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READY-MONEY MORTIBOY
BY
WALTER BESANT AND JAMES RICE.

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READY-MONEY
MORTIBOY.

A MATTER-OF-FACT STORY.

BY

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AUTHORS OF "THE GOLDEN BUTTERFLY," ETC.

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READY-MONEY MORTIBOY.

A MATTER-OF-FACT STORY.

CHAPTER I.

THE Street, as Frank stepped into it from Dick's hotel, was alive with people, for the night was warm and fine. He bade his rich cousin good night, in his easy pleasant way, never hinting at the sore straits to which he was reduced. Dick was rather inclined to believe, indeed, from what little information he was able to elicit from Frank, that Art paid;—that Frank got a living at it, at all events, he was too proud to be helped when he saw the chance of doing well without help. Now, Dick rather admired this phase of Frank's character—as who would not? Yet he resolved that, when he saw him the next day, he would compel him to disclose the state of his finances and his prospects. While one cousin thought this, the other hesitated a moment in front of the hotel, remembering suddenly that he had no bed to go to. It was a curious sensation, the most novel he had ever experienced. No bed. Nowhere to go to. No money, or next to none, in his pocket. Nothing at all resembling a home. Even a portable tent, or a Rob

Roy canoe, would have been something. He shook himself all over, like a dog. Then he laughed, for he had had a capital day and a good dinner, and he was only five-and-twenty.

"Hang it," he said, "a night in the open won't kill one, I suppose. Dick Mortiboy must have had many in his travelling days."

Then he lit a cigar. Dick had forced a dozen upon him—which, with that curious feeling that permits a man to take anything except money from another, Frank accepted with real gratitude. With his hands in his pockets, and his hat well back on his head, as all old Eton boys wear it, he strolled westward, turning things over in his mind in that resignedly amused frame of mind which comes upon the most unhappy wight after a bottle and a half of claret. Our ancestors, in their kindly brutality, permitted condemned criminals to have a long drink on the way to Tyburn. The punchbowl was brought out somewhere near the site of the Marble Arch; and the *condamné*, fortified and brightened up by the drink, ascended the ladder with a jaunty air, and kicked off his shoes before an admiring populace;—just as well, it seems to me, as keeping the poor wretch low, and making him feel all his misery up to the very last. Frank, having had his bowl of punch, was about to embark upon that wild and hopeless voyage of despair, which consists in sailing from port to port, looking for employment and finding none. There are certain ships to be met with in the different havens of the world, which are from time to time to be found putting in, "seeking." They never find. From Valparaiso they go to Rio; from Pernambuco to Port Louis; from Calcutta to Kingston;

from Havana to Shanghai. They are always roving about the ocean, always "seeking," and always in ballast. Who are their owners; how the grizzled old skipper keeps his crew together; how they pay for the pickled pork and rum in which they delight; how they have credit for repairs to rigging and sails; how the ship is docked, and scraped, and kept afloat—all these things are a profound mystery. After a time, as I have reason for believing, they disappear; but this must be when there is no longer any credit possible, and all the ports in the world are closed to them. Probably at this juncture the skipper calls together his men, makes the weather-beaten tars a speech, tells them that their long and happy voyages must now terminate, because there is no more pickled pork and no more rum, and discloses to them a long-hidden secret. They cheer feebly, set the sails once more, turn her head due North, and steer away to that warm, windless, iceless ocean at the North Pole, where all vagrom ships betake themselves at last, and live together in peace and harmony far from the storms of the world.

Which things are an allegory. Ships are but as men. The North Pole ocean is as that hidden deep where dwell the men who have "gone under." They "go under" every day, falling off at each reverse more and more from the paths of honesty. One of them called on me a week ago. I had met him once, and only once, at Oxford, years since. He shook hands with me as with his oldest and best friend; he sat down; he drank my sherry; he called me old fellow; and presently, when he thought my heart was open to the soft influence of pity, he told me his tale, and—borrowed thirty shillings. He went away. Of