

Dowling Richard

Miracle Gold: A Novel (Vol. 3 of 3)



Richard Dowling

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CHAPTER XXVII

NEW RELATIVES

When John Hanbury turned his face homeward to Chester Square from Grimsby Street that evening, the long summer day was at last ended, and it was dusk.

He had, before setting out for the country that morning, written a note to his mother explaining whither he was going, and left it with the document she had given him the night before. He wound up his note by telling her he was still, even after the night, so confused and hurried in his thoughts that he would make no comment on the discovery except that it was one of the most extraordinary that had ever befallen man. He was going into the country to find what confirmation he could, if any, of the marvellous tale.

On getting back to London he had had a strange meeting with his mother. Both were profoundly moved, and each, out of mercy to the other, affected to be perfectly calm, and fell to discussing the new aspect of affairs as though the news into which they had just come was no more interesting than the ordinary surprises that awaken interest once a week in the quietest family. Beyond an embrace of more warmth and endurance than usual, there was no sign that anything very unusual had occurred since their last meeting. Then Mrs. Hanbury sat down, and her son, as was his custom when excited, walked up and down the room as he told his Derbyshire experience.

"In a few hours," he went on, after some introductory sentences, "I found out all that is to be found out about the Graces near their former place, Gracedieu. It exactly corresponds with all my father says. The story of Kate Grace's disappearance and marriage to a foreign nobleman (by the tradition he is French), is still told in the place, and the shop in which her father formerly carried on his business in wool can still be pointed out, unaltered after a hundred and thirty years. There is Gracedieu itself, a small house in a garden, such as a man who had made money in trade in a country town would retire to. There is also the tradition that Grace, the wool dealer, did not make his money in trade, but came into it through his rich son-in-law, whose name is not even guessed at, the people there being content as a rule to describe him as a foreigner, while those who pride themselves on their accuracy, call him a Frenchman, and the entirely scrupulous say he was a French count."

"And do these Graces still live at Gracedieu, John?"

"No, mother. They left it years ago—generations ago. And now I want to tell you a thing almost as incredible as the subject of my father's letter. No longer since than yesterday I met, in London, the representative of these Graces, the only surviving descendant."

"That is truly astonishing," said Mrs. Hanbury. "Yesterday was a day of wonders."

"A day of miracles," said the young man thoughtfully.

For the first time in his life he had a secret from his mother, and he was at this moment in doubt as to whether he should impart to her, or not, all the circumstances of his going to Grimsby Street yesterday. He had no inclination to speak now of the quarrel or disagreement with Dora. That incident no longer occupied a front and illumined position in his mind. It was in a dim background, a quiet twilight.

"How did you come across them? What are they like?"

"I came across them quite by accident. It is much too long a tale to tell now. Indeed, it would take hours to tell fully, and I want not to lose any time at present."

"As you please, John. This is a day when wonders come so quick that we lose all sense of their importance. Tell me just what you like. I am only concerned about one thing."

"And what is that, mother?" He asked in a troubled voice. He was afraid she was about to make some reference to Dora.

"That you do not allow yourself to become too excited or carried away," she said, with pleading solicitude.

He kissed her, and said cheerfully: "Trust me, mother, I am not going to lose my head or knock myself up. Well, when I met Mrs. and Miss Grace yesterday—"

"Oh, the representatives are women?"

"Yes, mother, and gentlewomen too; though I should think far from well off—"

"If," said Mrs. Hanbury promptly, "narrow circumstances are all the drawback they labour under that could be soon put right."

"God bless you, my good mother," cried the son with affectionate pride. "Well, when I saw them yesterday in their place in Grimsby Street I had, of course, no notion whatever that they were in any way related to us. I took no particular notice of them beyond observing that they were ladies. The strangest thing about them is that the younger is—is—" He hesitated, not knowing how much of yesterday's events must come out.

"What?" said the mother with a smile.

"Is, as I said, a perfect lady."

"Yes; but why do you hesitate?"

"Well, mother, I don't know how to put it," he laughed lightly, and coloured impatiently at his own blundering stupidity.

"I will help you. That the younger is fifty, wears corkscrew curls, and teaches the piano in that awful Grimsby Street. Never mind, John, I am not afraid of an old maid, even if you are."

"Good heavens! I don't mean that, mother! I'll put it in this way. It is not to say that there is a strong likeness, but, if you saw Miss Grace, you would be prepared to swear it was Miss Ashton."

"What? So like Dora Ashton! Then, indeed, she must be not only ladylike but a beauty as well."

"The two would be, I think, quite indistinguishable to the eye, anyway. The voices are not the same."

"Now, indeed, you do interest me. And was it because of this extraordinary resemblance you sought the young lady's acquaintance?"

"Well, as I said, it is too long a story, much too long a story to tell now. I did not seek the lady's acquaintance. A man who knew us both, and whom I met yesterday by accident, was so struck by the similarity between Miss Ashton and Miss Grace that he insisted upon my going with him to the house of this Mrs. Grace."

"Oh, I understand. You were at Mrs. Ashton's Thursday, met some man there, and he carried you off. Upon my word you seem to be in a whirl of romances," she said gaily.

"That was not exactly the way the thing arose. The man who introduced me was at Ashton's, but we shall have the whole story out another day."

"Then what do you think of doing now? You seem in a great hurry."

"I'm not, mother, in a great hurry anywhere in particular."

"You, of course, are wishing to run away to Curzon street?"

"No. They are not at home this evening. Mrs. Ashton said they were to dine at Byngfield's. I am in a hurry, but in a hurry nowhere. I am simply in a blaze of excitement, as you may imagine." He paused, and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. The worst was over. There had been a reference to Dora and no explanation, a thing he wished to avoid at any expense just now. There had been a statement that he had met the Graces, and no mention of Leigh. His mind had been in a wild whirl. He had in the first burst of his interview with his mother magnified to himself the

unpleasant episodes of yesterday, as far as Leigh was concerned at all events. Now he was more at rest. He had got breathing space, and he could between this and the next reference decide upon the course he should pursue in that most uncomfortable affair. There would be ample excuse for almost any irregularity on his part with regard to her in the amazing news which had come upon him. His mind was calmer and more unclouded now.

"Well, perhaps if you talk to me a while you may grow cooler. Tell me anything you like or nothing. You will wear yourself out, John, if you don't take care. To judge from your father's letter to you he attached on practical importance to the secret it contained, to the only object he had in communicating it was to keep you still. It has had so far an effect the very opposite of what he desired."

"I know I am very excitable. I will try to be more calm. Let me see. What can we talk about? Of course I can neither think nor speak about anything which does not bear on the disclosure."

"Tell me then what you heard of the Graces in Derbyshire, and why you think them not well off. That may have a practical use, and will take your mind off your own place in the affair."

"Oh! yes. Well, you see Castleton isn't a very big place, and Mr. Coutch is the most important professional man in it, so I found my way to him, and he told me he had been making inquiries for a widow and her granddaughter who lived in London, and I asked where they lived and so on, and found out that Mrs. Grace who was making the inquiries was the very Mrs. Grace I had met yesterday. I told Coutch that I was the person he was looking for, that I represented the other branch of the Grace family, and that I was most anxious to befriend my relatives by giving them what information they might desire. I did not say anything to him about the Polish affair, or the man whom Kate Grace had married, beyond informing Coutch that he had not been a French nobleman, and that I was a descendant of that marriage.

"Then he told me he feared from what his London correspondent had written him that the Graces were in distress, or anyway were far from well off, as Mrs. Grace had lately lost a large sum of money, and Miss Grace every penny she had in the world. His correspondent said he thought the only object of the inquiry was to find out if by any chance there might be ever so remote a chance of tracing the other branch of the family with a view to finding out if by will or failure of that line some property might remain to those who bore the name of Grace, and were direct in the line of the wool-dealer of the eighteenth century. I then told him that I was not either exactly poor or rich, and that I would be most happy to do anything in my power for my distant relatives. He said that there was not even a trace of property in his neighbourhood to which either of the branches had the shadow of a claim, as Gracedieu had generations ago passed away from the family by sale, and they had never owned anything else there."

"I am delighted you told this man we would be happy to be of any use we could to this poor old lady, and her granddaughter. Of course, John, in this case you must not do anything in which I am not a sharer. All I have will be yours legally one day, and in the mean time is yours with my whole heart and soul. Apart altogether from my desire to aid in this matter because these people are your people, it would, of course, be my duty to do so, because they are your dead father's people. You own you are restless. Why not go to them and tell them all? Say they have friends and well-wishers in us, and that I will call upon them to-morrow."

So mother and son parted, and he went to Grimsby Street. He had left Chester Square in a comparatively quiet state of mind, but as he drove in the hansom his imagination took fire once more, and when he found himself in Mrs. Grace's sitting-room he was highly excited.

When he returned to Chester Square he sought his mother's room. He found her sitting alone in the twilight. In a hasty way he described the interview between himself, Mrs. and Miss Grace, and said he had conveyed his mother's promise of a visit the next day.

Then he said: "Do you know, I think we had better keep all this to ourselves?"

"I am glad, my son, you are of that opinion. Up to this I have spoken to no one, not even to your aunt Preston or Sir Edward, who were here to-day. I don't remember ever having heard that the Hanburys were related to people called Grace, and I suppose if I did not hear it, no one among our friends did. I hope you cautioned Mrs. and Miss Grace. But, remember, John, this is not wholly our secret. It is theirs quite as much, if not more, than ours. All we can do for the present is to keep our own tongues quiet."

"I am sure you will like Mrs. and Miss Grace. They are very quiet people and took my news very well. Good news or news of this kind tries people a great deal more than calamitous news. They seem to be simple and well-bred."

"Well, when people are simple and well-bred, and good-natured, and not selfish—"

"I think they are all that," he interjected.

"There is no merit in getting on with them. The only thing to consider John, is, will they get on with me? Am I to be got on with by them?"

"Why, my mother would get on with the most disagreeable women ever known."

"Yes, but then these two may not be the most disagreeable. At all events I'll do my best. Do you intend staying in or are you going to the club or to Curzon Street?"

"The Curzon Street people are dining out at Byngfields' as I told you earlier in the day. I am too restless to stay in the house and the club seems too trivial for an evening like this. I think I'll go out and walk to that most delightful of all places."

"Where is that?"

"Nowhere in particular. I am too tired and excited to decide upon anything to-night. I'll just go for a stroll and think about nothing at all. I'll say good night, as I may not be back early."

And so mother and son parted.

He left the house. It was almost dark. He wandered on in an easterly direction, not caring or heeding where he went. He tried to keep his mind from hurrying by walking at a leisurely rate, and he tried to persuade himself he was thinking of nothing by employing his eyes actively on all things that came his way as he strolled along. But this device was only an attempt and scarcely a sincere attempt.

"A king," he would think, insensibly holding his head high, "one of my people, my great grandfather's grandfather, has been king of an old monarchy and millions of men. It is a long time ago, no doubt, but what does all blood pride itself upon if not former splendours? A king! And the king of no miserable Balkan state or Christian fragment of the Turkish empire, but a king of an ancient and powerful state which stood powerful and stubborn in the heart of fierce, military, warlike Europe and held its own! Poniatowski was no doubt an elected king, but so were the others, and he was a Lithuanian nobleman before he became King. The kingdom over which he ruled exists no longer except in history, and even if the infamous partitions had never taken place and Stanislaus had owned his English marriage and taken his English family with him, I should have no more claim to the throne than to that of the Queen. But I am the lineal descendant of a king who reigned for a generation, and neither the malignity of to-day nor the lies of history can destroy that fact."

"Still the whole thing is, of course, only moonshine now, and if I went to Lithuania, to Wolczyn itself, they would laugh at my pretensions. The family estates and honours had been vapourized before that last of the Poniatowskis fell under Napoleon. So my father asserts, and he took some trouble to enquire. Therefore, no doubt it would be best to keep the whole thing secret. But can we?"

He put the thought away from him as having no immediate urgency. It would be best for him to think of nothing at all, but to watch the gas lamps and the people and the cabs and carriages hurrying through the free air of England.

But Dora? What of Dora? Dora had said good night to him and then good bye. He had behaved badly, shamefully, no doubt. There was no excuse for him or for any man allowing himself to be

carried away by temper in speaking to a lady, above all in speaking to a lady whom he thought and intended to make his wife. Could Dora ever forgive him? It was more than doubtful. If she did, what assurance had he for the future? How would Dora take this discovery about the husband of Kate Grace in the eighteenth century? She would think little or nothing about it. She had no respect for hereditary honours or for old blood. She judged all men by their deeds and by their deeds alone. Hence she had tolerated him, doubtless, when she believed him to be no more than the son of a City merchant possessing some abilities. She had tolerated him! It was intolerable to be tolerated! And by the woman he intended asking to be his wife.

He had asked her to be his wife and she had hung back because he had not yet done anything important, had not yet even taken up a well-defined position in politics.

If he told her to-night that he was descended from Stanislaus II. King of Poland she would not be impressed ever so little. He did not attach much importance to his old Lithuanian blood or the transient gleam of kingship which had shone upon his race. But there was, in spite of Dora, something in these things after all, or all the world was wrong.

Dora was really too matter-of-fact. No doubt the rank is but the guinea stamp and the man is the gold for all that. But in our complex civilization the stamp is very convenient; it saves the trouble of assaying and weighing every piece of yellow metal we are offered as gold, and Burns himself, in his letters at least, shows anything but this fierce democratic spirit. Why Burns' letters erred the other way, and were full of sickening tuft-hunting and sycophancy.

What a marvellous likeness there was between the appearance of those two young girls. Now, if anyone had said there was a remote cousinship between the girls all who saw would say cousinship! Sisterhood! No twins could be more alike. And yet the resemblance was only accidental.

He would like to see them together and compare them.

Like to see them together? Should he?

Well, no.

Dora was generous, there was no question of that; and she was not disposed to be in the least jealous. But she could scarcely help wondering how he felt towards another girl who was physically her counterpart and seemed to think more of blood and race.

It might occur to Dora to look at the likeness between herself and his cousin Edith in this way: To me John Hanbury is merely a young man of promising ability, who may if he likes forward causes in which I take a great interest. I sometimes cross him and thwart him, but then he is my lover, and, though I despise rank, I am his social superior in England now anyway. How would it be with him if this young girl whose appearance is so like mine cares' for him, apart from his abilities and possible usefulness in causes interesting to me, and sets great store by noble race and royal blood?

That would be an inquiry upon which Dora might not care to enter. Or it might be she would not care? Might it be she was glad to say good-bye?

"Perhaps Dora has begun to think she made a mistake in listening to me at all. After yesterday and my cowardly weakness and vacillation during the afternoon, and my unpardonable outburst after dinner, she may not care to send me away from her because she pities me! Good God! am I going to marry a woman who pities me?

"I will put Dora away from my thoughts for the present.

"The Graces must come to live with us, that's certain.

"Fancy that odious dwarf and Dora pitying me! I cannot bear the thought! I could not breathe five minutes in an atmosphere of pity. There are good points in my character, but I must take care of them or they might deteriorate into baseness. I must take care of myself, beware of myself. I am not perfect, I am not very vile. I should like to be a god. Let me try."

He had told his mother he was going Nowhere in particular. It was quite plain his reflections were bringing him no nearer to Curzon Street.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LEIGH AT HIS BENCH

Tom Stamer was afraid of only two people, namely, John Timmons and the policeman. Of both he had experience. In his fear of Timmons were mingled love and admiration. No such diluting sentiments qualified his feelings towards the guardians of law and order. He had "done time," and he did not want to do it again. He was a complete stranger to anything like moral cowardice. He had never even heard of that weakness by that name. He was a burglar and a thief without any code at all, except that he would take anything he wished to take, and he would die for John Timmons. He did not look on dying as a very serious thing. He regarded imprisonment as a monstrous calamity, out of all proportion to any other. He would not go out of his way to kill a policeman, but if one stood in his way he would kill him with as little compunction and as much satisfaction as a terrier kills a rat. If up to the present his hands were clean of blood, it was because shedding it had never seemed to him at once expedient and safe. If he were made absolute king he would like to gather all the police of the kingdom into a yard with high walls and shoot them from a safe balcony.

Although his formulated code was limited to the two articles mentioned above, certain things he had not done wore the air of virtue. He never quarrelled with any man, he never ill-treated his wife, he never cheated anyone. When drunk he was invariably amiable and good-natured, and gave liberally to others. He was a completely loyal friend, and an enemy all the more merciless and horrible because he was without passion.

He had little or no mind, but he was on that account the more terribly steadfast. Once he had resolved upon a thing nothing could divert him from trying to accomplish it. His was one of those imperfect, half-made intellects that are the despair of philanthropists. You could do nothing whatever with him; he could rob and murder you. If he had all those policemen in that high-walled court he would not have inflicted any torture upon them. He would have shot them with his own hand merely to make sure the race was extirpated. His fidelity was that of an unreasoning beast. He knew many men of his own calling, and by all of them he was looked upon as being the most mild and true, and dangerous and deadly burglar in London. He was morally lower than the lowest of the uncorrupted brutes.

Stamer had made up his mind that Oscar Leigh was in league with the police, and that this postponement of buying the gold from Timmons was merely part of some subtle plan to entrap Timmons and himself.

This conviction was his way of deciding upon taking Oscar Leigh's life. He did not even formulate the dwarf's death to himself. He had simply decided that Leigh meant to entrap Timmons in the interest of Scotland Yard. Timmons and himself were one.

Wait a week indeed, and be caught in a trap! Not he! Business was business, and no time was to be lost.

When he left Tunbridge Street that morning, he made straight for Chelsea. This was a class of business which did not oblige him to keep his head particularly clear. He would lay aside his ordinary avocation until this affair was finished. The weather was warm, so he turned into a public-house in the Vauxhall Bridge Road and sat down at a table to think the matter over while cooling and refreshing himself with a pint of beer.

One thing puzzled him. How was it that the dwarf pretended to be with Timmons half-a-mile away, at the time he himself, and half-a-dozen other men who knew Leigh's appearance thoroughly, saw him as plain as the sun at noonday winding up his clock at the second floor window of the house opposite the Hanover? There could, of course, not be the least doubt that Timmons had been deceived, imposed upon in some way. But how was it done? Timmons knew the dwarf well, knew

his figure, which could not easily be mistaken, and knew his voice also. They had met several times before Timmons even broached the gold difficulty to him. Leigh had told Timmons that he was something of a magician. That he could do things no other man could do. That he had hidden knowledge of metals, and so on, and could do things no other man living could do with metals, and that he had books of fortune-telling and magic and the stars, and so on.

Stamer's education had been neglected. He had read little, and knew nothing of magic and these things, but he had heard it was only foolishness. Timmons was an honourable man and wouldn't lie. He had said the plan of getting rid of the gold was to be that Leigh was to pretend to make it and sell it openly or with very little secrecy. That was a good notion if Leigh could persuade people he made it. Unfortunately gold could not be run into sovereigns. It had to be stamped cold and that could only be managed by machinery.

Well, anyway, if this man, this Leigh, knew a lot of hidden things he might know a lot about chloroform and laudanum and other drugs he heard much about but that did not come in his way of business. Leigh might know of or have invented something more sudden and powerful than chloroform and have asked Timmons to smell a bottle, or have waved a handkerchief in Timmons's face, and Timmons might have there and then gone off into a sleep and dreamed all he believed about the walk at midnight and the church clock.

That looked a perfectly reasonable and complete explanation. In fact it was the explanation and no other was needed. This was simplicity itself.

But what was the object of this hocusing of Timmons, and, having hocused the man, why didn't he rob him of the gold he had with him, or call the police? That was a question of nicer difficulty and would require more beer and a pipe. So far he was getting on famously, doing a splendid morning's work.

He made himself comfortable with his tobacco and beer and resumed where he had left off.

The reason why the dwarf didn't either take the gold or hand over Timmons to the police was because he hadn't all he wanted. When he got Timmons asleep he left him somewhere and went back to wind his clock just to show he wasn't up to anything. What was it Timmons hadn't? Why, papers, of course. Timmons hadn't any papers about Stamer or any of them, and the only thing Leigh would have against Timmons, if he gave him up then, would be the gold, out of which by itself they could make nothing! That was the whole secret! Leigh knew the time when Timmons would come to his senses to a minute, and had him out in the street half a mile from the house before he knew where he was.

If confirmation of this theory were required had not Timmons told him that Leigh carried a silver bottle always with him, and that he was ever sniffing up the contents of the bottle? Might not he carry another bottle the contents of which, when breathed even once, were more powerful, ten times more powerful, than chloroform?

This explanation admitted of no doubt or even question. But if a clincher were needed, was it not afforded by what he had heard the landlord and frequenters of the Hanover say last night about this man's clock? They said that when the clock was wound up by night the winding up _always_ took place in the half hour between midnight and half-past twelve, and furthermore that on no occasion but one, and that one when Leigh was out of town, that one and singular occasion being the night before his visit to the Hanover, had a soul but the dwarf been seen in the clock room or admitted to it.

This affair must be looked after at once. It admitted of no delay. He would go to the Hanover and early enough to try some of their rum hot, of which he had heard such praises last night.

This was the substance of Stamer's thinking, though not the words of his thought.

On his way to Chetwynd Street he thought:

"He wants to get evidence against Timmons, and he wants to get evidence against _me_ for the police. If he doesn't get it from Timmons pockets next Thursday, he'll get it some other way

soon, and then Timmons and I will be locked up. That must be prevented. He is too clever for an honest, straightforward man like Timmons. It isn't right to have a man like that prying into things and disturbing things. It isn't right, and it isn't fair, and it must be stopped, and it shall be stopped soon, or my name isn't Tom Stamer. I may make pretty free in this get-up. It belonged to a broken-down bailiff, and I think I look as like a broken-down bailiff as need be. When Timmons didn't guess who I was, I don't think anyone else will know, even if I met a dozen of the detectives."

He was in no hurry. He judged it to be still early for the Hanover. He wanted to go there when people were in the private bar, some time about the dinner hour would be the best part of the day for his purpose, and it was now getting near that time.

When he reached Welbeck Place he entered the private bar of the Hanover, and perching himself by the counter opposite the door, on one of the high stools, asked for some rum hot. There was no one in this compartment. The potman served him. As a rule Williams himself attended to the private compartment, but he was at present seated on a chair in the middle of the bar, reading a newspaper. He looked up on the entrance of Stamer, and seeing only a low-sized man, in very seedy black, and wearing blue spectacles, he called out to Tom to serve the gentleman.

Mr. Stamer paid for his steaming rum, tasted it, placed the glass conveniently at his right elbow, lit his pipe, and stretched himself to show he was quite at his ease, about to enjoy himself, and in no hurry. Then he took off his blue spectacles, and while he wiped the glasses very carefully, looked around and about him, and across the street at the gable of Forbes's bakery, with his naked eyes.

He saw with satisfaction that Oscar Leigh was sitting at the top window opposite, working away with a file on something held in a little vice fixed on his clockmaker's bench.

Oscar Leigh, at his bench in the top room of Forbes's bakery, overlooking Welbeck Place, was filing vigorously a bar of brass held in a little vice attached to the bench. He was unconscious that anyone was watching him. He was unconscious that the file was in his hand, and that the part of the bar on which he was working gradually grew flatter and flatter beneath the fretting rancour of the file. He was at work from habit, and thinking from habit, but his inattention to the result of his mechanical labour was unusual, and the thoughts which occupied him were far away from the necessities of his craft.

When he put the rod in the vice, and touched its dull yellow skin into glittering ribs and points sparkling like gold, he had had a purpose in his mind for that rod. Now he had shaved it down flat, and the rod and the purpose for which it had been intended were forgotten. The brazen dust lay like a new-fallen Danæe shower upon the bench before him, upon his grimy hands, upon his apron. He was watching the delicate sparkling yellow rain as it fell from the teeth of inexorable steel.

Oscar Leigh was thinking of gold-Miracle Gold.

Stamer had resumed his blue spectacles. He was furtively watching out of the corners of his eyes behind the blue glasses the man at the window above. He too was thinking of a metal, but not of the regal, the imperial yellow monarch of the Plutonian realms, but of a livid, dull, deadly, poisonous metal-lead, murderous lead.

The gold-coloured dust fell from the dwarf's file like a thin, down-driven spirt of auriferous vapour.

"Miracle Gold," he thought, "Miracle Gold. All gold is Miracle Gold when one tests it by that only great reagent, the world. The world, the world. In my Miracle Gold there would be found an alloy of copper and silver. Yes, a sad and poisonous alloy. Copper is blood-red, and silver is virgin white, and gold is yellow, a colour between the two, and infinitely more precious than they, the most precious of all metals is gold.

"The men who sought for the elixir of life sought also for the philosopher's stone. They placed indefinite prolongation of life and transmutation of the baser metals into gold side by side

in importance. And all the time they were burying in their own graves their own little capital of life; they were missing all the gold of existence!

"They ceaselessly sought for endless life and found nothing but the end of the little life which had been given them! They ceaselessly sought to make gold while gold was being made all round them in prodigal profusion! They seared up their eyes with the flames of furnaces and the fumes of brass, to make another thing the colour of flame, the colour of brass! Was there no gold made by the sunlight or the motion of men's hearts?

"I cannot make this Miracle Gold. I can pretend to make it and put the fruit of violence and rapine abroad as fruit of the garden of the Hesperides. The world will applaud the man who has climbed the wall and robbed the garden of the Hesperides, providing that wall is not in London, or England, or the British Empire.

"I am not thinking of making this gold for profit; but for fame; for fame or infamy?

"I am in no want of money, as the poor are in want of money, and I do not value money as the rich value it. From my Miracle Gold I want the fame of the miracle not the profit of the gold. But why should I labour and run risk for the philosopher's stone, when I am not greedy of pelf? For the distinction. For the glory.

"Mine is a starved life and I must make the food nature denies me.

"But is this food to be found in the crucible? or on the filter?

"I am out of gear with life, but that is no reason why I should invent a dangerous movement merely to set me going in harmony with something that is still more out of gear with life.

"The elixir of life is not what is poured into life, but what is poured out of it. We are not rich by what we get, but by what we give. Tithonus lived until he prayed for death.

"And Midas starved. He would have given all the gold in the world for a little bread and wine or for the touch of a hand that did not harden on his shoulder.

"Here is a golden shower from this brass bar.

"Miracle Gold! Miracle Gold does not need making at my hands. It is made by the hands of others for all who will stretch forth their hands and take it. It is ready made in the palm of every hand that touches yours in friendship. It is the light of every kindly eye.

"It is on the lips of love for lovers.

"One touch of God's alchemy could make it even in the breast of a hunchback if it might seem sweet to one of God's angels to find it there!"

He dropped the file, swept the golden snow from the bench, rose and shook from his clothes the shower of golden sparks of brass. Then he worked his intricate way deftly through the body of the clock and locking the door of the clock-room behind him, descended the stairs and crossed Welbeck Place to the Hanover public house.

CHAPTER XXIX

STRONG SMELLING SALTS

Stamer had by this time been provided with a second glass of the Hanover's famous rum hot. Mr. Williams the proprietor was still immersed in his newspaper, although Stamer's implied appreciation of the hot rum, in the order of a second glass, had almost melted the host into the benignity of conversation with the shabby-looking stranger. On the appearance of the dwarf, Williams rose briskly from his chair and greeted the new-comer cordially. Stamer did not stir beyond drawing back a little on his stool. Out of his blue spectacles he fixed a steady and cat-like gaze upon Leigh.

"How warm the weather keeps," said Leigh, climbing to the top of a stool, with his back to the door of the compartment and directly opposite Stamer. "Even at the expense of getting more dust than I can manage well with, I think I must leave my window open," pointing upwards to the clock-room. "The place is suffocating. Hah! Suffocating."

"Why don't you get a fine muslin blind and then you could leave the window open, particularly if you wet the blind."

"There's something in that, Mr. Williams; there's a great deal in what you say, Mr. Williams. But, you see, the water would dry off very soon in this broiling weather, and then the dust would come through. But if I soaked the blind in oil, a non-drying oil, it would catch all the dust and insects. Dust is as bad for my clock as steel filings from a stone are for the lungs of a Sheffield grinder. Hah! Yes, I must get some gauze and steep it in oil. Would you lend me the potman for a few minutes? He would know what I want and I am rather tired for shopping."

"Certainly, with pleasure, Mr. Leigh. Here, Binns, just put on your coat and run on an errand for Mr. Leigh, will you."

The potman who was serving the only customer in the public bar appeared, got his instructions and money from the clock-maker and skipped off with smiling alacrity. The little man was open-handed in such matters.

"Yes; the place is bad enough in the daytime," went on Leigh as he was handed a glass of shandy-gaff, "but at night when the gas is lighted it becomes choking simply."

"It's a good job you haven't to stay there long at night. No more than half-an-hour with the gas on."

"Yes, about half-an-hour does for winding up. But then I sometimes come there when you are all in bed. I often get up in the middle of the night persuaded something has gone wrong. I begin to wonder if that clock will get the better of me and start doing something on its own account."

"It's twice too much to have on your mind all by yourself. Why don't you take in a partner?" asked Williams sympathetically, "or," he added, "give it up altogether if you find it too much for you?" If Leigh gave up his miserable clock, Leigh and Williams might do something together. The two great forces of their minds might be directed to one common object and joined in one common fame.

"Partner! Hah!" cried Leigh sharply, "and have all my secrets blown upon in twenty-four hours." Then he added significantly. "The only man whom I would allow into that room for a minute should be deaf and dumb and a fool."

"And not able to read or write," added Williams with answering significance.

"And not able to read or write," said the dwarf, nodding his head to Williams.

The publican stood a foot back from the counter and expanded his chest with pride at the thought of being trusted by the great little man with the secret of the strange winder of two nights ago. Then he added, by way of impressing on Leigh his complete trustworthiness respecting the

evening which was not to be spoken of, "By-the-way Mr. Leigh, we saw you wind up last night, sure enough."

"Oh yes, I saw you. I nodded to you."

"Yes, at ten minutes past twelve by my clock, a quarter past twelve by my watch; for I looked, Mr. Leigh. You nodded. I told the gentlemen here how wonderfully particular you were about time, and how your clock would go right to a fraction of a second. If I am not mistaken this gentleman was here. Weren't you here, sir?" Williams said, addressing Stamer for the first time, but without moving from where he stood.

"I happened to be here at the time, and I saw the gentleman at the window above," said Stamer in a meek voice.

Then a remarkable thing happened.

The partition between the private bar and the public bar was about six feet high. Just over the dwarf's head a pair of long thin hands appeared on the top of the partition, and closed on it with the fingers pointing downward. Then very slowly and quite silently a round, shabby, brown hat stole upwards over the partition, followed by a dirty yellow-brown forehead, and last of all a pair of gleaming blue eyes that for a moment looked into the private bar, and then silently the eyes, the forehead, and the hat, sank below the rail, and finally the hands were withdrawn from the top of the partition. From the moment of the appearance of the hands on the rail until they left it did not occupy ten seconds.

No one in the private bar saw the apparition.

"Well," said Leigh, who showed no disposition to include Stamer in the conversation, "I can have a breath of air to-night when I am winding up. I am free till then. I think I'll go and look after that mummy. Oh! here's Binns with the muslin. Thank you, Binns, this will do capitally."

He took the little silver flask out of his pocket, and poured a few drops from it into his hand and sniffed it up, and then made a noisy expiration.

"Very refreshing. Very refreshing, indeed. I know I needn't ask you, Williams. I know you never touch it. You have no idea of how refreshing it is."

The smell of eau-de-cologne filled the air.

Stamer watched the small silver flask with eyes that blazed balefully behind the safe screen of his blue glasses.

"Would you oblige me," he said in a timid voice, holding out his hand as he spoke.

Leigh was in the act of returning the tiny flask to his waistcoat pocket. He arrested it a moment, and then let it fall in out of sight, saying sharply: "You wouldn't like it, sir. Very few people do like it. You must be used to it."

Stamer's suspicions were now fully roused. This was the very drug Leigh had used with Timmons. It produced little or no effect on the dwarf, for as he explained, he was accustomed to it, but on a man who had never inhaled it before the effect would be instant, and long and complete insensibility. "I should like very much to try. I can stand very strong smelling salts."

"Oh! indeed. Can you? Then you would like to try some strong smelling salts?" said Leigh with a sneer as he scornfully surveyed the shabby man who had got off his stool and was standing within a few feet of him. "Well, I have no more in the flask. That was the last drop, but I have some in this." Out of his other waistcoat pocket he took a small glass bottle with a ground cap and ground stopper. He twisted off the cap and loosened the stopper. "This is very strong, remember."

"All right." If he became insensible here and at this time it would do no harm. There was plenty of help at hand, and nothing at stake, not as with Timmons last night in that house over the way.

"Snuff up heartily," said the dwarf, holding out the bottle towards the other with the stopper removed.

Stamer leaned on one of the high stools with both his hands, and put his nose over the bottle. With a yell he threw his arms wildly into the air and fell back on the floor as if he were shot.

Williams sprang up on the counter and cried: "What's this! He isn't dead?" in terror.

The potman flew over the counter into the public bar, and rushed into the private compartment.

The solitary customer in the public bar drew himself up once more and stared at the prostrate man with round blue eyes.

Leigh laughed harshly as he replaced the stopper and screwed on the cap.

"Dead! Not he! He's all right! He said he could stand strong salts. I gave him the strongest ammonia. That's all."

The potman had lifted Stamer from the ground, propped him against the wall and flung half a bottle of water over his head.

Stamer recovered himself instantly. His spectacles were in pieces on the floor. He did not, considering his false beard and whiskers, care for any more of the potman's kindnesses. He stooped, picked up his hat and walked quickly out of the Hanover.

"I like to see a man like that," said Leigh, calmly blowing a dense cloud of cigar-smoke from his mouth and nodding his head in the direction Stamer had taken.

"You nearly killed the man," said Williams, dropping down from the counter inside the bar and staring at Leigh with frightened eyes that looked larger than usual owing to the increased pallor of his face.

"Pooh! Nonsense! That stuff wouldn't kill anyone unless he had a weak heart or smashed his head in his fall. I got it merely to try the effect of it combined with a powerful galvanic battery, on the nasal muscles of my mummy. Now, if that man were dead we'd get him all right again in a jiffy with one sniff of it. I was saying I like a man like him. You see, he was impudent and intruded himself on me when he had no right to do anything of the kind, and he insisted on smelling my strong salts. Well, he had his wish, and he came to grief, and he picked himself up, or rather Binns picked him up, and he never said anything but went away. He knew he was in the wrong, and he knew he got worsted, and he simply walked away. That is the spirit which makes Englishmen so great all the world over. When they are beaten they shake hands and say no more about the affair. That's true British pluck." Leigh blew another dense cloud of smoke in front of him and looked complacently at Williams.

"Well," said the publican in a tone of doubt, "he didn't exactly shake hands, you know. He does look a bit down in the world, seems to me an undertaker's man out of work, but I rather wonder he didn't kick up a row. Many another man would."

"A man of any other nationality would, but not a Britisher. If, however, you fancy the poor chap is out of work and he comes back and grumbles about the thing, give him half-a-sovereign from me."

"Mr. Leigh, I must say that is very handsome of you, sir," said Williams, thawing thoroughly. He was a kind-hearted man, and did think the victim of the trick ought to get some sort of compensation.

Meanwhile, Stamer had reached the open air and was seemingly in no great hurry to go back to the Hanover to claim the provision Leigh had made for his injury. He did not seem in a hurry to go anywhere, and a person who knew of what had taken place in the private bar, and seeing him move slowly up Welbeck Place with his left shoulder to the wall and his eyes on the window of the workshop, would think he was either behaving very like a kicked cur and slinking away with the desire of attracting as little attention as possible, or that he was meditating the mean revenge of breaking the dwarf's window.

But Stamer was not sneaking away. He was simply taking observations in a comprehensive and leisurely manner. Above all, he was not dreaming of breaking the clockmaker's window. On

the contrary he was hugging himself with delight at the notion that he would not have to break Leigh's window. No, there would not be the least necessity for that. As the window was now no doubt it would be necessary to smash one pane at least. But with that muslin blind well-soaked in oil stretched across the open, caused by the raising of the lower sash there would be no need whatever of injuring the dwarf's glass.

He passed very slowly down Welbeck Place towards the mews under the window which lighted the private bar, and through which he had watched the winding up of the clock last night. His eyes, now wanting the blue spectacles, explored and examined every feature of Forbes's with as close a scrutiny as though he were inspecting it to ascertain its stability.

When he had deliberately taken in all that eyes could see in the gable of Forbes's bakery, he turned his attention to his left, and looked with care unmingled with anxiety at the gable or rather second side of the Hanover. Then he passed slowly on. It might almost be fancied from his tedious steps that he had hurt his back or his legs in his fall, but he did not limp or wriggle or drag his legs.

Beyond the Hanover, that is on this side between the end of the public house and the Welbeck Mews, were two poor two-storey houses, let in tenements to men who found employment about the mews. These houses Stamer observed closely also, and then passed under the archway into the mews. Here he looked back on the gables of the tenement houses. They were, he saw, double-roofed, with a gutter in the middle, and from the gutter to the mews descended a water-pipe into the ground.

When there was nothing more to be noted in the outside of the gables, Stamer pulled his hat over his eyes and struck out briskly across the mews, which he quitted by the southern outlet.

As he finished his inspection and left the mews he thought:

"So that was the stuff he gave Timmons, was it? I suppose it had more effect on him or he got more of it. It didn't take my senses away for more than a flash of lightning, but more of it might knock me silly for a while. Besides, Timmons is not as strong a man as I. It is a wonder it did not kill him. I felt as if the roof of my skull was blown off. I felt inclined to draw and let him have an ounce. But then, although he may be playing into the hands of the police, he isn't a policeman. He couldn't have done the drill, although his boots are as big as the regulation boots. Then, even if I did draw on him I couldn't have got away. There were too many people about.

"So he'll wind up his clock to-night between twelve and half-past, will he? It will take him the longest half-hour he ever spent in all his life! There's plenty of time to get the tools ready, and for a little practice too."

Stamer had no personal resentment against Leigh because of the trick put upon him. A convict never has the sense of the sacred inviolateness of his person that belongs to men of even the most depraved character who have never "done time." He had arrived at his deadly intent not from feelings of revenge but from motives of prudence. Leigh possessed dangerous information, and Leigh was guilty of treason and was trying to compass betrayal; therefore he must be put away, and put away at once.

Meanwhile the man who drew himself up by his hands, and looked over the partition between the public and private bar, had left the Hanover. He was a very tall man with grizzled, mutton-chop whiskers and an exceedingly long, rusty neck. He wore a round-topped brown hat, and tweed clothes, a washed-out blue neckerchief, the knot of which hung low on his chest. He had no linen collar, and as he walked carried his hands thrust deep into his trousers' pockets.

He too, had come to Chetwynd Street, to the Hanover, to gather any facts he might meet about this strange clockmaker and his strange ways. He had gone into the public bar for he did not wish to encounter face to face the man about whom he was inquisitive. He had sent a boy for Stamer's wife and left her in charge of his marine store in Tunbridge Street, saying he was unexpectedly obliged to go to the Surrey Dock. He told her of the visit Stamer had paid him that morning, and

said he thought her husband was getting a bit crazy. Then he left her, having given her instructions about the place and promising to be back in a couple of hours.

Timmons was more than three hours gone, and when he re-entered Tunbridge Street Mrs. Stamer came in great excitement to meet him, saying she had no notion he would be so long and that if Tom came back during her absence he would be furious, as she had left no word where she was to be found. To this Timmons replied shortly that he didn't suppose Stamer would have come back, and parted from her almost rudely, which showed he was in a mind far from ordinary, for he was always jocular and polite after his fashion to the woman.

When he was alone in his own place he began walking up and down in a state of great perturbation.

"I don't know what to make of it-I don't know what to make of it," he thought. "Stamer is no fool, and I know he would not lie to me. He says he saw Leigh wind up the clock at the time Leigh was standing with me under the church tower. The landlord of that public-house says he saw him, and Leigh himself says he nodded to the landlord at a quarter past twelve! I'm not mad, and I wasn't drunk. What can it mean? I can make nothing of it.

"There may be something in what Stamer says after all. This miserable, hump-backed creature may be only laying a trap for us. If I thought I was to be caught after my years of care and caution by a mannikin like that, I'd slit his wizzard for him. I did not like his way last night, and the more I think of it the less I like it. I think I had better be off this job. I don't like it, but I don't care to fail, particularly after telling Stamer all about it.

"What business had that fool Stamer to walk straight into the lion's mouth? What did he want in Chetwynd Street? No doubt he went there on the same errand as I, to try to find out something more about last night. Well, a nice thing he did find out. What infernal stuff did the dwarf give Stamer to smell? It was a mercy it did not kill the man. If it had killed Stamer, and there had been an inquest, it would have made a nice mess. No one could tell what might have come out about Stamer, about the whole lot, about myself!

"It is plain no one ought to have further dealings with that little man. Anyone who could give stuff like that to a man to smell in broad daylight, and in the presence of witnesses, would not stick at a trifle in the dark and when no one was by. Yes, I must cut the dwarf. Fortunately, there is nothing in Leigh's possession he can use against me. I took good care of that.

"How will Stamer take the affair? Will he cherish anger? Will he want revenge?

"Well, if he will let him."

These were not the words in which Timmons thought, but they represent the substance of his cogitations.

Meanwhile, Oscar Leigh had left Chetwynd Street, and gone back to the clock-room to fix the new blind Binns, the potman, had bought for him. He had not intended returning that day, but he had nothing special to do, and the blind was a new idea and new ideas interested him.

He let himself in by the private door, and went straight to the clock-room. He had a bottle of sweet oil, and the roll of muslin. He oiled the muslin, and having stretched and nailed it in position, raised the lower sash of the window about two feet from the sill. The muslin was double, and the two sheets were kept half an inch apart by two rods, so that any dust getting through the outer fold might be caught by the inner one. Having settled this screen to his satisfaction, he left the room and descended once more.

"My clock," he thought, "will be enough for fame. I will not meddle with this Miracle Gold. I am committed to nothing, and anything Timmons may say will be only slander, even if he did dare to speak."

He reached the street, and wandered on aimlessly.

"My clock when it is finished will be the most perfect piece of mechanism ever designed and executed by one man. It will be classed among the wonders of the world, and be spoken of with admiration as long as civilization lasts.

"But I must take care it does not get the upper hand of me. Already the multiplicity of the movements confuse my head at times when I am not near it. I must be careful of my head, or my great work will suffer. Sometimes I see those figure of time all modelled and fashioned and in their proper dispositions executing their assigned evolutions. At times I am in doubt about them. They grow faint, and cobwebby, and misty, as though they were huddled together in some dim room, to which one ray of light was suddenly admitted. I must be careful of my head.

"Long ago, and also until not very long ago, when I added a new effect or movement it fell into its proper place and troubled me no more. Now, when I am away from my clock, when I cannot see and touch it, I often forget a movement, or give it a wrong direction, draw from it a false result.

"I am too much a man of one idea. I have imagination enough for a score of hands and ten stout bodies, and I have only a pair of hands and THIS!"

He paused and looked down at his protuberant chest and twisted trunk, and shrunken, bent legs, and enormous feet.

"I am a bad specimen of the work of Nature's journeyman, to put it as some one does, and I am abominably made-all except the head!"

He threw up his head and glanced around with scornful challenge in his eye.

"Hey!" cried a man's voice in alarm.

He looked up.

The chest of a horse was within a hand's breadth of his shoulder. The horse's head was flung aloft. The horse snorting and quivering, and bearing back upon his haunches.

Leigh sprang aside and looked around. He was in the middle of Piccadilly at Hyde Park Corner. He had almost been ridden over by a group of equestrians.

The gentleman whose horse had nearly touched him, took off his hat and apologised.

"You stopped suddenly right under the horse's head," said the gentleman. "I am extremely sorry."

Leigh raised his stick to strike the head of the horse.

The rider pulled his horse sharply away and muttered something under his breath.

"Oh, Sir Julius," cried a voice in terror, "it's Mr. Leigh!"

The dwarf's stick fell from his hand. "God's mercy in Heaven!" he cried in a whisper, as he took off his hat slowly, "Miss Ashton!"

Then, bareheaded and without his stick, he went up to the side of her horse, and said in a hoarse whisper, "I will have nothing to do with that Miracle Gold!"

A groom who had dismounted handed him his stick, and putting on his hat, he hastened away through the crowd which had begun to gather, leaving Dora in a state of mingled alarm and pity.

"Is he mad?" said Sir Julius Whinfield as the dwarf disappeared and the equestrians moved on.

"I'm sure I don't know. I think not. For a moment he terrified me, and now he breaks my heart!"

"Breaks your heart?"

"Oh, he ought not to be human! There surely can be no woe like his!"

CHAPTER XXX

DORA ASHTON ALONE

Dora Ashton was greatly shocked and distressed by the peril of Oscar Leigh and his subsequent behaviour.

"I am sure, Miss Ashton, I hope you will not imagine for a moment either that I was riding carelessly or that I recognised Mr. Leigh until you spoke. I saw him plainly enough as he was crossing the road. He was not minding in the least where he was going. He would have got across us in good time if he had only kept on; but he pulled up suddenly right under my horse's nose. I am sure I was more frightened than he. By Jove! how he glared at me. I think he would have killed me there and then if he could. He was going to strike my horse with that dreadful bludgeon of his. I am sure I was much more frightened than he was," said Sir Julius, in a penitential tone of voice, as the two rode on side by side.

The other members of the party, including Mr. Ashton, had fallen behind and were also discussing the incident among themselves.

"You were quite blameless," said the girl, who was still pale and trembling. "I don't suppose the poor man was much afraid. Of what should he be afraid?"

"Well," said the baronet, stroking the arching neck of his bay, "he was within an ace of being ridden over, you know."

"And suppose he had been knocked down and ridden over, what has he to fear, poor man?" she said. Her eyes were fixed, and she was speaking as if unconscious she uttered her words. The group had turned out of the noise of Piccadilly and were riding close together.

"He might have been hurt, I mean seriously hurt. Particularly he?"

"Hurt! How could he be hurt? You might be hurt, or I might be hurt, but how could he be hurt. Particularly he! You fancy because he is maimed and misshapen he is more likely to be hurt than a sound man?"

"Assuredly."

"I cannot see that. When people say a man was hurt, they do not mean merely or mostly that he endured pain. They mean that he was injured or disabled in some way. How can you injure or disable him? He is as much injured and disabled as a man can be and live."

"That is very true; but he might have been killed. Miss Ashton, you do not mean to say you think it would be better he had been killed?" cried Sir Julius in a tone of one shocked and surprised.

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