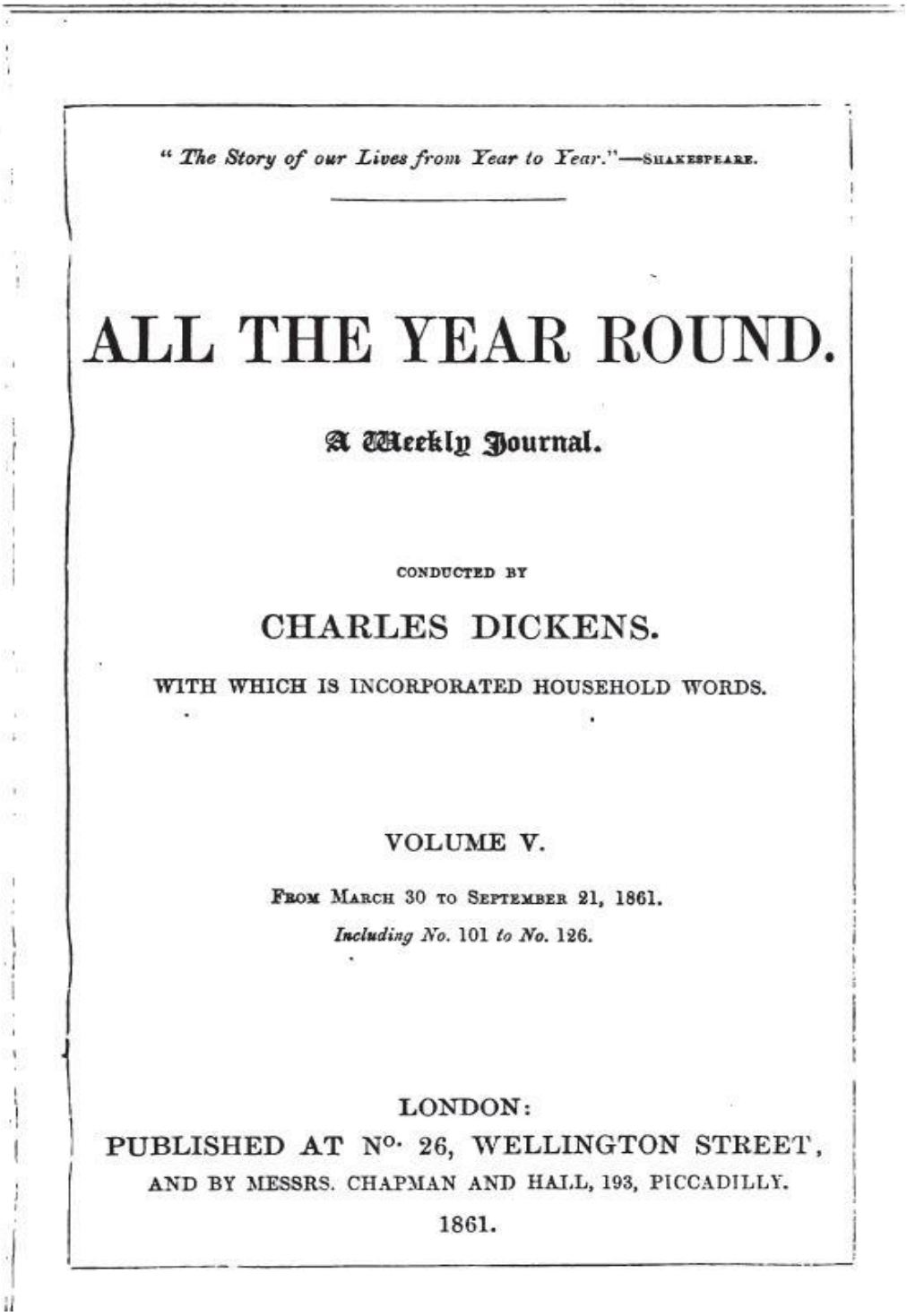
June 29th, 1861 Charles Dickens recounts the performance given by Blondin at the Crystal Palace on June 29, 1861.This long article, entitled "Old Rome of Crystal", was published in the column *All the Year Round*, *Volume 5*, a daily chronicle issued under the direction of Charles Dickens. It recounts the performance given by Blondin at the Crystal Palace on June 29, 1861. Some articles were written by Charles Dickens himself, others were not. It is therefore uncertain whether this one is his work or that of Eliza Lynn Linton, an essayist of the time. JLB Biography Tome II Page 13:



" *The Story of our Lives from Year to Year.*"—SHAKESPEARE.

ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

A Weekly Journal.

CONDUCTED BY

CHARLES DICKENS.

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED HOUSEHOLD WORDS.

VOLUME V.

FROM MARCH 30 TO SEPTEMBER 21, 1861.

Including No. 101 *to No.* 126.

LONDON:

PUBLISHED AT Nº. 26, WELLINGTON STREET,

AND BY MESSRS. CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

1861.

But labour on,
Labour and Love alone can heal thine heart,
And when its waters thus thou'st purified,
They can give strength to others. Child, good night."

OLD ROME IN CRYSTAL.

It is a blighty day in June: a day when the lazy grey of the stagnant unhealthy clouds seems like so much visible exhalation of fever.

I have just arrived at the Crystal Palace, somewhat ashamed of myself, to see Blondin, the Franco-American Rope-dancer, risk his life, for my half-hour's amusement. I am with some thousands of other jostling cravers for the unhallowed excitement, and a great choice of delight lies before me. Shall I sit down in the great transept a hundred feet below the rope, which looks as small from there as the perch of a bird-cage, and quietly watch till the hero slips and smashes a red sop of flesh and bones at my feet? Or, shall I go up to the first gallery, where I shall actually be able to see him half way in his fall, and behold his death more pleasantly and tranquilly? Or, shall I risk a little more trouble for an exquisite and new sensation, and ascend to the third, or five shilling gallery? Or, shall I boldly take a gold piece and mount till I can be on a level with the rope of the venturous Icarus, and there, watching his lithe and clasping feet, have the felicity of being able for years to lean across the epergne at dinner parties to relate how I was the first to see Blondin's foot miss its hold, the instant before he fell one hundred feet, and was picked up stone dead? I know all this is rather cruel, and I am rather ashamed of myself; but really no one can conceal that we all, thousands of us, have come to see an acrobat perform a feat of imminent danger. For an instant, I feel one of a pack of ten thousand staghounds, who are in full cry, and thirsting to lap the blood of one poor fox; but I laugh at my own scruples, and they get away and hide out of my sight, ready to pounce on me, I have no doubt, at some less busy and less preoccupied time.

Here, there are ten thousand of us whom the train has poured from its cellular throat, driving up the tubular passage of the Crystal Palace like so many black peas up a pea-shooter. We have all but one object—to see a man walk on (perhaps fall from) a rope a hundred feet high. We may tear buns to pieces, joint fowls, and devour vast ledges of sandwiches, but still the one object of all of us—bishops, lawyers, authors, fashionables—is to see a rope-dancer venture his life for one hundred pounds the half-hour. For this purpose, the sharp one-toothed instrument has bit to-day through so many tickets; for this, vats of pale ale have been emptied; for this, Regent-street and the Parks have contributed armies of languid Herculeses and pearl-powdered Venuses. For this, paralytic old Lady Chickenliver has been dragged here in her Bath chair, and even old Lord Stiffney has hobbled from his club. Can that gentleman yonder be a popular preacher? Can that lady near him be the powerful authoress of Night in the Upper Alps; or, Glances at the Glaciers? Half London is here, eager for a dreadful accident, since gladiators are no longer quite the fashion. Crowded? Why, the railway station is full, the voluminous gowns are jamming up the ticket collectors' turnstiles, statuesquely-dressed Guardsmen are losing all sense of dignity, and rushing madly up the tedious and endless steps, honest tradesmen are dragging their children through all obstacles, as if they were taking thieves to prison, everybody seems afraid that Blondin may fall before they are able to take their seats. In vain the gardens spread their flowers. They have no admirers to-day. It is so delicious to see a man risk his life, without being in danger oneself, and so cheap too—for only half-a-crown. Death can be seen on a larger scale in a battle; but there, the risk is so considerable. Minié bullets, too, drive out horrible plugs of flesh, our surgeons say, and the Armstrong bolt literally tears bodies to pieces; which is unpleasant. O sweet little wearers of round hats. O dainty donners of Mauve silks and sprigged muslins—I hear a voice saying—there was a time when all the ladies of Rome, with perfumes and fans, went daily to the Colosseum to see gigantic slaves chop each other to pieces; when the great arena was daily one huge vessel of blood; then the ladies clapped their little white hands, and stamped their little sandalled feet, and ate sweetmeats, and laughed and chatted and were happy as birds in spring; but, O sweet little ladies, these women were not Christians, they were Pagans, the inhabitants of the most corrupt city God ever allowed to corrupt the world. There are your ladies, too, even now, living in Spain, who shout and laugh when they see horses torn by the bull's horns, and their life-blood spout out at one gush upon the sand, and even when men are trodden under foot and crushed for their amusement. But these are the people in the last degradation of a degraded religion, and of a civilisation two centuries behind ours. The chiding voice, whosever it may be, is drowned by the tramp of unreasoning and hurrying feet, as we flow on in full tide, and break out into the building exactly where some Hindoos have been now for several years engaged in pretending to kill a Bengal tiger, already punctured with one arrow. But who cares for natural history, or rows of podgy kings in niches, or Greek statues, or Pompeian rooms, or lotus pillars, or Indian red monsters, when for half-a-crown one can see a man run three hundred and twenty feet on a rope a hundred feet high, and perhaps fall a hundred feet? If the pleasure and excitement be not in that possibility, say, why is the rope at that height?

Pleasantly the flowers trail from their basket-cages; sweetly they blow in purple fragrance or in golden softness round the fountains and beside the statues; but who cares for them to-day, when we may see a man smashed for half-a-

crown? Let the palm-trees spread their tents, and the great fern-trees from New Holland arch their branches; Nature has no charms to offer us like the chance of seeing a foolish brave man's death for half-a-crown.

In the centre of the great avenue I find a walled-in red-baize counter for the sale of tickets. A careworn man of fashion next me is anxious to know how near the rope the ten-shilling ticket will bring him; a still more careworn man of pleasure in the background wants to be informed where he can go for five shillings; while a dozen other eager, immovable, but anxious fashionable men, with ladies on their arms, are proffering their half-crowns for front-seats in the lower balcony.

I climb the stairs, with a moment's glance on the far reach of misty horizon, and take my place in the lofty gallery. I am at the jutting-out point of the gallery, looking down on the great central transept which the rope traverses; the rope, thick as my wrist, is composed of two stout strands, and which I saw wound all the way round the great central iron pillar of the corkscrew staircase leading to the gallery where I now am.

The cross ropes reaching from the rope to keep it perfectly and surely steady, are bound round the blue and white bars that I lean my arms on, looking at the fluttering Vanity fair below me. A rough hearty workman, who is tightening it, and halloaing, regardless of consequences, to a man opposite, who looks like a black, has much to say about Blondin. So has the stolid smiling policeman, B 434, whom several "swells," with trellises of auburn whisker, are "working" for oracles.

"I tell you what, sir," says he, addressing an imaginary ringleader, "there's not half of the ladies as likes it; and take my word for it, if he (Blondin) doesn't come down with a run one of these fine days."

Further, oracle P. C. B 434 cannot be induced to vouchsafe.

To him enters the workman, who volunteers much more information, and takes a less hortatory and warning point of sight.

"These here ropes," says he, "are to keep the rope as Blondin walks on perfectly steady, which is——"

"Five hundred feet high?" suggests a lounger at the club.

"No; exactly one hundred feet from the floor of the building, and three hundred and twenty feet from end to end; which is, as I may say, from fore and aft. Those weights you see every twenty feet or so, weigh thirty pounds each; Mr. Blondin thinks that is a better way of keeping it all perfectly steady, than splicing more rope to the galleries.

I ask how long Blondin took crossing the rope?

"He ran down it, sir, the other day in less than two minutes, as fast as a man could run on dry land."

This was an exaggeration of my friend, I afterwards found.

At this moment, a short thickset man wearing a French hat, passed. I saw by the gold medals which he bore "as bold as brass" on his left breast, that it was Monsieur Blondin; I knew him by his heavy gold-headed American cane, and by the frank brave acrobatic face I had often seen in illustrated papers.

"It do make 'em (the ladies) shiver a bit, but there's no harm in it," said the workman; who then, giving a suspicious pull to a rope, and pronouncing his opinion that it was altogether "a rum start," went on his way: wherever, below or above, that might be.

Now the band, all scarlet and gold lace, begins to be jubilant, and alternately drummy and brassy, or now and then lulls to silence, while a solo flute tells us of its sorrows. That conductor in black, with his back steadily turned to the audience, is the only person who will not see Blondin venture his life. How I pity that conductor at this moment!

Below, the crowd is divided into two opposite parties seated on either side of the transept, which is left bare, for fear Blondin, or his pole, or anything which is his, should fall and hurt anybody.

"Exactly like the House of Commons!" says the wife of the member for Rottenborough, who is sitting next to me.

The people are strewn over the floor like clippings of black cloth about a tailor's shop, only that here and there scraps of scarlet and shreds of green and lilac look as if sweepings of a milliner's shop have got intermingled with the tailor's snippings. Overhead, the summer dresses of the ladies show through the open work balconies, like rows of azaleas in full bloom, arranged for a flower-show. The pretty thoughtless creatures, always encouraging men to risk their lives in reckless and romantic ways, are everywhere. There are flower borders of them on the steps of the great orchestra, and spots of them like morsels of tapestry patterns, only sketched in, under the organ, and up even in the topmost galleries.

I beguile a moment or two by looking at a mendacious lithograph, representing Blondin crossing over the Horse-shoe Fall at Niagara on a rope; though I very well know he did not cross the Niagara river within a quarter of a mile of the Falls, and that, to cross the Falls through boiling mist and on a slippery rope would be impossible to any human being. Of course, too, as might be expected, the interval traversed by the rope is made three times as high, and ten times as wide, as it really is; nor does the lithograph contain any notice of Blondin's rival, who also daily crossed the same river on a rope.

"But the most dreadfullest thing, sir," said the workman, again appearing, to do something or other to a rope, which got loose and hung over the transept, "is to see him go over in a sack; now there's no deception, sir, for I've put it on myself, and you can see nothing in it but the rope just where your feet go. Oh, its hawful! he must have a deal of nerve or

summot.—You 'avn't got the price of a pot of beer, sir, about you, have ye?"

The workman's story ends as workmen's stories often do. I give him largesse.

Suddenly all the sea of black hats below turns white. But hush! there is a slight tremble of the rope above our heads and all the faces change whiter again, just as a row of aspen trees do, when the wind passes through them. And now the twenty thousand hands of the ten thousand people, clap, and produce a secondary ripple and flutter of white foaming along the edges of those waves of black.

It is Blondin, who has emerged from his red-covered dressing-room, and passed from the little red sideboard upon the white twisted rope. I feel a slight qualm as of incipient sea-sickness when I see the reckless adventurer appear in an Indian dress, with a huge crown of black and white ostrich feathers nodding on his head, and run nimbly on the rope (higher than those wires that cross the Strand near Somerset House), with an enormous balancing pole quivering in his hands. His feet, wrapped in Indian mocassins of deer-skin or wash leather, lap round the rope as he walks and runs, in time to the cadenced music. The ladies near me, turn away their eyes; for, to look at Blondin, brings on that sort of vertigo one feels when looking down from a high tower.

"What a pity," says an enthusiast in the voluptuousness of cruelty, "he does not carry a glass tumbler with him, and drop it when half way across; it would convey such a sense of danger, and I dare say it would make a lady or two faint."

"Or why not detonating balls, and make them scream?" says a second old epicure, who has just let his heavy silver-headed cane fall on the heads of the unoffending people below.

Now standing on one leg, now sitting on the rope like a sailor, now throwing a somersault, now standing on his head on the rope, Blondin starts on his "little tour;" and the more terribly near he seems to death—whose great black hand I almost seem to see clutching at him—the more the ladies clap their little white hands, and the more fashion's thousand heads gape, stare, "wonder with a foolish face of praise," and languidly applaud. More smelling of salts, more half-faintness, more brazen-staring indifference to risk or death, but no more faint excitement or pale phantoms of pleasure than that can be produced. And from the opposite little platform above the flags and escutcheons steps out Blondin again; this time not in dainty white, this time with no gold badge swinging from his neck, but in a ghastly striped hood like an Italian penitent or a guilty monk. Now the pleasure assumes a still more painful and hideous form. The ladies scarcely dare to look up at the puppet-like figure moving uneasily on its feet. His eyes are blinded, he advances stooping and swerving with the affected timidity of a beginner, or of a man condemned to some horrible and refined torture. It reminds me of that dreadful bridge, El Araf, finer than a hair, and sharper than a sabre blade, on which the Mahomedans say all true believers are at the last day to be passed over from hell to heaven. Below, all is fire. The good pass over with ease, uttering prayers; the bad lose their balance, and fall, quick and screaming, into Gehenna.

I see the lady faces below shudder as the daring man slips—now one inquiring foot, now another—down the edge of the rope, as if blindly feeling for safety. Now, this man with the brain of a chamois, lies down on the rope and crosses his feet, then rises and passes on with a certainty that seems miraculous.

But the excited people below, want to see still more daring feats. They have paid their money, and Blondin has not yet been half enough near death. He is now to attempt a still more dangerous feat, and even this is nothing to what he will do if the gentle ladies who scream "at the smallest little mouse that runs on floor" will only patronise him sufficiently.

The intervals of suspense are relieved by an attendant (wonderfully like a real live footman) passing round for inspection the hooded sack that Blondin has just worn and thrown down. It is perceived "that the sack is really quite wet with perspiration," as an M.P. near me says, with an exultation, not unmingled with surprise.

The band beats out fresh music as the third and most horrible of the phases of the "amusement" commences, and still the imperturbable conductor keeps his black back stolidly turned to us and to Blondin. The ladies' ribbons move like wind-tossed flower-beds; for every one expects to see something "delightfully frightful," less brutal than a prize fight, but, oh far more tantalising and dangerous. The ladies who have half fainted have now recovered, and are on the alert. A few of the younger ladies clench their eyebrows with an expression of pain, but they all look up;—for you know that what ten thousand people come to see, cannot be wrong.

This time, M. Blondin of the flaxen beard and frank brave immovable eyes, is dressed as a French cook—white flat cap, white apron, white breeches, and white shoes. He does not chalk his feet, nor hesitate a moment. He quietly straps on his back, a portable stove, which, funnel and all, weighs some fifty pounds, and from which hang pots, pans, bellows, and broom. With this load, he steps boldly on to the rope; this time it makes the heart beat ten times harder than before, to see the stove bob about on his back and all but destroy his balance. Now, he is safe half way across the rope, and here he has to set down the unwieldy stove and begin cooking. With extreme and painful care he gets on one knee, and from thence across the rope; he then ties his balancing pole firmly to the rope, slowly lowers the stove, now unstrapped, backward to the rope, then turns, and, sitting on the pole, addresses himself to cook at the toppling stove; which, I suppose, he has hooked in some way to the pole.

The suspense is agonising as he lights the fire. The smoke circles out of the funnel. He blows

it, and proceeds to crack the eggs for the omelets. Everything he has done with, he flings below, so that the falling may show the distance, and increase your sense of the danger he is in. You see with horror, the time the white shells take to swirl and swirl, till they smash on the planks of the long transept below. Now he splashes down water, now a pot-lid rings like a bad penny on the floor, and rolls to the feet of an injured-looking policeman, who looks at Blondin as if he were only waiting till he comes down, to take him up.

The black smoke volumes out—I see the fire blazing—from time to time, Blondin stands on the rope and sways round the frying-pan. His manner is the manner of an anxious cook, and of nothing else; he is neither alarmed nor hurried; but the spectators hold their breath.

"I tell you what it is, sir," says the M.P. for the Stilton Hundreds to the M.P. for Rottenborough, "the suspense is sustained too long; the horror defeats itself; all but the height has been done before—at Vauxhall and other places, in my youth; but just look at him now! standing on the rope and putting out the omelet; it really makes me giddy."

Blondin has finished his torturing cooking; now he lowers down a tray, on which are a well-cooked omelet and some bottles of beer or wine. He lowers it with jerks, and the almost footman receives it, and hands it down the outside rows of the House of Commons off duty. The boys can with difficulty keep their fingers off, and the gentlemen and ladies are hardly repressed from snatching by the skimming haste and superficial celerity of the waiter.

There is something coming, more trying to the nerves than the somersault, the walking in the sack, or the lying on the rope and fanning himself with one hand. Blondin has to take up his pole, turn, and then re-strap and lift up that fifty pounds' weight of lighted stove, with its swinging stew-pans, bellows and all. Surely it is almost impossible that he can rise and keep his balance, with that weight oscillating on his back! To think of all those eyes turned towards him now with anxious, yet unpitying stare. Such, surely, were the eyes that ringed the Colosseum when we early Britons, blue with paint, beat out each other's brains with bronze axes to amuse the dandies and wantons of Rome—the wicked.

He staggers! No, he is safe. He has risen on one knee, has carefully got astride of the rope. He has stooped down and strapped on his stove; he has smiled to his wife in the baloony; he has taken off his hat and bowed, to acknowledge his thanks for the applause; he has slowly risen, with the heavy weight dragging him backward, and has risen erect and safe upon the rope. Now he passes up the rope, stove and all, and bows safely from the little red shelf near his dressing-room.

The band storms out "God save the Queen," the black sea breaks up and pulverises into atoms, decantering down the various passages leading to the railway station. I hear no expressions of pity nor anxiety; but the hon. member for Rottenborough says to some other M.P., "The suspense was too protracted.—Will you be down at the House to-night?"

Others are saying that what we have just seen, painful as it is, is nothing to what Blondin will do. He is going to walk, in the grounds, on a rope fifty feet higher, and pass through the playing fountains. He will walk the rope on stilts, with his feet in baskets; he will carry a man over on his back; some one says he will actually wheel his wife over in a scarlet and gold wheelbarrow.

"Of course he'll break his neck one of these days.—My dear, have you got the opera-glass?" says Lady Fantwiddle, as she passes to her carriage.

I leave the Palace, fully persuaded of one thing, and that is, that if M. Blondin wants to make a very great success indeed, he should carry over a baby on his back. That would be an admirable excitement, and would bring all the fashionable mothers in London to see him. We have all enjoyed the Chinese juggler, who let a friend fling knives at his face; we have all rejoiced to see the Alhambra champion break his back, and Leotard fly through the air. But Blondin rope-dancing with a baby in his arms would be, "Let me assure you, my dear Lady Fantwiddle, perfectly irresistible."

THE LAST LEWISES.

THE HEADLESS.

In the gaudy relic-room of the Louvre, near the window, is a white round table, engraved all over curiously with a sort of map or projection. Not far off is exposed a little satin slipper creased, soiled, and very tiny. Holiday folk do not much regard these curiosities, being wholly engrossed with the fineries and the table services, the body linen, and, most precious of all, that poor battered St. Helena hat. But the geographical table was engraved by the fingers of Louis Capet, sometime King of France, and the tiny slipper belonged to that ill-fated Widow Capet, Marie Antoinette. When did she wear that soiled slipper last? At the Versailles dance? At the palace window when she faced the mob howling below?

Upon a worn sou-piece of the period, is about the best likeness of Lewis the Desired. From that coin looks out upon us, the round bulb-shaped face, sloped away to where it sprouts in the tie-wig, the large nose, the fat hanging double chin, the aimable fatuity, the gentle inanity. We can read his whole life and all its sorrowful adventures on the one-sou piece—his delights, his lockmaking, his joys and trials, and his weaknesses. Alack! as we put it by in the drawer, we see that such a face was not the face for the crisis. Perhaps another with sterner lines and less florid cheeks would have fared no better. The family estates had come down to him, ruinously mortgaged, rack-rented, harried, wasted, burnt up, and here at last were the tenants at bay, and proceedings in court, and a bloody foreclosure.