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BEYOND RE[illegible]

CHAPTER V.

STEPS IN THE RIGHT ROAD.

"Are ye a-comin', matey?" asked the laughter, in a hoarse whisper, pausing after a couple of heavy strides forward.

I made no reply.

Tragic affrays are so common in the papers that one finds of this man being killed or maimed almost with indifference; but to hear the shot fired which one knew may have put a man to death within a few hundred paces is another thing. I could not speak, for the sickening apprehension of what was going behind in the place I had but just now escaped from.

"Well, stay where ye are," growled my companion, taking my silence in bad part, "I'll be plunged in with a curse.

Long after he was gone out of hearing, I stood there, expecting one sound—and then a cry, a whistle, the approaching footsteps of Hookey or the police—anything to take the place of that void in which I seemed to exist; for I heard nothing but the clubbing of the blood in my veins, and the occasional pat of a drop falling upon a dead leaf.

I found myself at the palings of the park without knowing how I got there. I must have turned about and gone up the hill in a fashion, at the same unconscious way I had taken across Wimbledon, and so made my way home. There I noticed that it lacked a quarter to six by the clock of the post office. It must have been eight when I got to the house where I lodged in Old Street Road.

My landlady met me on the stairs, a candle in her hand, for the fog here was black, and the darkness greater than at Richmond in the middle of the night.

"Oh, you've come home, are you?" said the woman, blocking the passage. "What's the matter of your hat?

I put my hand to my head and discovered that I was hatless. I did not notice it before.

"And what in the world are you been a-doing to yourself, I'm sure? You're all of a mess of mud from end to end."

"I must have fallen down," I said, passing her, and going towards my room.

"Oh, well, look here, young man," she called after me, "if you can afford to go out drinkin' all night you can just manage to pay me what's my due." She broke off to explain, as I went up the next flight of stairs, and the light of her lamp fell upon my face, "Well, I never! If you ain't got on clothes. Look here, mister—"

But I hobbled on to my room, and shutting the door, I lighted the rest. Still, as I went about to find matches and light my lamp, I heard her talking to the lodgers below in a high voice that was meant for my ear.

I sank down on a chair before the lamp in a dim dinner on the grimy table. I wanted to concentrate my thoughts, to form some definite idea of what had to be done in the crisis to which matters had come. That is what I had been vainly attempting to achieve as I plodded homeward. It seemed as if the fog had got into my mind and blurred all ideas in dense obscurity. As I sat down something in my pocket chinked against the chair. It was the purse given me by Jack. Even that had slipped out of my mind. Now, as I held it in my hand, the soft, cool kid reminded me of the touch of Wyndham's fingers. Would these gentle fingers do as much for me? I asked myself wearily, with a dim foreboding that I had lost for ever, that the course I must take must lead me far from her. I realized that one realized it was the way of the world. It was a little timely consideration kept.

"Reproached me," I said to myself, bitterly caressing the purse; pressed it against the hard fate to which I had to have brought her. I saw her voice was! How sweet it was when I was sunk in misery! Oh, what I have lost! I recall those last few hours—the minute—that I might leave the hope of better things! What for? What signs of tender—strength have I given her? I continued to indulge my reverie for some time, and then, with a benumbed all my resolution—actually what it was I had to do. The letter telling that had come into my hand when I found myself a captive had not left me when I found myself once more free. No! I would make a great effort. I would do what was right. I clung to that chance of redeeming myself at the first. One thing was bigger burden her with my ruin. I would go away and leave her. I opened the purse, and poured the contents on the table. There was gold. I spread it out on the table. I heard, dark before, was gleaming with the glitter of it. I feast—saying to myself that not all this money spent all should be a good bad she had in view for me to accept it. Oh, it hurt to her with rich interest!

At that my head burst open suddenly, and my landlady came in with her hands here, young man!" But I put her eyes fell on the table. She came up to the table in silence and rested her knuckles on it, looking down at the money her mouth open, and her eyes round with wonder. There she stood, her one family silk on, and, bending her brow, looked straight at me.

"Are you mad, young man?

"What do you mean—or what?" she asked, in a low tone.

"It matter to you what I am?" I said.

"It matter! A good bit to me. You haven't paid for a fortnight, and I've been you eating dry bread more like a starving dog than a Christian. You've been getting dinner and more haggard and more wild looking every day."

"Take what I owe you," said I pushing the sovereigns across the table.

"No, I wouldn't touch it afore I know it's honestly come by. I've managed to keep myself straight in spite of hard times. Nothing can I've said against my house, and I can't come to get myself into trouble for a low shilling."

"Do you think I'm a thief?" I asked, the old blood I had in my veins rushing hot up into my face.

"I know you are—that's more?" cried she, raising her voice as I had raised mine, and retorting fiercely for fierceness. "Don't tell me that's London mud on your sleeves! Look at it—it's yeller! Oh, you don't do a deed! And them goloshes—how did you come by them when you went out in your?"

I laughed, but condemned the laugh as I heard it. I'm sorry, I said, I'm a little jarring. I'll make up for it. I'll make it up to you. I'm sorry, I said, I'm a little jarring. I'll make it up to you. I'm sorry, I said, I'm a little jarring. I'll make it up to you. I'm sorry, I said, I'm a little jarring