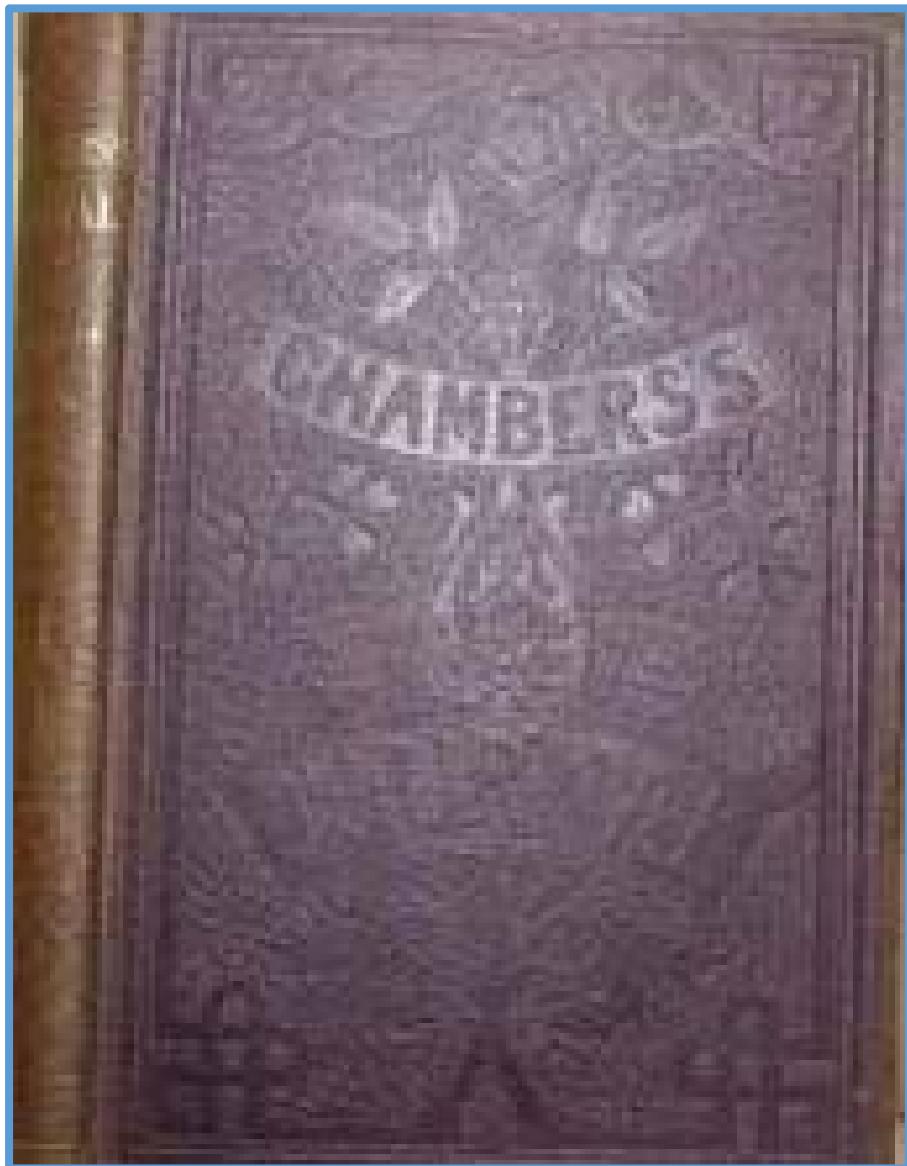


# The Recollections of Captain Wilkie

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## THE RECOLLECTIONS OF CAPTAIN WILKIE

"Who can he be?" thought I, as I watched my companion in the second-class carriage of the London and Dover Railway. I had been so full of the fact my long-expected holiday had come at last, and for a few days, at least, the gayeties of Paris were about to supersede the dull routine of the hospital wards, we were well out of London before I observed I was not alone in the compartment. In these days we have all pretty well agreed "three is company and two is none" upon the railway. At the time I write of, however, people were not so morbidly sensitive about their travelling companions. It was rather an agreeable surprise to me to find there was some chance of whiling away the hours of a tedious journey. I therefore pulled my cap down over my eyes, took a good look from beneath it at my vis-à-vis, and repeated to myself: "Who can he be?"

I used rather to pride myself on being able to spot a man's trade or profession by a good look at his exterior. I had the advantage of studying under a master of the art, who used to electrify both his patients and his clinical classes by long shots, sometimes at the most unlikely of pursuits; and never very far from the mark.

"Well, my man," I have heard him say, "I can see by your fingers you play some musical instrument for your livelihood, but it is a rather curious one; something quite out of my line." The man afterwards informed us he earned a few coppers by blowing "Rule Britannia" on a coffee-pot, the spout of which was pierced to form a rough flute. Though a novice in the art, I was still able to astonish my ward companions on occasion, and I never lost an opportunity of practising. It was not mere curiosity, then, which led me to lean back on the cushions and analyze the quiet middle-aged man in front of me.

I used to do the thing systematically, and my train of reflections ran somewhat in this wise: "General appearance, vulgar; fairly opulent and extremely self-possessed; looks like a man who could out-chaff a bargee, and yet be at his ease in middle-class society. Eyes well set together and nose rather prominent; would be a good long-range marksman. Cheeks flabby, but

the softness of expression redeemed by a square-cut jaw and a well-set lower lip. On the whole, a powerful type. Now for the hands—rather disappointed there. Thought he was a self-made man by the look of him, but there is no callous in the palm and no thickness at the joints. Has never been engaged in any real physical work, I should think. No tanning on the backs of the hands; on the contrary, they are very white, with blue projecting veins and long, delicate fingers. Couldn't be an artist with that face, and yet he has the hands of a man engaged in delicate manipulations. No red acid spots upon his clothes, no ink stains, no nitrate of silver marks upon the hands (this helps to negative my half-formed opinion he was a photographer). Clothes not worn in any particular part. Coat made of tweed, and fairly old; but the left elbow, as far as I can see it, has as much of the fluff left on as the right, which is seldom the case with men who do much writing. Might be a commercial traveller, but the little pocketbook in the waistcoat is wanting, nor has he any of those handy valises suggestive of samples."

I give these brief headings of my ideas merely to demonstrate my method of arriving at a conclusion. As yet I had obtained nothing but negative results; but now, to use a chemical metaphor, I was in a position to pour off this solution of dissolved possibilities and examine the residue. I found myself reduced to a very limited number of occupations. He was neither a lawyer nor a clergyman, in spite of a soft felt hat, and a somewhat clerical cut about the necktie. I was wavering now between pawnbroker and horsedealer; but there was too much character about his face for the former, and he lacked that extraordinary equine atmosphere which hangs about the latter even in his hours of relaxation; so I formed a provisional diagnosis of betting man of methodistical persuasions, the latter clause being inserted in deference to his hat and necktie.

Pray, do not think I reasoned it out like this in my own mind. It is only now, sitting down with pen and paper, I can see the successive steps. As it was, I had formed my conclusion within sixty

seconds of the time when I drew my hat down over my eyes and uttered the mental ejaculation with which my narrative begins.

I did not feel quite satisfied even then with my deduction. However, as a leading question would—to pursue my chemical analogy—act as my litmus paper, I determined to try one. There was a "Times" lying by my companion, and I thought the opportunity too good to be neglected.

"Do you mind my looking at your paper?" I asked.

"Certainly, sir, certainly," said he most urbanely, handing it across.

I glanced down its columns until my eye rested upon the list of the latest betting. "Hullo!" I said, "they are laying odds upon the favorite for the Cambridgeshire. But perhaps," I added, looking up, "you are not interested in these matters?"

"Snares, sir!" said he violently; "wiles of the enemy! Mortals are but given a few years to live; how can they squander them so? They have not even an eye to their poor worldly interests," he added in a quieter tone, "or they would never back a single horse at such short odds with a field of thirty."

There was something in this speech of his which tickled me immensely. I suppose it was the odd way in which he blended religious intolerance with worldly wisdom. I laid the "Times" aside with the conviction I should be able to spend the next two hours to better purpose than in its perusal.

"You speak as if you understood the matter, at any rate," I remarked.

"Yes, sir," he answered; "few men in England understood these things better in the old days before I changed my profession. But that is all over now."

"Changed your profession?" said I, interrogatively.

"Yes; I changed my name, too."

"Indeed?" said I.

"Yes; you see, a man wants a real fresh start when his eyes become opened, so he has a new deal all round, so to speak. Then he gets a fair chance."

There was a short pause here, as I seemed to be on delicate ground in touching on my

companion's antecedents, and he did not volunteer any information. I broke the silence by offering him a cheroot.

"No, thanks," said he; "I have given up tobacco. It was the hardest wrench of all, was that. It does me good to smell the whiff of your weed. Tell me," he added suddenly, looking hard at me with his shrewd gray eyes, "why did you take stock of me so carefully before you spoke?"

"It is a habit of mine," said I. "I am a medical man, and observation is everything in my profession. I had no idea you were looking."

"I can see without looking," he answered. "I thought you were a detective, at first; but I couldn't recall your face at the time I knew the force."

"Were you a detective, then?" said I.

"No," he answered, with a laugh; "I was the other thing—the detected, you know. Old scores are wiped out now, and the law cannot touch me; so I don't mind confessing to a gentleman like yourself what a scoundrel I have been in my time."

"We are none of us perfect," said I.

"No; but I was a real out-and-outer. A 'fake,' you know, to start with, and afterwards a 'cracksman.' It is easy to talk of these things now, for I've changed my spirit. It's as if I was talking of some other man, you see."

"Exactly so," said I. Being a medical man, I had none of that shrinking from crime and criminals which many men possess. I could make all allowances for congenital influence and the force of circumstances. No company, therefore, could have been more acceptable to me than of the old malefactor; and as I sat puffing at my cigar, I was delighted to observe my air of interest was gradually loosening his tongue.

"Yes; I'm converted now," he continued, "and of course I am a happier man for that. And yet," he added wistfully, "there are times when I long for the old trade again, and fancy myself strolling out on a cloudy night with my jimmy in my pocket. I left a name behind me in my profession, sir. I was one of the old school, you know. It was very seldom we bungled a job. We used to begin at the foot of the ladder, the rope ladder, if I may say so, in my younger days, and

then work our way up, step by step, so we were what you might call good men all through."

"I see," said I.

"I was always reckoned a hard-working, conscientious man, and had talent, too; the very cleverest of them allowed that. I began as a blacksmith, and then did a little engineering and carpentering, and then I took to sleight-of-hand tricks, and then to picking pockets. I remember, when I was home on a visit, how my poor old father used to wonder why I was always hovering around him. He little knew I used to clear everything out of his pockets a dozen times a day, and then replace them, just to keep my hand in. He believes to this day I am in an office in the City. There are few of them could touch me in that particular line of business, though."

"I suppose it is a matter of practice?" I remarked.

"To a great extent. Still, a man never quite loses it, if he has once been an adept—excuse me; you have dropped some cigar ash on your coat," and he waved his hand politely in front of my breast, as if to brush it off. "There," he said, handing me my gold scarf pin, "you see I have not forgot my old cunning yet."

He had done it so quickly I hardly saw the hand whisk over my bosom, nor did I feel his fingers touch me, and yet there was the pin glittering in his hand. "It is wonderful," I said as I fixed it again in its place.

"Oh, that's nothing! But I have been in some really smart jobs. I was in the gang that picked the new patent safe. You remember the case. It was guaranteed to resist anything; and we managed to open the first that was ever issued, within a week of its appearance. It was done with graduated wedges, sir, the first so small you could hardly see it against the light, and the last strong enough to prize it open. It was a clever managed affair."

"I remember it," said I. "But surely some one was convicted for that?"

"Yes, one was nabbed. But he didn't split, nor even let on how it was done. We'd have cut his soul out if—" He suddenly damped down the very ugly fires which were peeping from his eyes. "Perhaps I am boring you, talking about these old wicked days of mine?"

"On the contrary," I said, "you interest me extremely."

"I like to get a listener I can trust. It's a sort of blow-off, you know, and I feel lighter after it. When I am among my brethren I dare hardly think of what has gone before. Now I'll tell you about another job I was in. To this day, I cannot think about it without laughing." I lit another cigar, and composed myself to listen.

"It was when I was a youngster," said he. "There was a big City man in those days who was known to have a very valuable gold watch. I followed him about for several days before I could get a chance; but when I did get one, you may be sure I did not throw it away. He found, to his disgust, when he got home that day, there was nothing in his fob. I hurried off with my prize, and got it stowed away in safety, intending to have it melted down next day. Now, it happened this watch possessed a special value in the owner's eyes because it was a sort of ancestral possession—presented by his father on coming of age, or something of that sort. I remember there was a long inscription on the back. He was determined not to lose it if he could help it, and accordingly he put an advertisement in an evening paper, offering thirty pounds reward for its return, and promising no questions should be asked. He gave the address of his house, 31 Caroline Square, at the end of the advertisement. The thing sounded good enough, so I set off for Caroline Square, leaving the watch in a parcel at a public house which I passed on the way. When I got there, the gentleman was at dinner; but he came out quick enough when he heard a young man wanted to see him. I suppose he guessed who the young man would prove to be. He was a genial-looking old fellow, and he led me away with him into his study.

"'Well, my lad,' said he, 'what is it?'

"'I've come about that watch of yours,' said I. 'I think I can lay my hands on it.'

"'Oh, it was you that took it!' said he.

"'No,' I answered; 'I know nothing whatever about how you lost it. I have been sent by another party to see you about it. Even if you have me arrested you will not find out anything.'

"'Well,' he said, 'I don't want to be hard on you. Hand it over, and here is my check for the amount.'

"'Checks won't do,' said I; 'I must have it in gold.'

"'It would take an hour or so to collect in gold,' said he.

"'That will just suit,' I answered, 'for I have not got the watch with me. I'll go back and fetch it, while you raise the money.'

"I started off and got the watch where I had left it. When I came back, the old gentleman was sitting behind his study table, with the little heap of gold in front of him.

"'Here is your money,' he said, and pushed it over.

"'Here is your watch,' said I.

"He was evidently delighted to get it back; and after examining it carefully, and assuring himself it was none the worse, he put it into the watch-pocket of his coat with a grunt of satisfaction.

"'Now, my lad,' he said, 'I know it was you took the watch. Tell me how you did it, and I don't mind giving you an extra five-pound note.'

"'I wouldn't tell you in any case,' said I; 'but especially I wouldn't tell you when you have a witness hid behind that curtain.' You see, I had all my wits about me, and it didn't escape me the curtain was drawn tighter than it had been before.

"'You are too sharp for us,' said he, good-humoredly. 'Well, you have got your money, and that's an end of it. I'll take precious good care you don't get hold of my watch again in a hurry. Good night—no; not that door,' he added as I marched towards a cupboard. 'This is the door,' and he stood up and opened it. I brushed past him, opened the hall door, and was round the corner of the square in no time. I don't know how long the old gentleman took to find it out, but in passing him at the door, I managed to pick his pocket for the second time, and next morning the family heirloom was in the melting-pot, after all. That wasn't bad, was it?'"

The old war-horse had evidently forgotten all about his conversion now. There was a tone of triumph in the conclusion of his anecdote which showed his pride in his smartness far surpassed

his repentance of his misdeeds. He seemed pleased at the astonishment and amusement I expressed at his adroitness.

"Yes," he continued with a laugh, "it was a capital joke. But sometimes the fun lies all the other way. Even the sharpest of us come to grief at times. There was one rather curious incident which occurred in my career. You may possibly have seen the anecdote, for it got into print at the time."

"Pray let me hear it," said I.

"Well, it is hard lines telling stories against one's self, but this was how it happened: I had made a rather good haul, and invested some of the swag in buying a very fine diamond ring. I thought it would be something to fall back upon when all the ready was gone and times were hard. I had just purchased it, and was going back to my lodgings in the omnibus, when, as luck would have it, a very stylishly-dressed young lady came in and took her seat beside me. I didn't pay much attention to her at first; but after a time something hard in her dress knocked up against my hand, which my experienced touch soon made out to be a purse. It struck me I could not pass the time more profitably or agreeably than by making this purse my own. I had to do it very carefully; but I managed at last to wriggle my hand into her rather light pocket, and I thought the job was over. Just at this moment she rose abruptly to leave the 'bus, and I had hardly time to get my hand with the purse in it out of her pocket without detection. It was not until she had been gone some time I found out in drawing out my hand in that hurried manner the new and ill-fitting ring had slipped over my finger and remained in the young lady's pocket. I sprang out and ran in the direction in which she had gone with the intention of picking her pocket once again. She had disappeared, however; and from that day till this I have never set eyes on her. To make the matter worse, there was only four pence half-penny in coppers inside the purse. Serve me right for trying to rob such a pretty girl; still, if I had two hundred quid now I should not be reduced to—Good heavens, forgive me! What am I saying?"

He seemed inclined to relapse into silence after this; but I was determined to draw him out a little more, if I could possibly manage it.

"There is less personal risk in the branch you have been talking of," I remarked, "than there is in burglary."

"Ah!" he said, warming to his subject once again, "it is the higher game which is best worth aiming at. Talk about sport, sir, talk about fishing or hunting! Why, it is tame in comparison! Think of the great country house with its men-servants and its dogs and its firearms, and you with only your jimmy and your centre-bit, and your mother wit, which is best of all. It is the triumph of intellect over brute force, sir, as represented by bolts and bars."

"People generally look upon it as quite the reverse," I remarked.

"I was never one of those blundering life-preserver fellows," said my companion. "I did try my hand at garroting once; but it was against my principles, and I gave it up. I have tried everything. I have been a bedridden widow with three young children; but I do object to physical force."

"You have been what?" said I.

"A bedridden widow. Advertising, you know, and getting subscriptions. I have tried them all. You seem interested in these experiences," he continued, "so I will tell you another anecdote. It was the narrowest escape from penal servitude ever I had in my life. A pal and I had gone down on a country beat—it doesn't signify where it was—and taken up our headquarters in a little provincial town. Somehow it got noised abroad we were there, and householders were warned to be careful, as suspicious characters had been seen in the neighborhood. We should have changed our plans when we saw the game was up; but my chum was a plucky fellow, and wouldn't consent to back down. Poor little Jim! He was only thirty-four round the chest, and about twelve at the biceps; but there is not a measuring-tape in England could have given the size of his heart. He said we were in for it, and we must stick to it; so I agreed to stay, and we chose Morley Hall, the country house of a certain Colonel Morley, to begin with.

"Now this Colonel Morley was about the last man in the world we should have meddled with. He was a shrewd, coolheaded fellow, who had knocked about and seen the world, and it seems he took a special pride in the detection of criminals. However, we knew nothing of all this at that time; so we set forth hopefully to have a try at the house.

"The reason made us pick him out among the rest was he had a good-for-nothing groom, who was a tool in our hands. This fellow had drawn up a rough plan of the premises for us. The place was pretty well locked up and guarded, and the only weak point we could see was a certain trap-door, the padlock of which was broken, and which opened from the roof into one of the lumber-rooms. If we could only find any method of reaching the roof, we might force a way securely from above. We both thought the plan rather a good one, and it had a spice of originality about it which pleased us. It is not the mere jewels or plate, you know, a good cracksmen thinks about. The neatness of the job and his reputation for smartness are almost as important in his eyes.

"We had been very quiet for a day or two, just to let suspicion die away. Then we set out one dark night, Jim and I, and got over the avenue railings and up to the house without meeting a soul. It was blowing hard, I remember, and the clouds were hurrying across the sky. We had a good look at the front of the house, and then Jim went round to the garden side. He came running back in a minute or two in a great state of delight. 'Why, Bill,' he said, gripping me by the arm, 'there never was such a bit of luck! They've been repairing the roof or something, and they've left the ladder standing.' We went round together, and there, sure enough, was the ladder towering above our heads, and one or two laborers' hods lying about, which showed some work had been going on during the day. We had a good look round, to see everything was quiet, and then we climbed up, Jim first and I after him. We got to the top, and were sitting on the slates, having a bit of a breather before beginning business, when you can fancy our feelings to see the ladder we came up by suddenly stand straight up in the air, and then slowly descend until it rested in the garden

below. At first we hoped it might have slipped, though that was bad enough; but we soon had that idea put out of our heads.

"'Hullo, up there!' cried a voice from below.

"We craned our heads over the edge, and there was a man, dressed, as far as we could make out, in evening dress, and standing in the middle of the grass plot. We kept quiet.

"'Hullo!' he shouted again. 'How do you feel yourself? Pretty comfortable, eh? Hal! hal! You London rogues thought we were green in the country. What's your opinion now?'

"We both lay still, though feeling pretty considerably small, as you may imagine.

"'It's all right; I see you,' he continued. 'Why, I have been waiting behind that lilac bush every night for the last week, expecting to see you. I knew you couldn't resist going up that ladder, when you found the windows were too much for you.—Joe! Joe!'

"'Yes, sir,' said a voice, and another man came from among the bushes.

"'Just you keep your eye on the roof, will you, while I ride down to the station and fetch up a couple of constables?—Au revoir, gentlemen! You don't mind waiting, I suppose?' And Colonel Morley—for it was the owner of the house himself—strode off; and in a few minutes we heard the rattle of his horse's hoofs going down the avenue.

"Well, sir, we felt precious silly, as you may imagine. It wasn't so much having been nabbed bothered us, as the feeling of being caught in such a simple trap. We looked at each other in blank disgust, and then, to save our lives, we couldn't help bursting into laughter at our own fix. However, it was no laughing matter; so we set to work going around the roof, and seeing if there was a likely water-pipe or anything might give us a chance of escape. We had to give it up as a bad job; so we sat down again, and made up our minds to the worst. Suddenly an idea flashed into my head, and I groped my way over the roof until I felt wood under my feet. I bent down and found the colonel had actually forgotten to secure the padlock! You will often notice, as you go through life, it is the shrewdest and most cunning man who falls into the most absurd mistakes; and this was an example of it. You may

guess we did not lose much time, for we expected to hear the constables every moment. We dropped through into the lumber-room, slipped downstairs, tore open the library shutters, and were out and away before the astonished groom could make out what had happened. There wasn't time enough to take any little souvenir with us, worse luck. I should have liked to have seen the colonel's face when he came back with the constables and found the birds were flown."

"Did you ever come across the colonel again?" I asked.

"Yes; we skinned him of every bit of plate he had, down to the salt-spoons, a few years later. It was partly out of revenge, you see, we did it. It was a very well-managed and daring thing, one of the best I ever saw, and all done in open daylight, too."

"How in the world did you do it?" I asked.

"Well, there were three of us in it—Jim was one—and we set about it in this way: We wanted to begin by getting the colonel out of the way, so I wrote him a note purporting to come from Squire Brotherwick, who lived about ten miles away, and was not always on the best of terms with the master of Morley Hall. I dressed myself up as a groom, and delivered the note myself. It was to the effect the squire thought he was able to lay his hands on the scoundrels who had escaped from the colonel a couple of years before, and if the colonel would ride over they would have little difficulty in securing them. I was sure this would have the desired effect; so, after handing it in, and remarking I was the squire's groom, I walked off again, as if on the way back to my master's.

"After getting out of sight of the house, I crouched down behind a hedge; and, as I expected, in less than a quarter of an hour the colonel came swinging past me on his chestnut mare. Now, there is another accomplishment I possess which I have not mentioned to you yet, and that is, I can copy any handwriting I see. It is a very easy trick to pick up if you only give your mind to it. I happened to have come across one of Colonel Morley's letters some days before, and I can write so even now I defy an expert to detect a difference between the

hands. This was a great assistance to me now, for I tore a leaf out of my pocket-book and wrote something to this effect:

"As Squire Brotherwick has seen some suspicious characters about, and the house may be attempted again, I have sent down to the bank, and ordered them to send up their bank-cart to convey the whole of the plate to a place of safety. It will save us a good deal of anxiety to know it is in absolute security. Have it packed up and ready, and give the bearer a glass of beer." Having composed this precious epistle, I addressed it to the butler, and carried it back to the Hall, saying their master had overtaken me on the way and asked me to deliver it. I was taken in and made much of down-stairs, while a great packing case was dragged into the hall, and the plate stowed away, among cotton-wool and stuffing. It was nearly ready, when I heard the sound of wheels upon the gravel, and sauntered round just in time to see a business-like closed car drive up to the door. One of my pals was sitting very demurely on the box, while Jim, with an official-looking hat, sprang out and hustled into the hall.

"Now then," I heard him say, "look sharp! What's for the bank? Come on!"

"Wait a minute, sir," said the butler.

"Can't wait. There's a panic all over the country, and they are clamoring for us everywhere. Must drive on to Lord Blackbury's place, unless you are ready."

"Don't go, sir!" pleaded the butler. "There's only this one rope to tie. There, it is ready now. You'll look after it, won't you?"

"That we will. You'll never have any more trouble with it now," said Jim, helping to push the great case into the car.

"I think I had better go with you and see it stowed away in the bank," said the butler.

"All right," said Jim, nothing abashed. "You can't come in the car, though, for Lord Blackbury's box will take up all the spare room. Let's see; it's twelve o'clock now. Well, you be waiting at the bank door at half-past one, and you will just catch us."

"All right; half-past one," said the butler.

"Good-day," cried my chum; and away went the car, while I made a bit of a short cut and

caught it around a turn of the road. We drove right off into the next county, got a down-train to London, and before midnight the colonel's silver was fused into a solid lump."

I could not help laughing at the versatility of the old scoundrel. "It was a daring game to play," I said.

"It is always the daring game which succeeds best," he answered.

At this point the train began to show symptoms of slowing down, and my companion put on his overcoat and gave other signs of being near the end of his journey.

"You are going on to Dover?" he said.

"Yes."

"For the Continent?"

"Yes."

"How long do you intend to travel?"

"Only for a week or so."

"Well, I must leave you here. You will remember my name, won't you? John Wilkie. I am pleased to have met you. Is my umbrella behind you?" he added, stretching across. "No; I beg your pardon. Here it is in the corner;" and with an affable smile, the ex-cracksman stepped out, bowed, and disappeared among the crowd upon the platform.

I lit another cigar, laughed as I thought of my late companion, and lifted up the "Times," which he had left behind him. The bell had rung, the wheels were already revolving, when, to my astonishment, a pallid face looked in at me through the window. It was so contorted and agitated I hardly recognized the features which I had been gazing upon during the last couple of hours. "Here, take it," he said, "take it. It's hardly worth my while to rob you of seven pounds four shillings, but I couldn't resist once more trying my hand;" and he flung something into the carriage and disappeared. It was my old leather purse, with my return ticket, and the whole of my travelling expenses. His newly awakened conscience had driven him to instant restitution.