THE KEY OF THE STRONG ROOM

BY

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CHAPTER I.

HOW JOHNNY POUNCE WENT TO THE BAD.

OR rather, how the Bad came to Johnny Pounce; for Johnny Pounce was a brisk, energetic little man, with a strong sense of his own duty towards his neighbour, and a very hazy and indefinite notion of his neighbour's duty towards himself; and it has been generally observed that the folk who appear to go to the bad of their own volition are distinguished by precisely opposite characteristics, inasmuch as they are, as a rule, neither brisk nor energetic (except in the matter of language) and while they have formed the liveliest possible conception of what is due to themselves from others, appear to imagine that their obliging conduct in consenting to exist is an ample set-off against any account which might otherwise have stood against them in their neighbours' books.

He had been Johnny Pounce for many years. There is in the lifetime of most Johnnies an epoch at which the last syllable is cut off from the affectionate diminutive as being a species of undignified fringe, which, although proper and consistent when taken in conjunction with embroidered collars, frilled trousers, and caps of peculiar construction, resembling nothing so much as a concertina with a tassel and a spinal affection, is wholly inconsistent with the maturer dignity of jackets and highlow boots, to say nothing whatever of whiskers and the *toga virilis*. But it was otherwise with Johnny Pounce, There existed a legend in his family that for some years after his christening he was addressed and referred to on all occasions, formal or otherwise, as John, with a view to the propitiation of a rich uncle, likewise so called, who was then, and for ever after until he died Something in Demerara, and who was known to have entertained great objections to anything in the shape of a corruption of his own name, and who would, it was supposed, be proportionately gratified at his nephew's Christian name being maintained in its integrity.

But the rich uncle died insolvent of Sugar, when Johnny Pounce was six years old, to the great indignation of the Pounce family generally, and of those immediately interested in Johnny's welfare in particular. They had only one way of taking it out of the rich uncle's memory, and they availed themselves of it without delay. John became Jack upon the spot, and the name, whenever it was used, was rapped out with an emphatic asperity, which, although in no way referable to any misconduct on the part of its small proprietor, plunged that citizen into great consternation whenever family necessities required that he should be addressed by name. A sense of injury is seldom so deeply implanted, however, that time will not do much towards uprooting it, and in the course of years a compromise was effected, and John became Johnny. This consummation was brought about by various causes, and among others, through the intercession of the small owner himself, as he considered the emendation was not so susceptible of startling emphasis as the shorter corruption, and moreover would

give him more time to collect and arrange under various heads, those senses which were generally widely scattered whenever it was necessary to address him. A stern sense of the impropriety of disturbing the average which declared that every John shall be both Johnny and Jack in the course of his existence, may have had some influence in inducing Johnny's papa (who was then in temporary employment as a Census clerk) to make the alteration. As Johnny grew up, he continued so small (if one may so express oneself) and evinced a disposition so pleasantly timid and so easily imposed upon, and interpreted by such a cheery, piping little voice, that the propriety, not to say the necessity, of continuing to identify him as Johnny Pounce, was tacitly admitted as a matter of course upon all sides. So as Johnny Pounce he grew up, as Johnny Pounce he fought the battle of life, in a timidly courageous sort of way, like the comic soldier in the Battle of Waterloo, who is such a terrible coward until the necessity of engaging six or eight cuirassiers at once, becomes apparent.

Hitherto, that is to say up to the date of Johnny's going to the Bad, the Bad had left him pretty well to himself. Johnny was far from being a rich man, for he was an attorney's clerk, but he was almost as far removed, or so he thought, from being a very poor one. At the age of thirteen he entered the office of Messrs. Pintle and Sim, gentlemen, attorneys of Her Majesty's Courts at Westminster, and solicitors of the High Court of Chancery, at a commencing salary of seven shillings a week. The salary was small, but then so was Johnny, and it was understood that the two should increase and grow up together - an arrangement which was fortunately broken through, for at fifteen Johnny became, physically, a constant quantity. The salary, however, was increased by small degrees, as the unobtrusive virtues of the recipient became unintentionally conspicuous, until at the age of fifty-five he found himself in the possession of one hundred and fifty pounds per annum, together with his employers' full and undivided confidence.

Johnny had married, at the age of twenty-one, a pleasant round-faced little body of about his own age. She was the daughter of the housekeeper then attached to Pintle and Sim's offices, in Carey Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, and by her he had a son. The son, Young John for distinction, was a tall young fellow, who had been decently educated by his father, and effectually provided for by Messrs. Pintle and Sim, who had managed to procure for him a Government appointment - a junior assistant clerkship in the office of the Board for the Dissemination of Pauper Philosophy. Jack Pounce was looked up to as the great Pounce Court Card, being the representative of Majesty in the Pounce Councils, and in that capacity was played with great effect by Mrs. Pounce, whenever it became necessary, in contest with a fashionable lodging-letting neighbour, to assert the family respectability.

Not that the office of the Board for the Dissemination of Pauper Philosophy was an aristocratic Government office, or even an agreeable one, as far as the clerks were concerned. To be sure it was situated in Whitehall, and the hours were from eleven to five, which sounded well, but any aristocratic inferences drawn from these facts would be decidedly erroneous. It was to the Pauper Philosophy Office that all those shabby, not to say dirty, young men in caps and pipes, contrasting strongly with the graceful crowd of other more fortunate Government clerks, were making their way down Parliament Street at a quarter to eleven every morning, and it was at the door of the Pauper Philosophy Office that many unceremonious arrests were made by

showy Caucasians, who looked quite gentlemanly by contrast with their dispirited and shabby prisoners.

In fact the Pauper Philosophy Office, from the President of the Board and Secretary down to the assistant messengers, lived in chronic hot water, which appeared to have had the effect of boiling them, hard, so particularly impracticable were all officials connected with the establishment to each other and to the world at large. The President of the Board was in hot water, because he was ostensibly responsible for the proceedings of the office; and as he was a ministerial officer who in his ministerial capacity was also responsible for the good behaviour of five and twenty other Departments, with the intricate working of which he was supposed to become intimate by a species of Divine Right, immediately upon his taking office, he found his time fully occupied in cramming up "explanations," wherewith to satisfy the awkward demands of members with a natural taste for figures. The Secretary was in hot water because remorseless leader writers invariably spotted him as the actual author of every official bungle, and called (about three times a month) upon the country for his instant dismissal. The Under-Secretaries were in hot water because they found that the Secretary, upon parliamentary emergencies, was so fully occupied in cramming the President, that every detail of official business was referred to them for decision - matters upon which, as one was appointed by a Liberal, and the other by a Conservative Government, they never entirely agreed and the clerks were in hot water because they were deeply in debt, because they hated each other, looking, as they did, upon each other as the stepping-stones to a yearly increment of £10 instead of £5, and because their prospects in life were limited to the remote possibility of their attaining, one at a time, the princely salary of £300, after a forty years' apprenticeship. And finally, the messengers were in hot water because the clerks owed them money, because they owed each other money, and because hot arguments as to the comparative official superiority of clerks and messengers arose upon every occasion upon which these functionaries came into collision.

There was only one class of officials connected with the Pauper Philosophy Department, which appeared to enjoy a comparative immunity from the general feeling of unhappiness and discontent which pervaded the office. These were the Examiners; a dozen or so of gentlemen who were appointed (for no reason that clearly appeared) at a salary of £300, rising (for no obvious cause) by large yearly instalments to £800. It was required of these gentlemen that they should smoke pipes, drink beer, make bets, come when they liked, go when they liked, do what they liked, and be saddled with no responsibility whatever. These twelve gentlemen were the stock Mystery of the civil service. More questions were asked in the House about these functionaries than about any other minor topic of Parliamentary discussion, and they were naturally proud of the interest they excited. Sometimes, to be sure, this interest grew to rather too unwieldy dimensions to be pleasant, and in such cases it would become the duty of one of them to manufacture a return calculated to show, beyond all dispute, that the whole work of the Pauper Philosophy Office was, in point of fact, discharged by them, whereupon they would be much complimented in an indirect sort of way, and the subject allowed to drop for the time.

On Christmas Eve, in the year of grace 1854, Johnny Pounce entertained a small circle of his more intimate friends. Johnny lived on a second floor in Great Queen Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, and on the second floor in question were

assembled besides Johnny Pounce, and his wife, and his son John, Mr. and Mrs. Jemmy Feather, and Mr. Jemmy Feather, junior. Mr. Feather made a good thing of it as clerk to Bolter, Q.C. Jemmy Feather was a short, stoutish, middle-aged gentleman, with a highly respectable gold chain, a responsible-looking shirt pin, and a gold ring which was a reference in itself. Mrs. Feather was a weazen little body, with over lady-like manners, and a tendency to be ultra-genteel. Mr. Feather, junior, was fifteen, and in collars and straps. He was also in Bolter, Q.C.'s chambers as a sort of under-clerk and beer-fetcher to Bolter's pupils. This fact was carefully concealed from Mrs. Feather, who had been deluded by her designing husband into the idea that Mr. Feather, junior, spent his day in an arm chair, settling pleas and declarations all day long, and occasionally meeting in consultation such attorneys as his employer could not conveniently find time to see. This hypothetical and rosy view of the real facts of the case reconciled his mamma to his entering the service of a Queen's Counsel in such large practice that his clerk drew about £300 a year in fees alone. Then there was Joe Round, Mrs. Joe Round, and Miss Joe Round, and Miss Joe Round's young man, in a pink fluffy face, and blue stock with gold flies. Joe Round was deputy usher at the Central Criminal Court. He was a big, full-voiced man, with a red face, black curly hair, and a self-assertive manner. He had a way with him which seemed to say, "I am Joe Round. Take me as you find me, or let me go, but don't find fault." Mrs. Joe Round was a beautiful specimen of faded gentility. She was an Old Bailey attorney's daughter, and a taste for exciting trials had led her in early youth to the C. C. C., where she saw Joe Round, fell in love with his big voice, and married him. Miss Round was a rather pretty girl, with flirty, aggravating ways which threatened to drive Miss Round's young man (who was a Toast-master) into a state of utter desperation. John Pounce the younger was present, but sat apart in a moody, sulky way, that created considerable astonishment; for John was a strapping, good-looking young fellow, with plenty to say for himself, and always, on occasions of festivity, in good humour.

The evening had been spent as most conventional Christmas Eves are. There is a fearful ordeal to be gone through by all who wish to see Christmas-day in according to rule, and this ordeal is called Forfeits. By way of atonement for an imaginary crime you are required to perform an enigmatical and apparently impossible task. As there exist only about six of these *supplicia*, and as everybody has known them, and their solution by heart from the age of four, and as the tasks, when known, are of the simplest possible description, it is difficult to see in what particular feature the amusement consists. In nearly all cases the penalty involves kisses, which, have to be bestowed on young ladies present, which is an insulting view to take of what is usually looked upon as a favour, and places them, moreover, in an embarrassing position. As there was only one young lady present, Miss Round, she became as a matter of course the implement of torture to the aggravation of the pink young toast-master, who appeared to be doing the reverse of drinking everybody's health, and making no exception in favour of young John, between whom and Miss Round an excellent understanding seemed to exist.

Supper had been laid, devoured, and removed, and a fragrant liquor looking like gravy soup, but being in point of fact, rum-punch, had taken its place. Cheery little Johnny Pounce was ladling it out of a very large ladle into very small glasses, with a skill which argued an extensive practice, extending over a large number of consecutive Christmas Eves.

Johnny Pounce was eminently loyal, and there were three toasts that invariably obtained at his meetings, the Queen, Church and State, and the Firm.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, in proposing the last toast, "I call it still the Firm, though it's a Firm no longer except in name. Mr. Sim, as you have heard me say, left the business three years since, and he's now in Melbourne doing his ten thousand a year, God bless him. It's my conviction, gentlemen, that if ever there was a better-hearted gentleman than Pintle that gentleman is Sim, and if ever there existed a nobler old gentleman than Sim that old gentleman is Pintle. They were good to me when I was a boy no higher than - than I am now, gentlemen, and they've made a man of me, and they've given me my old wife there (hear, hear) - my old wife there, who's looking just the same in my old eyes as she did thirty year ago, gentlemen. ("Go along, Johnny, do," from Mrs. Pounce.) She's stuck to me through thick and thin, for I've had a hardish time of it, take one thing with another, and here I am thrown high and dry beyond the reach, as I humbly believe, of poverty, with my boy here - look up, young John - with my boy here a-serving the Queen; (John, my boy, fill up) - a-serving the Queen, God bless her, and doing more to make his old dad's heart happy, by doing that for ninety pound a year than if he was managing a bank with five hundred, gentlemen. Gentlemen, this is all Pintle and Sim, and what I say is, Here's the health of Pintle and Sim, and God bless 'em. The Firm, gentlemen."

The toast was received with all enthusiasm.

"Why, young John," said Johnny. "Cheer up, lad, you're terrible down-hearted to-night!"

"What's it all about, John?" said Jemmy Feather. "Give it a name, young John."

"I think Mr. John must be in love," said Miss Round.

"Nonsense, I'm all right, father. Don't mint me, I'm a bit low to-night, but it's nothing to speak of."

"Now, Mr. John,'' said Miss Round, "I insist upon your cheering up. It's a very bad compliment you're paying me; I declare you haven't spoken a word to me all the evening." And Miss Round assumed a becoming pout which had worked great things in bringing the young toast-master to the point.

The effect of the usually successful pout was quite lost upon Mr. John, who fidgeted upon his chair in an unsatisfactory and discontented way. Not so, however, upon the toast-master who, remembering the effect the pout in question had had upon him, regarded young John with feelings of the bitterest hate. He was, of course, unable to convey any verbal expressions of his sentiments on this point, so he contented himself with silently drinking innumerable ironical toasts, all of which professed to invoke blessings without number on the head of the miserable young man.

A knock was heard at the door, and a drabby maid servant put her head in.

“Mr. Pounce, sir. If you please, sir, you’re wanted.”

“Eh, what, Maria, me wanted? Why, who wants Johnny Pounce at half-past twelve on Christmas morning?”

“It’s a gentleman, sir. It’s from the Firm. He’s in the back room.”

“God bless me, at this time of night! Excuse me, old friends, for a moment; I’ll be with you again directly. Here, young John, take my place, my boy, and give ’em a song: I’ll be back directly.” And Johnny Pounce left the room.

Young John could not in strictness be complimented upon his conduct in the chair. The song which his father had suggested on leaving the room, was loudly called for.

“Now, young John,” said Round. “The song. Silence in court.”

“Oh do, Mr. John,” chorussed the ladies.

“For my sake,” added Miss Round.

“Yes, for *her* sake,” muttered the toast-master, ironically.

“Look here,” said John, “I’m not in cue for singing, and that’s the long and short of it. Hang it all, can’t you see that?”

It could be seen, and very plainly too. The poor fellow presented a depressing specimen of a convivial chairman.

“I believe it’s usual to sing when called on,” said the toast-master. “At least that’s the rule.”

“Hear, hear,” from Feather. “Now, gents, what do you say? The prisoner at the bar stands on his deliverance.”

“Ha! ha! Good that. ‘Stands on his deliverance.’ So he does.” This from Round.

“Now, gents, you shall well and truly try; eh, Round, my boy?”

“Certainly,” said the usher. “‘Well and truly try.’ Well said, Jemmy. Good. ‘Well and truly try. And true deliverance make.’”

Whether the result of this combination of forces backed up as it was by the majesty of the Law, would have had the desired effect is uncertain, for at that moment Johnny Pounce entered the room as pale as a ghost.

“We’re very glad you’re come, Mr. Pounce,” said Mrs. Feather, “young Mr. John is quite refractory he won’t sing, do what we can. Why, dear me, Mr. Pounce, what on earth’s the matter?”

“There must be no more singing to-night; an awful thing has happened. Mr. Pintle fell down dead half-an-hour ago!”

And Johnny Pounce dropped into his chair, and covered his face with his hands.

“Good God, Johnny! Dead!” said Mrs. Pounce; “Mr. Pintle dead!”

“Yes, dead! and me drinking his health not ten minutes since. Old friends, you’ll forgive me, I know; but I’m afraid we must break up; it’s an awful thing.”

“And you a drinking of his health!” reflected the toast-master, with an air which suggested that he regretted the circumstance as having a tendency to lessen the general belief in the efficacy of toasts, and, indirectly, in his professional importance.

The company arose to go amid an awkward silence, which was broken by occasional and spasmodic efforts at common-place consolation.

The having to go away gave a heartless effect to the behaviour of the company; it seemed so like deserting a friend in the hour of need; but there was no help for it, and one by one, almost silently, the visitors took their departure.

“It’s a dreadful thing,” said Johnny, when he and his wife and son were left alone. “Disease of the heart: sudden, quite sudden; dropped down in his chair, and me sent to, to give up his papers; I must be off to the office.”

“Oh, Johnny, Johnny! what *are* we to do? Poor Mr. Pintle! Such a fine old gentleman, and ten years more life you could have declared to; the picture of health he always was. Poor Mrs. Pintle!”

And Johnny Pounce wrapped himself in a great coat and shawl, and hurried through the driving snow across Lincoln’s Inn Fields into Carey Street.

The visitors (for they were two) who had so unceremoniously disturbed Johnny’s party were waiting for him in a Hansom at the office door. One of them was an errand-lad, whose faculties seemed to have been quite dispersed by the frightful occurrence which had just taken place, and which, in fact, he had almost witnessed. The other was a tall, dark gentlemanly man, with a heavy black moustache and military bearing. He was John Redfern, the late Mr. Pintle’s nephew and heir-at-law, and held a captain’s commission in a cavalry regiment. The mission upon which he had come was to fetch the will which was known to be in the office, together with such other documents as might refer to the affairs of the dead man, and to seal all cupboards, doors, and safes.

“Oh! here you are,” said Captain Redfern.

“What a deuce of a time you’ve been! Now, we’ll get the will and other papers, and then you must come down with them to Russell Square, and deliver them into Mrs. Pintle’s custody.”

Poor Johnny opened the office door with some difficulty, for his hand shook violently, and his eyes were blinded with big tears. Although he winked and blinked hard at them, they wouldn't take the hint, but rolled down his face until their identity was lost in that of the melting snow on his woollen comforter.

"Mr. Pintle's will, sir, is in this box; shall I take it to Russell Square, sir, or unlock it here?"

"Better open it now," said Captain Redfern; "Mrs. Pintle is, of course, greatly distressed, and would be unable to attend to it at present. Open it; will you?"

The box was opened, but no will was there; and the papers it contained referred only to mortgages effected on his real property. Poor Johnny stood utterly dismayed, as he had a perfect recollection of having seen Mr. Pintle place it there a few days before his death.

"There is no will here, sir, and yet he always told me to look here for it if ever he was carried off sudden. What's more, I see him put it in here himself not three days ago. It was the day before yesterday when he kindly added a codicil, which increased the sum he was good enough to leave to me, sir; I'm his confidential clerk, sir, and have been for fifteen year, and he'd have told me if --"

"Well, but isn't there any other receptacle into which he may have placed it? Think now. Don't stand staring there, but bustle about and find it."

"Captain Redfern, I'm doing my best to think, but my head's not strong, and I've been terribly shook, sir. There are the drawers of his private table; it's the only place I can think of."

The drawers of the desk were opened one by one, and their contents overhauled, Memoranda, important letters that required his personal attention, stationery, and other matters of a similar nature, were there, but no will.

"I'm quite lost, sir," said Johnny. "It's the most extraordinary thing! He would never have destroyed it without telling me."

"Come along, you boy," said Captain Redfern to the office lad. "You can go," he added to Pounce. "I keep you on at your salary another week, during which time you be always here in case you're wanted. At the end of the week you go. Take this as notice to quit. Stop; seal up the inner room;" and sealed up the inner room was.

Captain Redfern and the boy got into the Hansom, and drove off to Russell Square. Old Johnny Pounce, completely staggered by what had occurred, locked the outer door, and trudged back through the cold slush to Great Queen Street.

His wife and son were still sitting up, talking over the event of the evening, when Johnny entered. The mother had evidently been recapitulating the chances of Johnny Pounce having been comfortably provided for; and young John listened sulkily, but with interest nevertheless.

"Well, Johnny, back again! Now you just drink this right off before you say another word;" and she handed him a big tumbler of punch, which she had kept hot for him during his absence.

"No, no, my dear; no punch. It's a most extraordinary thing, but there's no will to be found. He must have destroyed it since the day before yesterday, and I've notice to go this day week. Thus ends forty-five years' faithful service!"

"Oh! Johnny!" sobbed his wife.

"Young John, my boy," said his father, "there's no knowing how long I may be without employment; for I'm an old man, John, and it'll be poor work whatever it is. You're the head of the family now, young John, and it's your turn to show yourself equal to the position. You're the Queen's servant, John, and a gentleman. John, my boy, we must look to you."

"Don't look to me, father, for much," said young John, "for I got the sack this morning!"

CHAPTER II.

HOW JOHNNY POUNCE SPENT A CONSIDERABLE TIME AT THE BAD.

THIS was a terrible blow to Johnny Pounce and his wife, who had a restless time of it that night. He knew very well that Mr. Pintle had made a will, and further, that his, Johnny Pounce's, name was down in it for £1,000, which was a sum sufficient to render him independent for life. If the will turned up, which appeared unlikely, all would be well; if not, the family prospects were particularly unsatisfactory. He was thrown out of employment, with no immediate prospect of obtaining anything half so good (for he was getting on in years), and had saved but little money, for he knew, or felt sure that he knew, that Pintle and Sim would never let him want. Moreover his son, whom he had looked upon as the only prop and stay of the family respectability, had that day been ignominiously discharged from his clerkship.

And the manner of his dismissal was this. He had a few days before, in resisting a piece of unnecessary petty tyranny on the part of a fellow clerk in temporary charge of his department, used stronger language than was absolutely necessary. This was reported to the Secretary. Now the Secretary had a double action, back-hand way of dealing with complaints of the kind between "hands," (as he delighted to call them) of nearly equal rank, and the usual remedy was adopted on this occasion. Fox (the complainant) was rebuked for having used unnecessary tyranny, but it was shown that young John was doubly culpable, for he not only resisted the order, which he should have obeyed and then complained of, but he had also sworn a bad oath, and otherwise misconducted himself (being a hot-headed young fellow) to the annihilation of all order and discipline. So it was ordered that young John should forthwith publicly apologize to the miscreant Fox, which young John resolutely declined to do. So My Lords deliberated on the state of the case, and the result of the deliberation was that young John was required to deliver over into My Lords' hands his resignation of the appointment he held under them.

A more miserable young man than young John was on the afternoon of Christmas Eve probably never stepped out of a government office. He was absolutely penniless, and particularly deeply in debt - in a small vulgar way - besides. He had borrowed £5 from a loan office, and he was in debt to the amount of some pounds to the tavern-keeper who supplied his dinner. His tailor and boot-maker had for months been a source of anxiety to him, sleeping and waking; and a miserable bit of kite-flying (of which he expected to hear more on the 1st February) exercised a depressing influence over him, which appeared to increase in geometrical proportion as the day approached.

As a set-off to these claims, he had his half quarter's cheque on the Paymaster-General for about £12, and a letter from the Secretary accepting his resignation in My Lords' names.

Young John had, however, quite made up his mind as to his future course. The Crimean war was then in full swing, the battles of the Alma and Inkerman had both been fought in the course of the last three or four months, and the demand for young and active fellows to fill up the lists of the dead was unprecedented. There were recruiting sergeants at every street corner in Westminster, who talked with robust eloquence of the glories of the War (which they had not seen) and of the rollicking character of life in the trenches (of which they had formed but vague and imperfect notions). Liberal bounty and a free kit were offered as a temptation, should the war itself be an insufficient attraction. Of the starving, with plenty within grasp (only under lock and key); of the freezing, with new great-coats and rugs in tens of thousands a mile away (only under seal); of the dying for want of medicines and bandages, with stores of drugs and bales of lint within pistol shot (only stowed in ship holds) nothing was said. In point of fact, of these matters little or nothing was then known in England. Young John had made up his mind that morning that he would take the shilling of the first smart cavalry sergeant who hailed him, so he spent an hour or two in writing a letter to his father and mother (enclosing his cheque on the Paymaster-General duly signed) and in packing up a scanty wardrobe, the greater part of which he determined to sell. He left his home before daybreak on Christmas morning, and bore away straight for a public-house in Charles Street, Westminster, the head quarters of a party of cavalry recruiting sergeants.

He soon found what he wanted. A non-commissioned officer of the 13th Light Dragoons was down upon him in a hail-fellow well-met sort of way, with, an affectation of joviality intended to convey an idea of what a particular jolly thing a soldier's life really was. Young John soon entered into conversation with the sergeant, and the sergeant, who was a liberal-hearted dog, stood a pot of beer (because it was Christmas-day) which they drank together.

Young John asked few questions of the sergeant, but those that he did ask had reference principally to the nature of the life in store for him.

"Well," said the sergeant, summarizing the whole thing, "look here; eight in the morning *reveillé* - up you get. You can get up at eight, can't you?"

Johnny thought he could manage it at a pinch.

"That's lucky. Well, you have an hour to dress; then comes breakfast - coffee or chocolate, bread and butter, and eggs, or wot not. Then once a week, mornin' stables; twice a week, adjutants' parade, one hour; other days, nothing, except when for guard or fatigue, which comes (say) once a month. One o'clock, dinner - soup or fish (seldom both), and jint; pudden very rare. Then nothin' till six: six, evening stables, once a week; other days, reading out loud, half an hour. Then nothing till tattoo, which in crack regiments is mostly half-past eleven. At tattoo, roll call, and bed. That's the programme."

Young John made some allowance for the gallant fellow's enthusiasm: extreme love of a profession often invests it with an attractive colouring.

"I joined eighteen months ago," the sergeant continued. "I'm but a young soldier, as you see, but I rose. In six weeks I was made a corporal, with 5s. 9d. a day; in six more I was troop sergeant, with 8s. 4d. That's what I'm getting now; 8s. 4d. ain't bad for eighteen months. You'd do it in half the time."

"Now look here," said John. "Don't tell unnecessary lies. If the service was the worst on the face of the earth, I'd join it, because I've, what people call, gone wrong, and I want to get away from. this. I'm a strongish chap, and about the sort of man you fellows want; so hand over the shilling. My name's John Cole; age, twenty-two; previous occupation, clerk."

The sergeant vowed he was the very man he wanted. He admired pluck he said, and had himself cut away from, a lucrative profession because he wanted to see what blood was like. Most of the men in crack cavalry regiments were young barristers of arts or medical doctors, with here and there a young nobleman or two, under an assumed name. These young men had cut from home because their relentless parents, having set their face against the army as a profession, had refused to buy them commissions. That was his case. He was a barrister of arts once; now he was troop-sergeant in Her Majesty's 13th Light, and thank God, *he* said.

All this was satisfactory, as far as it went, and young John Pounce was duly enlisted, under the name of John Cole, by the friendly sergeant. The subsequent medical examination and attestation were properly and satisfactorily undergone, and Private John Cole, of Her Majesty's 13th Light Dragoons, was drafted off to the regimental depôt, and thence in about six weeks to the Crimea.

A thoroughly sleepless night is a fearful thing to undergo. It is bad enough when that sleeplessness is the result of sharp pain or irritating fever, but when it comes of a distressed and disheartened mind, it is absolutely terrible. Poor old Johnny Pounce had a bad time of it that Christmas night. He tossed and rolled about, and changed the side of his pillow, and then, when it turned out that that energetic step was barren of good result, he got out of bed, and walked up and down the room; then he got into bed again, and counted five thousand. "Five thousand" found him rather more wakeful if possible than he was when he began, so he gave up counting to listen to the ticking of the old Dutch clock. But the old Dutch clock called so loudly for "Linkman Toddles! Linkman Toddles! Linkman Toddles!" that he began to wish that functionary would appear, and satisfy the clamorous old instrument. Toddles not turning up, the clock gave him up for a bad job, and in despair at Toddles' want of

faith, ticked out plaintively, “Come Dyspepsia! Come Dyspepsia! Come Dyspepsia!” This awful invocation was too much for poor Johnny, who got out of bed once more, and finally stopped the dreadful machine. As morning broke, he fell into a restless tossing sleep, which only had the effect of giving him a racking headache. When he finally awoke, it was with a dull heavy sense of some fearful misfortune which had just happened to him, and when the events of the preceding night broke suddenly upon him, he buried his old head in his pillow, and sobbed aloud.

Matters were not mended by the discovery of the letter which young John had placed on the sitting-room table. It hardly wanted this to complete the family misery, and old Johnny and his wife were absolutely thunderstruck by this fresh misfortune. The letter did not say where young John was going, nor did it give any clue to the step that he was about to take. It merely said that he was going away for a while; that if he could save any money he would send it from time to time to a post-office in the neighbourhood; that they were not to fret for him, as he would be sure to turn up sooner or later; that the cheque for £12 was for their use; that his dismissal was not attended by any disgraceful circumstances, and that he was their ever-loving son, John Pounce.

Old Johnny’s indignation at this desertion was unbounded.

“So that’s my son, is it? That’s my fair-weather son, whom I’ve brought up, and educated, and clothed, and fed, and whom the Firm made a gentleman of. What’ll the Firm think of this, after all their kindness?”

Mrs. Pounce mildly reminded her husband that the Firm was in heaven.

“True, true - I forgot. If he’d only given us a hint as to where he was going; if he’d shaken his old dad’s hand and kissed his old mother before he left, I could have forgiven him. But to desert his old parents just as soon as he found out that they were penniless and could help him no longer, was that like a son of ours, Emma?”

“Well, Johnny, for the matter of that, it may be that he was fearful of being an incumbrance. He’s left his half quarter’s salary for us, and I’m afraid the poor boy has gone forth into the world without a penny in his pocket. I’d make a better breakfast this morning for the knowledge beyond doubt that he’d had one too. Perhaps he’s hungry, Johnny.”

“Hungry, Emma? Young John hungry? Hungry, and me a-pegging away into bread and meat, and his half quarter’s cheque a-staring me in the face, and him hungry. What a dreadful thing to think of, old girl. Poor young John!”

They were not long in coming to the conclusion that he had enlisted. Johnny’s duties called him to Carey Street, although it was Christmas Day, but Mrs. Johnny made it her business to wander about recruiting depôts all day. Young John, however, carefully kept himself inside the public-house, and gave the friendly recruiting sergeant, who was not quite so friendly now - that professional gentleman having cooled down amazingly since the morning - a hint that he might possibly be sought for. So Mrs. Pounce’s efforts were utterly fruitless.

Johnny spent every day that ensuing week at the office. It was difficult at first to persuade oneself that that chair would never be filled by Mr. Pintle again; that the ruler, paper-weight, gum-bottle, pens, ink, and scissors, left as he had left them day after day for fifty years, had been arranged in their methodical order by him for the last time. The conveyancing clerk and the common law clerk were paid their salaries and dismissed by Captain Redfern, the heir-at-law, who was closeted all day long with old Johnny, going over mortgage deeds, and making himself intimate with all the affairs of the dead man. On the Saturday evening, old Johnny was paid his last week's salary of three pounds, and was informed that his services would for the future be dispensed with.

Old Johnny spent many a weary day, and trudged many a weary mile through snow and slush, after fresh employment. He was known and respected by many of Pintle's clients, and also by solicitors who had been opposed to Pintle and Sim; but he could get little from them. The fact that no will had been found, although it was admitted by Johnny that one had been made and deposited in his custody two days before Pintle's death, argued either gross carelessness or gross felony on the part of the confidential clerk, and added to this, he was a feeble old man, and quite past learning new duties. A few of his better friends subscribed small sums for the old man's maintenance, and others gave his wife needlework, so that for some weeks they were kept from absolute want. But these weekly subscriptions dwindled down, one by one, as the recollection of old Johnny and his distress became less vivid, until at last they had nothing to depend on but a weekly five shillings, the subscription of a stauncher friend than the rest.

In his extreme distress he made an appeal to Mrs. Pintle. He dressed himself as neatly as his reduced circumstances would allow, and presented himself at her house in Russell Square. He had been there once before since Mr. Pintle' s death, to ask permission to follow his old employer to the grave, but he was curtly informed that Captain Redfern would require him in the office that day, and that therefore he could not be present. This rebuff, conveyed to him by a weak-eyed flunkey, who called him "my man," had had the effect of preventing his applying to Mrs. Pintle for assistance hitherto; but emboldened by hunger, and more especially by the thinning face of his once chubby little wife, he determined to put his pride in his pocket, and encounter the weak-eyed one once more.

The weak-eyed one was just in the transition state between a very old page and a very young footman. His precise functions in Mrs. Pintle's household were as indefinite as his age, for his duties extended from cleaning the windows to driving (at a pinch) the brougham. He was engaged in the familiar but necessary duty of cleaning the knives when Johnny called, and as Johnny inadvertently pulled the visitor's bell, the weak-eyed one was under the necessity of exchanging the linen jacket of domestic life for the black coat and worsted epaulette of ceremony, and of making other radical improvements in his personal appearance, before he opened the door. This functionary had, from, a great many years' apprenticeship at opening street doors, taught himself to look upon society as divided into two great heads or groups Visitors and Servants; and he who was not a visitor, was, from the weak-eyed one's point of view, a servant. He considered that a man's social position was typified by the bell he rung, and as there existed no intermediate bell for the numerous classes of callers who certainly could not aspire to the dignity of being considered visitors in the ordinary

acceptation of the term, and who were equally far from being in the position of domestic servants, he recognized no intermediate class between the honoured drawing-room morning caller and the boy who brought the servants' beer. Avowedly a servant himself, he was affable, and in a weak-eyed way even cheerful, to those who identified themselves with the humbler bell; but he who, without due excuse, rang a bell which implied that he was a drawing-room visitor, became on the spot the object of the weak-eyed one's unutterable loathing and foul scorn.

Wretched Johnny stood on the steps waiting for the opening of the door, and improving the opportunity by blowing his frozen nose, that he might not be compelled to the commission of that indecency before Mrs. Pintle. Eventually it opened, and the weak-eyed one stood before him in all the respectable magnificence of expensive mourning.

"Well, what is it?'' said that retainer, as soon as he had taken Johnny's measure, and assured himself of Johnny's want of title to the dignity to which he had aspired.

Now "What is it?" is a peculiarly aggravating form of address, and one which is much affected by haughty menials, Bank of England clerks, ushers in courts of law, and other insolent and overbearing underlings. Providence, however, who seldom inflicts a bane without providing an antidote, has mercifully endowed the questioned one with the power of making the return inquiry, "What is what?" which, being unanswerable, has the effect of invariably shutting up, humbling, and morally squashing the miserable flunkey whose misconduct brings it down upon him.

Johnny, however, being depressed in mind, enfeebled in body, and entertaining altogether the poorest possible opinion of himself and his claims to an honourable reception, and, moreover, not being aware of the magnificent revenge which lay within his grasp, humbly replied that he should be glad to see Mrs. Pintle, if convenient.

"What might you wish with Mrs. Pintle?" asked the weak-eyed one.

"I am the late Mr. Pintle's confidential clerk; I wish to speak to her in that capacity."

"Oh! indeed, sir; walk in," said the weak-eyed one, not feeling altogether sure whether Johnny had not succeeded in establishing his title to the visitors' bell after all, notwithstanding the depressing seediness of Johnny's appearance. He perhaps thought that this melancholy state of things was the natural result of the absorbing nature of the confidences which had been reposed in Johnny by Mr. Pintle. The Queen's Counsel, who dined now and then at the house, were seedy, so that after all that was no rule. So he showed Johnny into the library, and shortly returned with the information that Mrs. Pintle was in the drawing-room and would see him there. So Johnny walked up the softly-carpeted staircase, with much internal flutter, and much external mopping, and moreover, with much clearing of husky throat. He found Mrs. Pintle dressed in the deepest black, and reclining, in a spineless way, on a comfortable sofa.

Mrs. Pintle was a lady of fifty, or thereabouts. She was a lank, limp, lady, with pale straw-coloured hair, turning grey, in that underdone pie-crust looking way peculiar to straw-coloured hair in middle age. She was a perfect monument of black bombazine, crape, bugles, and jet, and if the depth of her sorrow could be fathomed in any way by reference to the funereal character of her appearance, she must have been a wife to be proud of. The memorial erected in Kensal Green to the late Mr. Pintle's memory, covered as it was with Scriptural references (which were, no doubt, anxiously overhauled by all visitors to that cheerful spot immediately on their reaching home), was an admirable conventional tombstone, as tombstones go, but it was entirely eclipsed in efficacy by Mrs. Pintle herself, who possessed peripatetic advantages which carried a mournful recollection of the deceased lawyer into the very bosom of her visiting acquaintance. The only question was as to the comparative duration of the two monuments. Every article of furniture which admitted of black drapery was smothered in it, and the envelopes and note-paper were black, with a small white parallelogram in the centre. As you gazed upon this melancholy state of things, you were almost tempted to wonder how it was that the pie-crust hair had not been placed in mourning also.

Johnny was immensely impressed by this dismal spectacle, and was much pleased at the contradiction it gave to the popular rumour that Mr. and Mrs. Pintle had not spent a particularly happy life together. He bowed with much reverence, an act which Mrs. Pintle acknowledged with a movement of the head, which bore the same relationship to an ordinary nod that the Old Hundredth does to an Irish jig.

"You were my dear husband's clerk, I believe'" she remarked.

Johnny bowed.

"You can take a chair, if you have anything to say."

So Johnny sat down on the extreme edge of a very low *prie Dieu* chair, which was the only available seat immediately at hand, and twitched nervously at his old hat; an operation which appeared likely to result in the immediate dissolution of that article of apparel. It is always an awkward thing, that hat. There are only three classes of visitors who are permitted to know what to do with it when they take it into a house which is not their own. The friend of the family, who comes to spend the evening, leaves it with the man in the hall, the ordinary visitor places it on an unoccupied chair, and the carpenter deposits it on the ground; but all others are required to hold it in their hands during an interview, and yet, if possible, to keep it out of sight. Johnny's was a self-assertive hat, which did not admit of easy concealment; so he fidgeted it about until it actually appeared to be taking a prominent part in the conversation.

"Now, then," said Mrs. Pintle, "what do you want? I suppose it's nothing about the will?"

"Nothing about the will, ma'am. I've not been in the way of hearing about it lately."

"Well, then, what in goodness's name do you want? Speak out, man, and have done with it."

Mrs. Pintle was one of that numerous class of mourners, whose grief takes the form of irritability. Besides, she had jumped to the conclusion that Johnny's visit referred to the missing document, and was disappointed.

"Ma'am, I've never done this before, but it's help I've come for. I've been Mr. Pintle's clerk, man and boy for five and forty year; and - and now I'm in want, ma'am. I'm in absolute want. I've not come," said Johnny hurriedly,, anxious that he should not be misunderstood, "I've not come, ma'am, to mention that, in the hopes that your kindness will immediately - will immediately" - (and he paused for a way of expressing it; and then added triumphantly) "will immediately put me right. God forbid. But if you would kindly put me or my wife (she's a young woman still) in the way of earning a livelihood - we don't care how humble it is, or how hard the work - we shall be deeply grateful."

"Is that all?" asked Mrs. Pintle, with a cold official air which did not promise well.

"I've no more to say, ma'am," added he, "except that I've been living in a sort of way, on charity mostly, for the last six weeks. I've tried to get work, and failed. I don't know how it is, but I've failed. I'm not young, ma'am, but I've got plenty of work left in me, if I could only find somebody who wants it."

"*That* is all, I presume?"

"That is all, ma'am."

"Then listen to me. My husband made a will, you know that?"

Poor Johnny knew it perfectly well. It had been the leading fact in his thoughts for weeks past, and there was no chance of his forgetting it. So he bowed.

"Very good. You know that my husband made a will. He placed it under your care. He gave it to you on the 22nd December. He died at mid-night on the 24th. No will was to be found on the night of the 24th, and you have been unable or unwilling to produce it since. I don't know which, nor do I care. You can draw your own conclusions. Now you can go."

It burst upon Johnny all at once; a sort of suspicion appeared to attach itself to him that he knew more about the missing document than he cared to say. This was the solution of the difficulty he had experienced in getting employment from solicitors whom he had known, and with whom he had been friendly in better days.

"Mrs. Pintle," he exclaimed, "listen to me for one moment. Is it possible that I am suspected of having suppressed Mr. Pintle's will? It is a horrible thing to have to say in connection with one's self, but you seem to think that I know more than I have said. Good God! ma'am! why I am the greatest sufferer by its not being found. I am a legatee for £1,000. If it had turned up, my wife and I would have been independent by this time. As it is, my wife is dreadfully ill from want, and I have not a penny in my pocket - not a penny, not a penny!"

And old Johnny fairly gave way, and sobbed like a child on the crown of the self-assertive old hat.

“Will you oblige me by ringing that bell?” said Mrs. Pintle.

Johnny obeyed, and the weak-eyed one responded to the summons.

“Give this person some bread and cheese in the kitchen, and then show him out,” said Mrs. Pintle.

Johnny got up, brushed the obtrusive hat the wrong way with a trembling hand, and silently turned about and followed the retainer downstairs. When he reached the foot, he made for the street door.

“Didn’t you hear missus say you was to have some food?” asked the weak-eyed one.

But Johnny made no reply. He tugged at the street door with the view of getting into the street as quickly as possible. It was a complicated street door, with five or six small handles, and it was only to be opened by a combined tugging of two handles at once.

The weak-eyed one sauntered up to him, with his hands in his pockets, and watched Johnny’s efforts with much complacency.

“Go on, old cock, try again. Never give it up. Go in and win.” These and other remarks of an encouraging description, intended to spur Johnny on to fresh exertions, had the effect of irritating the poor old gentleman beyond all bounds.

“Damn you, open it, you dog, will you?” exclaimed Johnny with (for him) supernatural vehemence. And the weak-eyed one obeyed with an alacrity which one would scarcely have looked for in a man who a moment before was taking life in such a leisurely way.

Johnny tottered down the steps, shaking and trembling, and the weak-eyed one contemplated him from, the door.

“Poor devil!” exclaimed he. “Mad as flints; quite as mad!”

And Johnny doddered on bravely, until he reached the corner of Guilford Street. He then began to feel that his strength was almost at an end; so he made an effort to turn round the corner, in order to get out of sight of the insolent flunkey, and, that accomplished, fell heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER III.

HOW JOHNNY POUNCE CAME BACK TO THE GOOD AGAIN.

“COLE, I shall want you at my quarters immediately after inspection.”

“Very good, sir.”

The scene of this remarkable dialogue was the Crimea before Sebastopol; the speakers were our old friend Captain Redfern of Her Majesty’s --th Lancers, and Private John Coles of the same regiment, and regimental servant to Captain Redfern aforesaid.

Young John had proved to be too heavy and too tall a man for the friendly recruiting Sergeant’s corps, so he had been posted to a crack Lancer regiment then serving in the Crimea. In this regiment Captain Redfern held a commission, and as he went out in command of recruits, of whom young John was one, he was under the necessity of selecting one of them to act as a regimental servant during the voyage. His choice fell upon young John, who being extremely lazy and, moreover, utterly indifferent as to the future in store for him, accepted the situation.

Redfern and young John got on exceedingly well together. John’s superior education made him extremely useful to his master in many ways, and as Redfern was a particularly open-handed man, and not very exacting as a master, he and John became, in a distant sort of way, attached to each other. Redfern spent much of his spare time in poring over deeds and other legal documents referring to the estate of which he had become possessed through Pintle’s death; and as John was formerly in the habit of assisting his father in Mr. Pintle’s office, he had picked up sufficient technical knowledge to make himself useful as an interpreter whenever Redfern (whose legal ideas were crude and elementary) found himself at a stand-still.

Captain Redfern’s regiment was posted on the heights above Balaklava, but as he was attached temporarily to the staff of a general officer, his duties as aide-de-camp brought him continually on to the scene of action before Sebastopol. He had on this occasion been in attendance on his general at a divisional field-day in which his own regiment took part, and he availed himself of an opportunity of interchanging the few words already recorded, with his regimental servant before the parade was dismissed.

At the termination of the parade in question, young John cleaned his horse and accoutrements, and then hurried off to Redfern’s tent. He found his master in the act of sealing a goodly packet which appeared to contain a bundle of papers.

“Beg pardon, sir,” said young John, saluting, “I believe you wanted me.”

“Yes,” said Redfern, “I want you particularly. Come in and sit down on that chest.”

Young John obeyed.

“I believe,” said Redfern, “you’re a man to be trusted.”

“I hope so, sir,” said young John.

“I hope so, too. Well, I’m going to trust you. But in the first place I must enjoin you to utter secrecy as to what I am about to say to you, until the time arrives when you may speak.”

“You may trust me, sir; you may, indeed. I’ll never breathe a word of it until you give me leave.”

“Very good. Now listen. The attack is to be made to-night by the Second and Light Division. You will not be wanted, but I shall, for the general’s brigade forms part of the attacking column. It will all be the orders in half an hour. I don’t know whether or not you believe in predestination, nor do I care, but I do, and that is sufficient for my purpose. John Cole, I die to-night.”

“I sincerely hope not, sir.”

“Don’t interrupt me. I die to-night; that, at least, is my firm impression. Now this is what I want you to do. I want you to take charge of this packet, which I now address to you. When I am dead you will open it, and act according to the instructions therein contained. If it should happen that I survive, I shall require it of you again, until I feel disposed to give it into your possession once more. Now may I trust you with this?”

“Indeed you may, sir, I’ll take great care of it, but I sincerely trust it will not be in my keeping many hours.”

“I hope not, my man, but we shall see. Now if after the attack I do not return to quarters, get leave to look after me: bring me in if you find me, and whatever you do, for God’s sake don’t leave my body in the open air longer than you can help. Now you can go. I shall want Bessie at half-past ten.”

Young John saluted, and left the tent with the packet.

That night as Captain Redfern was carrying a message from one of the attacking columns to the reserve, he was struck by a rifle-ball, which entered his back and came out above his left arm. He died on the field within an hour of receiving the wound; and so his prophecy was verified.

Young John carried out his master’s instructions faithfully. Shortly after receiving intelligence of Redfern’s death he opened the packet, after having first satisfied the committee of officers that sat upon the dead man’s effects, that it was duly addressed to him in Captain Redfern’s handwriting. To his intense astonishment he found that it was directed to Mrs. Pintle. He was not aware of the relationship that existed between Mr. Pintle, and his late master, for although Captain Redfern was well known by repute to old Johnny long before Pintle’s death, young John had never heard of his existence until he joined the --th Lancers.

A memorandum, addressed to young John, accompanied the other enclosure. It was to the following effect:-

> JOHN COLE, - When I am dead, take the enclosed packet to Mrs. Pintle, 74, Russell Square, London, as soon as you reach England. If there is any chance of your being killed before you leave the Crimea, entrust it to a comrade upon whom, you can rely. If the attack to-night succeeds, it will probably not be necessary to do so. If you know no one else in whom you can place implicit confidence, give it to the Colonel.
>
> I hereby make you, Private John Cole, C troop of Her Majesty's --th Lancers, the legatee of all my moveables in camp, with the exception of the gold watch I usually wear, which I leave to poor Annie Blake. Her address is High Street, Little Petherington. And I hereby appoint you the executor of this my last will and testament.
>
> HERBERT REDFERN,
> Capt. H.M. --th Lancers.

The Crimean war was at an end, and the troops were on their way home again. Thinned and shattered as they were, they yet sufficed to afford evidence of the noble stuff they had left behind them, on Cathcart's Hill and in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. As they marched through great towns in their tattered uniform, with bear-skins and shakoes half shot away, their faces bronzed, and covered with ragged beard, and, above all, with their colours shot off almost to the pole, carried by dirty, ragged lads, who still somehow looked like gentlemen - lads who had already seen more misery and sickness in their young lives of twenty summers than the oldest spectator in the enthusiastic throng of civilians that gathered to welcome the old troops home again - as these sturdy warriors tramped through the English towns they had little expected to see again, women went into hysterics, and strong men, after shouting themselves hoarse with a kind of mad welcome that let itself go free to take what form it would, threw themselves down upon the grass, and there lay prone, and wept like women. For each man who saw a brother, or a friend, in those thinned and broken ranks, saw one whom he had hardly reckoned on ever seeing again; and he who counted no personal friends or relations among those rows of shattered warriors, saw thousands who had endeared themselves to him by their heroic pluck in battle, and, above even that, by their heroic and unmurmuring endurance of pain, privation, cold, disease, and hunger. And it was no disgrace to the men of peace that they did so weep, for even the staunchest heroes in that battle-thinned band - men who had laughed at the Russian shell, and laid wagers as to where it would fall; men of the "thin red line," who had fought at Balaklava and lit their cigars on the parapet of the Redan, marched that summer into Hyde Park, and as the Queen pinned the Cross of Valour over their sturdy hearts, choked themselves into tears that no physical anguish could have wrung from them.

Young John had risen in the service since the death of Redfern. He was now Troop Sergeant, and one of the smartest men in the squadron. His regiment was quartered at Hounslow on their return, and he was attached to the troop stationed at the old barracks at Kensington. His first care on reaching London was to find his father and mother. He had from time to time sent small sums of money to them, but he had never heard from them in reply, and it was with the apprehension of learning the details of some sad misfortune that he knocked at the old house in Great Queen Street.

The same drabby servant-girl opened the door, but she did not recognize young John in the strapping, set-up soldier, with the thick brown beard, who stood before her. She knew nothing of Johnny Pounce's whereabouts. He and Mrs. Pounce had left Great Queen Street eighteen months ago, owing much rent, and nobody in the house had heard of them since. She shouldn't wonder if they'd got into trouble. She had heard something about a will, and people said that they were no better than they ought to be. Oh, of course he could leave a message if lie liked, but he might as well leave one for the Lord Mayor of London.

Young John turned away with an aching heart, for the full sense of his ingratitude in leaving them at the critical moment, burst upon him. He next called at Russell Square, with the object of placing Captain Redfern's packet into Mrs. Pintle's hands. But Mrs. Pintle had long since left the house in Russell Square, for it was a much larger establishment than she, in her reduced circumstances, could afford to keep up. The footman who opened the door told him that when Mrs. Pintle left she gave directions that all letters directed to her late residence should be forwarded to an address in Michael's Place, Brompton, but that was ever so many months ago, and she might not be there now. However, he had better go there and ascertain her present address if she had moved. So young John walked back to the Strand, and mounted a Brompton omnibus, which put him down at the address to which he had been directed.

He found Mrs. Pintle in drawing-room apartments in Michael's Place. He obtained admission to her without difficulty, for the weak-eyed flunkey had been dismissed with the rest of the household, as soon as Mrs. Pintle gave up all hope of finding her husband's will. She was reclining on a horsehair sofa of decidedly serious presence, and was still in mourning, but this time it was for her nephew.

She was surprised at seeing a brown-faced, sturdy soldier enter the room, and her astonishment was not diminished when he announced himself as a soldier of the late Captain Redfern's regiment, for Captain Redfern and she had never been on particularly friendly terms, and since Mr. Pintle's death they had come to open war. The mourning that she wore was not by any means the result of emotion at that officer's death, but sprung from a species of natural taste for tombs, and everything that pertained thereunto.

"What is your business with me, soldier?" she asked.

"Beg pardon, ma'am; have I the honour of speaking to Mrs. Pintle?"

"You have."

"I'm the bearer of this parcel from the late Captain Redfern. He directed me to place it in your hands as soon as I returned to England. I only arrived four days ago, and I've availed myself of the first leave of absence I could get to bring it to you."

And young John touched his forehead, and wheeled about to depart.

"Stop," she said, "you must wait until I see what it is about."

And she attempted to open the parcel, but her hands trembled so that she could not unfasten the knots, so young John whipped out a pocket-knife, and solved the difficulty after the original Gordian receipt. The enclosure was contained in another wrapper, and upon this second wrapper being hastily torn asunder, there tumbled out of it a note addressed to Mrs. Pintle, together with the Will of the late Josiah Pintle!

Mrs. Pintle was one of those hard-faced ladies who have schooled their countenances to obey them implicitly. Mrs. Pintle's face was in a state of perfect discipline, and expressed no astonishment whatever. Not so, however, her voice.

"My God! my husband's will!"

Young John could scarcely believe the ears that conveyed Mrs. Pintle's exclamation to his brain, and felt much more disposed to trust to the eyes that told him that, judging from Mrs. Pintle's countenance, nothing extraordinary had happened. However, the same eyes subsequently contradicted themselves as he read the endorsement, "Will of Josiah Pintle, Esq."

"Mr. Pintle's will, ma'am!" he exclaimed; "I had no idea of that; he didn't tell me what it was. Why, my father is down in that for a thousand pounds!"

"And who is your father?"

"Pounce, ma'am ; Johnny - I mean John Pounce, ma'am - the late Mr. Pintle's confidential clerk."

"Then your name is Pounce?"

"My real name is, ma'am; I enlisted, shortly after Mr. Pintle's death, as John Cole; but my real name is Pounce."

Mrs. Pintle, after satisfying herself that the will was genuine, proceeded to open the accompanying note. It was to the following effect:-

> Before Sevastopol, 1856.
> AMELIA PINTLE,
>
> Long before this reaches you I shall be a dead man. We were never on friendly terms, and the words I am about to write will not tend to mend matters. Whether they do, or whether they do not, is a question that will not in any way disturb the skeleton that by that time will be bleaching in this infernal country.
>
> You always considered me an extravagant and unconscientious scoundrel, and I give you credit for your discernment. I don't attempt to exculpate myself, because I do not care enough for you or for anybody in the world to make it worth my while to do so. As I have already stated, by the time this is opened I shall be dead beyond all possibility of doubt. I live only for life, and posthumous honour or dishonour is a matter upon which I am most completely indifferent. As evidence of my sincerity, I not only enclose

Josiah Pintle's will, but I also give an account of the manner in which it came into my possession.

On the 24th of December, 1854, I dined with Mr. Pintle. On that occasion you were, you may remember, confined to your room by some sort of indisposition. After dinner, as Pintle and I sat over our wine, we talked over family matters, and, among others, of the disposition of his property after death. He told me that he had that evening brought his will to Russell Square with the express view of reading it over to me, in whom, you will remember, he reposed (contrary, I am bound to say, to your advice) much more confidence than I either desired or deserved.

He opened the document and began to read it to me as I sat with my back towards him, for he had turned round to get the full benefit of the light of the chandelier. He read for perhaps a couple of minutes, and then stopped: I concluded that he was considering the advisability of not reading to me the ensuing paragraph which might perhaps refer to a trifling legacy which he intended to bestow upon me. After a pause, I asked him why he did not go on, and, as he made no answer, I turned round to repeat my question. He was dead.

I alarmed the household; but, before they answered my summons, it occurred to me that, as I was his heir-at-law, and moreover deeply in debt, and further, as nobody but myself was aware of the fact that the will had been taken from the office, I might as well take possession of it and destroy it altogether. Accordingly I took possession of it, and, in due course, of the bulk of Mr. Pintle's property. On second thoughts I did not destroy the will, for, as I was under orders for the Crimea, I thought it possible that I might be killed, and, in the event of that melancholy occurrence, neither the will nor the property would be of any further use to me, whereas they might both prove of considerable value to yourself and the other legatees. So they are quite at your service.

HERBERT REDFERN,
Capt. H.M. --th Lancers.

Mrs. Pintle folded the letter deliberately, restored it to its envelope, and placed the envelope in her pocket.

"I shall not want you, Pounce," she said. "If, as you say (and I see no reason to disbelieve it), your father is a legatee for a thousand pounds, he will, of course, receive it when the will is proved; that, however, will probably be, under the circumstances, a work of time. In the interim, as I have done your father the injustice of believing that he that he did not act with perfect openness in the matter, I shall be happy to make him a small allowance. You had better send him to me."

"If I can discover him, ma'am, I will, but he's left his old lodgings, and no one knows where he has gone to!"

"Then find him. You had better advertise. Now you can go."

Young John left Mrs. Pintle's house with a heart almost as heavy as when he entered it, for there appeared but little chance of his finding old Johnny and his wife,

and, moreover, he had made the discovery that his late master, for whose memory he entertained a sincere regard, was, in point of fact, an unmitigated scoundrel.

He had the rest of the afternoon before him, and he spent the early part of it in sending advertisements to the principal daily papers. It was four o'clock before this was satisfactorily accomplished, and then he took a steamboat from Blackfriars intending to go to Chelsea, and thence to Kensington. But the boat did not go higher than Westminster bridge, so he landed there, and determined to take the omnibus at Charing Cross.

As he walked down Parliament Street, he had to pass the scene of his former labours, the Pauper Philosophy Office; which appeared, as far as he could see, to be getting on uncommonly well without him. There was the same old over-fed office-keeper at the door, there were the same two showy Caucasians waiting on the steps, and there were all the twelve Examiners looking out of the twelve windows, as of yore. There was the Lord President's carriage at the door, and there, no doubt, was the Lord President in the Secretary's room, learning a practical reply to the eminently practical question, which would be asked in the House that night, "Whether there was any truth in the statement that it was the practice of the Board for the Dissemination of Pauper Philosophy to educate and train young paupers to an extraordinary pitch of pauper perfection, at an enormous public expense, with the express view of qualifying such paupers to impart instruction in the rudiments of Pauper-Philosophy, and that accomplished, to take away from their sphere of duty such Pauper Philosophers as may seem to the Board to be peculiarly well qualified to train and educate other young paupers, and reward them with Assistant-Clerkships in the Office for the Dissemination of Pauper-Philosophy?"

As young John speculated on this possibility, it occurred to him that he would turn into the office and look up some of his old friends. He passed the Caucasians and the office-keeper unrecognized, and made his way up to the garret in which he had worked for the five years that preceded his dismissal.

It was just as he had left it, for promotion in the Pauper Philosophy Office was a work of many years. As he entered the room he was greeted with a stare of surprise, which was directed not so much

at him (for he was unrecognized) as at the uniform he wore.

"Don't you know me, lads?' he said, "Pounce - John Pounce!"

"John Pounce!" exclaimed the five clerks. "Lord! you don't say so?"

And sufficiently hearty greetings ensued, for John had been a sort of favourite in his way.

Inquiries as to what events had occurred since he left the office followed; and one, more hearty than the rest, saw in young John's return a reason for standing much beer.

"Where's Shab?" asked the hearty clerk. "Send him here, somebody!"

And somebody went for Shab.

"Who's Shab?" said Johnny.

"Shab? Oh! you know - no, he's since your time. Oh! he's a rum un is Shab. He runs herrands, and fetches beer, and posts letters, and does hod jobs. Shab ain't his name - its affectionate for shabby genteel so called 'cause he looks like a Member of Parliament down on his luck."

And the door opened, and Shab introduced his head.

"Want me, gentlemen? Anything I can do?"

"Here, Shab, old cock, a gallon of beer, and you so much as look at it and I'll knock your empty old head off. D'ye hear?"

This was a coarse speech, but it was not said unkindly. Shab was a general favourite, for he was always at hand when wanted, and never grumbled at his honorarium. He had seen better days, as the saying is, having originally been employed on odd jobs in the Pauper Philosophy Office as a law-stationer's clerk; but old age came upon him, and his hand trembled so that he became unfit for his work. So he became a hanger-on to the office in which he had temporarily served, and picked up occasional coppers as a kind of out-door message carrier.

"Why you look out of sorts; had your dinner, Shab?" asked a clerk.

"No, sir, no - not yet."

"Thought not; you look hungry. Here's a tanner for you - no, I haven't got it."

"Looks hungry," thought young John, "by Jove, he is hungry, too. Here, my man," added he, aloud, "here's a shilling for you, and in God's name get something to eat."

A clerk from, another room burst into the office. "What's this I hear about Jack Pounce come back again?" said the new comer. "Jack, old chap, doosid glad to see you. Why what are you doing in a uniform?"

The answer was interrupted by an extraordinary proceeding on the part of poor old Shab.

"Jack! Young John! O God!"

And poor old Johnny Pounce fell into his son's arms.

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So old, so feeble, so broken, had cheery little Johnny Pounce become since he went to the Bad! His rusty old suit of clothes was the cast-off of a waiter, just as he

himself was the cast-off of society. He was living in a miserable attic in Tothill Fields, and his once buxom little wife was in the fever ward of the Westminster Hospital.

There cannot be much need to tell how it all ended. How his son told him of the discovery of the missing will, how old Johnny and he went to Mrs. Pounce's bedside, and broke the news to her, gently at first, and then all at once with a sort of spasmodic rush; how Mrs. Pintle did her best (in a faded kind of way) to atone for the unjust suspicions which she had cast upon the old man; how the sick woman recovered her strength by slow degrees, until she was able to leave the Hospital for the old rooms in Great Queen Street; how the will was proved beyond dispute, after a lapse of six months or so; how One Thousand Pounds were paid to old Johnny, without deduction, by Mrs. Pintle, and how a handsome annuity was purchased for him with the money; how young John was bought out of the service, and enshrined in a high desk in the office of Pintle and Sims' successors, having been articled to the new firm by Mrs. Pintle herself, who further undertook to make him an allowance until he was admitted - are matters that would take many pages to tell in detail, and matters, moreover, which the reader will probably feel inclined to take for granted.

And so it was that Johnny Pounce, having gone to the Bad, and having spent a considerable time at the Bad when he got there, eventually came back to the Good again.