfrey, the draper. She waited in the crowd without.

In a few minutes he emerged, wearing a brilliant rosette, while in his hand he carried a flag, of somewhat homely construction, formed by tacking one of the small Union Jacks, which abounded in the town to-day, to the end of a deal wand—probably the roller from a piece of calico. Henchard rolled up his flag on the doorstep, put it under his arm, and went down the street.

(To be continued.)

A MAN AND HIS NECKTIE.

"It is a curious thing," says an English woman, "to note the subtle affinity between the young man and his necktie. Talk of 'the style' being 'the man!' In these days of sober masculine attire, the cravat, nine times out of ten, denotes the individual, and, above all, his humor. Observe how he has fingered his tie and you shall know his mood. When I meet Florizel, for instance, prancing down the street of an afternoon, with a little shepherd's-plaid necktie twisted into the most rakish of bows, then I know that he has an appointment with Amanda at 5 o'clock, and that the lady has a mind to listen to his suit. Other days I espy him in something limp and forlorn, and lavender colored. This is not a lucky day with Florizel, and if you fail to make good your escape he may go as far as to talk of his difficulties, still more darkly of the colonies, while for twopence he will tell you of the perfidy of the whole female sex.

There are men—and worthy citizens too—who always wear blood-red silk about their throats. There are others who will adorn themselves with ready-made bows, which buckle in some mysterious fashion, at the back; but this variety of the genius homo is held by the well dressed to be beyond the pale. There is yet another sort of man who invariably wears the most modest little pin-points or stripes. The color of his tie is dark blue or black; its texture is corded silk; and he wears it in a rather depressed-looking sailors' knot. This is the kind of a young man you can depend upon. He is neat, careful, modest, conscientious, honorable and of good report. But, to tell the strict truth, he is not always deliriously amusing. On the other hand beware of the youth who wears an enormous cravat frothing out on his unmanly bosom. He is, alas! too often a mauvaise langue, and would sacrifice you—or his grandanother—in order to set the tea-table in a roar.

FOOTWEAR NEVERS.

Some Hints as to the Kind of Boots to Wear.

Dr. Samuel Appleton, gives fourteen of them, which every person will derive comfort in heeding:

1. Never wear a shoe that will not allow the great toe to lie in a straight line.

2. Never wear a shoe with a sole narorwer than the outline of the foot, traced with a pencil close under the rounding edge.

3. Never wear a shoe that pinches the heel.

4. Never wear a shoe or boot so large in the heel that the foot is not kept in place.

5. Never wear a shoe or boot tight anywhere.

6. Never wear a shoe or boot that has depressions in any part of the sole to drop any joint or bearing below the level plane.

7. Never wear a shoe with a sole turning up very much at the toes, as this causes the cords on the upper part of the foot to contract.

8. Never wear a shoe that presses up into the hollow of the foot.

9. Never have the top of the boots tight, as it interferes with the action of the calf muscles, makes one walk badly and spoils the shape of the ankle.

10. Never come from high heels to low heels at one jump.

11. Never wear one pair of shoes all the time, unless obliged to do so. Two pairs of boots worn a day at a time alternately give more service and are much more healthful.

12. Never wear leather sole linings to stand upon. White cotton drilling or linen is much better and more healthful.

13. Never wear a short stocking, or one, which, after being washed is not, at least, one-half inch longer than the foot. Bear in mind that stockings shrink. Be sure that they will allow your toes to spread out at the extreme ends, as this keeps, the joints in place, and makes a strong and attractive foot. As to shape of stockings, the single digital or "one-toe stocking" is the best.

14. Never think that the feet will grow large from wearing proper shoes. Pinching and distorting makes them grow not only large but unsightly. A proper, natural use of all the muscles makes them compact and attractive.

How I Won My Wife

It was getting toward nine o'clock when my attention was attracted to a pretty little girl who was tripping across the street. Just as she reached the curb she slipped on a patch of ice and fell heavily. It took me about half a second to reach the little woman and pick her up. She was shaken by the fall, though not injured, and I had to support her for a moment. Then she went her way.

I had tramped up and down my beat three or four times when a bareheaded cash boy ran out of one of the big stores and yelled at me:

"Come, quick! The manager has caught a shoplifter!"

"Ah, officer," said the manager, who was a mere business machine, "I am glad you have come. One of our clerks at the lace counter discovered that a valuable piece of lace had been stolen and gave the alarm. This woman hurried away from the counter. The lace was found in an outside pocket of her cloak. This is the piece on the desk here."

There was a sudden movement on the part of he woman. She snatched her handkerchief from her face, extended her right arm and finger, which shook with rage, and, turning her blazing eyes upon the business machine, she fairly screamed:

"'Tis false! I am no thief!"

She was the black-eyed little girl that I had picked up scarcely half an hour before.

Then she told me her little story. She was an orphan and had been brought up by an old aunt in the country. About six months before this her aunt had died, and she came on to the city and turned her hand to lacemaking, and had been able to support herself decently since then.

She said she had stepped into the shop to make some small purchases and was arrested when walking away. She protested that she did not know how the lace came to be found in her pocket.

I explained the case to the sergeant at the station and got his permission for her to sit in a chair in the office instead of occupying a cell all night.

Somehow I couldn't get the sorrowful look of those eyes out of my mind, and I couldn't sleep, and when daylight came time hung on a peg until court time came. I walked around thinking over the case, trying to arrive at some solution favorable to the girl.

Of course when we got to court Minnie—that was her name—was convicted in one-two-three order. She made no statement—just stood dazed like—and the judge held her for trial in the court above.

As they led the girl away she was the picture of death. I gave her a nod of encouragment, but she returned it with a look that said as plainly as words could have said: "My heart is broken."

I had questioned her closely as to the appearance of the people who had stood near her at the lace counter. She could remember none save one flashily-dressed woman who had attracted her attention because of a remarkable mutilation of one of her ears, as if a piece had been cut out in a triangular form.

I persuaded the superintendent to grant me leave of absence for a couple of days and went to work. I overhauled the pictures at the office and gazed hard and earnestly at the features of every female crook in the rogues' gallery, but I could not find the one I was after.

At last I fell to reading the remarks under the picture of a bold, handsome face, and was knocked all into a cocked hat by the words, "Has a triangular piece cut out of the left ear."

I had a long talk with a detective friend of mine, and after a while he was able to place the woman and told me where she most frequented.

All that day and nearly all the next I was on the look out for that lady, and was despairing, when a big, handsome woman swept past me, actually brushing against me with her sealskin cloak.

I glanced up and fairly started, for one of her ears was mutilated just as the girl and the note in the office had described.

The woman swept on and I followed. She entered the very store where I had arrested Minnie, and went up to the very counter where the lace was stolen and began examining the stock. And then, selecting a trifle, she paid for it and turned to go.

I was in a quandary. But I was determined to make an effort and run the risk of making a serious mistake. Stepping up to her, I touched her shoulder and whispered, "Come with me. I want you a moment," at the same time looking straight into her eyes.

Every drop of blood left the woman's face. She fairly trembled for an instant, and then she looked back defiantly and went with me.

We had moved but a step or two in the direction of the bookkeeper's den, where the girl had been searched three days before, when something struck my feet. I stooped and picked up a bundle of lace. The woman had dropped it. I was right—I had found my thief.

Seeing that she was caught, the shoplifter owned up that she had stolen the piece of lace. When accused of the other theft, for which I wanted her, she confessed to that, too.

My, but wasn't that a grateful little woman! She just ran and placed her arms around my neck and kissed me. I was kind of taken back, for although I rather enjoy kissing, I don't like too many witnesses.

I married her two weeks afterward, and the business machine gave her a $250 outfit, and was glad to get out of the awkward fix at that price.

BITTER SWEET.

Dumpy doesn't sem as well pleased as he might because of the hundreds of congratulatory telegrams he received the day of his wedding.

I should say not. They were all sent 'collect.'