



GEORGE MEREDITH

RHODA FLEMING

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RHODA FLEMING

By George Meredith

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CHAPTER XII

Edward's engagement at his Club had been with his unfortunate cousin Algernon; who not only wanted a dinner but 'five pounds or so' (the hazy margin which may extend illimitably, or miserably contract, at the lender's pleasure, and the necessity for which shows the borrower to be dancing on Fortune's tight-rope above the old abyss).

"Over claret," was to have been the time for the asking; and Algernon waited dinnerless until the healthy-going minutes distended and swelled monstrous and horrible as viper-bitten bodies, and the venerable Signior, Time, became of unhealthy hue. For this was the first dinner which, during the whole course of the young man's career, had ever been failing to him. Reflect upon the mournful gap! He could scarcely believe in his ill-luck. He suggested it to himself with an inane grin, as one of the far-away freaks of circumstances that had struck him--and was it not comical?

He waited from the hour of six till the hour of seven. He compared clocks in the hall and the room. He changed the posture of his legs fifty times. For a while he wrestled right gallantly with the apparent menace of the Fates that he was to get no dinner at all that day; it

seemed incredibly derisive, for, as I must repeat, it had never happened to him by any accident before. "You are born--you dine." Such appeared to him to be the positive regulation of affairs, and a most proper one, --of the matters of course following the birth of a young being.

By what frightful mischance, then, does he miss his dinner? By placing the smallest confidence in the gentlemanly feeling of another man! Algernon deduced this reply accurately from his own experience, and whether it can be said by other "undined" mortals, does not matter in the least. But we have nothing to do with the constitutionally luckless: the calamitous history of a simple empty stomach is enough. Here the tragedy is palpable. Indeed, too sadly so, and I dare apply but a flash of the microscope to the raging dilemmas of this animalcule. Five and twenty minutes had signalled their departure from the hour of seven, when Algernon pronounced his final verdict upon Edward's conduct by leaving the Club. He returned to it a quarter of an hour later, and lingered on in desperate mood till eight.

He had neither watch in his pocket, nor ring on his finger, nor disposable stud in his shirt. The sum of twenty-one pence was in his possession, and, I ask you, as he asked himself, how is a gentleman to dine upon that? He laughed at the notion. The irony of Providence sent him by a cook's shop, where the mingled steam of meats and puddings rushed out upon the wayfarer like ambushed bandits, and seized him and dragged him in, or sent him qualmish and humbled on his way.

Two little boys had flattened their noses to the whiteness of winkles against the jealously misty windows. Algernon knew himself to be accounted a generous fellow, and remembering his reputation, he, as to hint at what Fortune might do in his case, tossed some coppers to the urchins, who ducked to the pavement and slid before the counter, in a flash, with never a "thank ye" or the thought of it.

Algernon was incapable of appreciating this childish faith in the beneficence of the unseen Powers who feed us, which, I must say for him, he had shared in a very similar manner only two hours ago. He laughed scornfully: "The little beggars!" considering in his soul that of such is humanity composed: as many a dinnerless man has said before, and will again, to point the speech of fools. He continued strolling on, comparing the cramped misty London aspect of things with his visionary free dream of the glorious prairies, where his other life was: the forests, the mountains, the endless expanses; the horses, the flocks, the slipshod ease of language and attire; and the grog-shops. Aha! There could be no mistake about him as a gentleman and a scholar out there!

Nor would Nature shut up her pocket and demand innumerable things of him, as civilization did. This he thought in the vengefulness of his outraged mind.

Not only had Algernon never failed to dine every day of his life: he had no recollection of having ever dined without drinking wine. His conception did not embrace the idea of a dinner lacking wine. Possibly he had some embodied understanding that wine did not fall to the lot of every fellow upon earth: he had heard of gullets unrefreshed even by beer: but at any rate he himself was accustomed to better things, and he did not choose to excavate facts from the mass of his knowledge in order to reconcile himself to the miserable chop he saw for his dinner in the distance--a spot of meat in the arctic circle of a plate, not shone upon by any rosy-warming sun of a decanter!

But metaphorical language, though nothing other will convey the extremity of his misery, or the form of his thoughts, must be put aside.

"Egad, and every friend I have is out of town!" he exclaimed, quite willing to think it part of the plot.

He stuck his hands in his pockets, and felt vagabond-like and reckless. The streets were revelling in their winter muck. The carriages rolling by insulted him with their display of wealth.

He had democratic sentiments regarding them. Oh for a horse upon the boundless plains! he sighed to his heart. He remembered bitterly how he had that day ridden his stool at the bank, dreaming of his wilds, where bailiff never ran, nor duns obscured the firmament.

And then there were theatres here--huge extravagant places! Algernon went over to an entrance of one, to amuse his mind, cynically criticizing the bill. A play was going forward within, that enjoyed great popular esteem, "The Holly Berries." Seeing that the pit was crammed, Algernon made application to learn the state of the boxes, but hearing that one box was empty, he lost his interest in the performance.

As he was strolling forth, his attention was taken by a noise at the pit-doors, which swung open, and out tumbled a tough little old man with a younger one grasping his coat-collar, who proclaimed that he would sicken him of pushing past him at the end of every act.

"You're precious fond of plays," sneered the junior.

"I'm fond of everything I pay for, young fellow," replied the shaken senior; "and that's a bit of enjoyment you've got to learn--ain't it?"

"Well, don't you knock by me again, that's all," cried the choleric youth.

"You don't think I'm likely to stop in your company, do you?"

"Whose expense have you been drinking at?"

"My country's, young fellow; and mind you don't soon feed at the table. Let me go."

Algernon's hunger was appeased by the prospect of some excitement, and seeing a vicious shake administered to the old man by the young one, he cried, "Hands off!" and undertook policeman's duty; but as he was not in blue, his authoritative mandate obtained no respect until he had interposed his fist.

When he had done so, he recognized the porter at Boyne's Bank, whose enemy retired upon the threat that there should be no more pushing past him to get back to seats for the next act.

"I paid," said Anthony; "and you're a ticketer, and you ticketers sha'n't stop me. I'm worth a thousand of you. Holloa, sir," he cried to Algernon; "I didn't know you. I'm much obliged. These chaps get tickets given 'm, and grow as cocky in a theatre as men who pay. He never had such wine in him as I've got. That I'd swear. Ha! ha! I come out for an airing after every act, and there's a whole pitfall of ticketers yelling and tearing, and I chaff my way through and back clean as a red-hot poker."

Anthony laughed, and rolled somewhat as he laughed.

"Come along, sir, into the street," he said, boring on to the pavement. "It's after office hours. And, ha! ha! what do you think? There's old farmer in there, afraid to move off his seat, and the girl with him, sticking to him tight, and a good girl too. She thinks we've had too much. We been to the Docks, wine-tasting: Port--Sherry: Sherry--Port! and, ha! ha! 'what a lot of wine!' says farmer, never thinking how much he's taking on board. "I guessed it was night," says farmer, as we got into the air, and to see him go on blinking, and stumbling, and saying to me, 'You stand wine, brother Tony!' I'm blest if I ain't bottled laughter. So, says I, 'come and see "The Holly Berries," brother William

John; it's the best play in London, and a suitable winter piece.' 'Is there a rascal hanged in the piece?' says he. 'Oh, yes! I let him fancy there was, and he--ha! ha! old farmer's sticking to his seat, solemn as a judge, waiting for the gallows to come on the stage.'

A thought quickened Algernon's spirit. It was a notorious secret among the young gentlemen who assisted in maintaining the prosperity of Boyne's Bank, that the old porter--the "Old Ant," as he was called--possessed money, and had no objection to put out small sums for a certain interest. Algernon mentioned casually that he had left his purse at home; and "by the way," said he, "have you got a few sovereigns in your pocket?"

"What! and come through that crush, sir?" Anthony negatived the question decisively with a reference to his general knowingness.

Algernon pressed him; saying at last, "Well, have you got one?"

"I don't think I've been such a fool," said Anthony, feeling slowly about his person, and muttering as to the changes that might possibly have been produced in him by the Docks.

"Confound it, I haven't dined!" exclaimed Algernon, to hasten his proceedings; but at this, Anthony eyed him queerly. "What have you been about then, sir?"

"Don't you see I'm in evening dress? I had an appointment to dine with a friend. He didn't keep it. I find I've left my purse in my other clothes."

"That's a bad habit, sir," was Anthony's comment. "You don't care much for your purse."

"Much for my purse, be hanged!" interjected Algernon.

"You'd have felt it, or you'd have heard it, if there 'd been any weight in it," Anthony remarked.

"How can you hear paper?"

"Oh, paper's another thing. You keep paper in your mind, don't you--eh? Forget pound notes? Leave pound notes in a purse? And you Sir William's nephew, sir, who'd let you bank with him and put down everything in a book, so that you couldn't forget, or if you did, he'd remember for you; and you might change your clothes as often as not, and no fear of your

losing a penny."

Algernon shrugged disgustedly, and was giving the old man up as a bad business, when Anthony altered his manner. "Oh! well, sir, I don't mind letting you have what I've got. I'm out for fun. Bother affairs!"

The sum of twenty shillings was handed to Algernon, after he had submitted to the indignity of going into a public-house, and writing his I.O.U. for twenty-three to Anthony Hackbut, which included interest. Algernon remonstrated against so needless a formality; but Anthony put the startling supposition to him, that he might die that night. He signed the document, and was soon feeding and drinking his wine. This being accomplished, he took some hasty puffs of tobacco, and returned to the theatre, in the hope that the dark girl Rhoda was to be seen there; for now that he had dined, Anthony's communication with regard to the farmer and his daughter became his uppermost thought, and a young man's uppermost thought is usually the propelling engine to his actions.

By good chance, and the aid of a fee, he obtained a front seat, commanding an excellent side-view of the pit, which sat wrapt in contemplation of a Christmas scene snow, ice, bare twigs, a desolate house, and a woman shivering--one of man's victims.

It is a good public, that of Britain, and will bear anything, so long as villany is punished, of which there was ripe promise in the oracular utterances of a rolling, stout, stage-sailor, whose nose, to say nothing of his frankness on the subject, proclaimed him his own worst enemy, and whose joke, by dint of repetition, had almost become the joke of the audience too; for whenever he appeared, there was agitation in pit and gallery, which subsided only on his jovial thundering of the familiar sentence; whereupon laughter ensued, and a quieting hum of satisfaction.

It was a play that had been favoured with a great run. Critics had once objected to it, that it was made to subsist on scenery, a song, and a stupid piece of cockneyism pretending to be a jest, that was really no more than a form of slapping the public on the back. But the public likes to have its back slapped, and critics, frozen by the Medusa-head of Success, were soon taught manners. The office of critic is now, in fact, virtually extinct; the taste for tickling and slapping is universal and imperative; classic appeals to the intellect, and passions not purely domestic, have grown obsolete. There are captains of the legions, but no critics. The mass is lord.

And behold our friend the sailor of the boards, whose walk is even as two

meeting billows, appears upon the lonely moor, and salts that uninhabited region with nautical interjections. Loose are his hose in one part, tight in another, and he smacks them. It is cold; so let that be his excuse for showing the bottom of his bottle to the glittering spheres. He takes perhaps a sturdier pull at the liquor than becomes a manifest instrument of Providence, whose services may be immediately required; but he informs us that his ship was never known not to right itself when called upon.

He is alone in the world, he tells us likewise. If his one friend, the uplifted flask, is his enemy, why then he feels bound to treat his enemy as his friend. This, with a pathetic allusion to his interior economy, which was applauded, and the remark "Ain't that Christian?" which was just a trifle risky; so he secured pit and gallery at a stroke by a surpassingly shrewd blow at the bishops of our Church, who are, it can barely be contested, in foul esteem with the multitude--none can say exactly, for what reason--and must submit to be occasionally offered up as propitiatory sacrifices.

This good sailor was not always alone in the world. A sweet girl, whom he describes as reaching to his kneecap, and pathetically believes still to be of the same height, once called him brother Jack. To hear that name again from her lips, and a particular song!--he attempts it ludicrously, yet touchingly withal.

Hark! Is it an echo from a spirit in the frigid air?

The song trembled with a silver ring to the remotest corners of the house.

At that moment the breathless hush of the audience was flurried by hearing "Dahlia" called from the pit.

Algernon had been spying among the close-packed faces for a sight of Rhoda. Rhoda was now standing up amid gathering hisses and outcries. Her eyes were bent on a particular box, across which a curtain was hastily being drawn. "My sister!" she sent out a voice of anguish, and remained with clasped hands and twisted eyebrows, looking toward that one spot, as if she would have flown to it. She was wedged in the mass, and could not move.

The exclamation heard had belonged to brother Jack, on the stage, whose burst of fraternal surprise and rapture fell flat after it, to the disgust of numbers keenly awakened for the sentiment of this scene.

Roaring accusations that she was drunk; that she had just escaped from Bedlam for an evening; that she should be gagged and turned headlong out, surrounded her; but she stood like a sculptured figure, vital in her eyes alone. The farmer put his arm about his girl's waist. The instant, however, that Anthony's head uprose on the other side of her, the evil reputation he had been gaining for himself all through the evening produced a general clamour, over which the gallery played, miauling, and yelping like dogs that are never to be divorced from a noise. Algernon feared mischief. He quitted his seat, and ran out into the lobby.

Half-a-dozen steps, and he came in contact with some one, and they were mutually drenched with water by the shock. It was his cousin Edward, bearing a glass in his hand.

Algernon's wrath at the sight of this offender was stimulated by the cold bath; but Edward cut him short.

"Go in there," he pointed to a box-door. "A lady has fainted. Hold her up till I come."

No time was allowed for explanation. Algernon passed into the box, and was alone with an inanimate shape in blue bournous. The uproar in the theatre raged; the whole pit was on its legs and shouting. He lifted the pallid head over one arm, miserably helpless and perplexed, but his anxiety concerning Rhoda's personal safety in that sea of strife prompted him to draw back the curtain a little, and he stood exposed. Rhoda perceived him. She motioned with both her hands in dumb supplication. In a moment the curtain closed between them. Edward's sharp white face cursed him mutely for his folly, while he turned and put the water to Dahlia's lips, and touched her forehead with it.

"What's the matter?" whispered Algernon.

"We must get her out as quick as we can. This is the way with women! Come! she's recovering." Edward nursed her sternly as he spoke.

"If she doesn't, pretty soon, we shall have the pit in upon us," said Algernon. "Is she that girl's sister?"

"Don't ask damned questions."

Dahlia opened her eyes, staring placidly.

"Now you can stand up, my dear. Dahlia! all's well. Try," said Edward.

She sighed, murmuring, "What is the time?" and again, "What noise is it?"

Edward coughed in a vexed attempt at tenderness, using all his force to be gentle with her as he brought her to her feet. The task was difficult amid the threatening storm in the theatre, and cries of "Show the young woman her sister!" for Rhoda had won a party in the humane public.

"Dahlia, in God's name give me your help!" Edward called in her ear.

The fair girl's eyelids blinked wretchedly in protestation of her weakness. She had no will either way, and suffered herself to be led out of the box, supported by the two young men.

"Run for a cab," said Edward; and Algernon went ahead.

He had one waiting for them as they came out. They placed Dahlia on a seat with care, and Edward, jumping in, drew an arm tightly about her. "I can't cry," she moaned.

The cab was driving off as a crowd of people burst from the pit-doors, and Algernon heard the voice of Farmer Fleming, very hoarse. He had discretion enough to retire.

CHAPTER XIII

Robert was to drive to the station to meet Rhoda and her father returning from London, on a specified day. He was eager to be asking cheerful questions of Dahlia's health and happiness, so that he might dispel the absurd general belief that he had ever loved the girl, and was now regretting her absence; but one look at Rhoda's face when she stepped from the railway carriage kept him from uttering a word on that subject, and the farmer's heavier droop and acceptance of a helping hand into the cart, were signs of bad import.

Mr. Fleming made no show of grief, like one who nursed it. He took it to all appearance as patiently as an old worn horse would do, although such an outward submissiveness will not always indicate a placid spirit in men. He talked at stale intervals of the weather and the state of the ground along the line of rail down home, and pointed in contempt or

approval to a field here and there; but it was as one who no longer had any professional interest in the tilling of the land.

Doubtless he was trained to have no understanding of a good to be derived by his communicating what he felt and getting sympathy. Once, when he was uncertain, and a secret pride in Dahlia's beauty and accomplishments had whispered to him that her flight was possibly the opening of her road to a higher fortune, he made a noise for comfort, believing in his heart that she was still to be forgiven. He knew better now. By holding his peace he locked out the sense of shame which speech would have stirred within him.

"Got on pretty smooth with old Mas' Gammon?" he expressed his hope; and Robert said, "Capitally. We shall make something out of the old man yet, never fear."

Master Gammon was condemned to serve at the ready-set tea-table as a butt for banter; otherwise it was apprehended well that Mrs. Sumfit would have scorched the ears of all present, save the happy veteran of the furrows, with repetitions of Dahlia's name, and wailings about her darling, of whom no one spoke. They suffered from her in spite of every precaution.

"Well, then, if I'm not to hear anything dooring meals--as if I'd swallow it and take it into my stomach!--I'll wait again for what ye've got to tell," she said, and finished her cup at a gulp, smoothing her apron.

The farmer then lifted his head.

"Mother, if you've done, you'll oblige me by going to bed," he said. "We want the kitchen."

"A-bed?" cried Mrs. Sumfit, with instantly ruffled lap.

"Upstairs, mother; when you've done--not before."

"Then bad's the noos! Something have happened, William. You 'm not going to push me out? And my place is by the tea-pot, which I cling to, rememberin' how I seen her curly head grow by inches up above the table and the cups. Mas' Gammon," she appealed to the sturdy feeder, "five cups is your number?"

Her hope was reduced to the prolonging of the service of tea, with Master Gammon's kind assistance.

"Four, marm," said her inveterate antagonist, as he finished that amount, and consequently put the spoon in his cup.

Mrs. Sumfit rolled in her chair.

"O Lord, Mas' Gammon! Five, I say; and never a cup less so long as here you've been."

"Four, marm. I don't know," said Master Gammon, with a slow nod of his head, "that ever I took five cups of tea at a stretch. Not runnin'."

"I do know, Mas' Gammon. And ought to: for don't I pour out to ye? It's five you take, and please, your cup, if you'll hand it over."

"Four's my number, marm," Master Gammon reiterated resolutely. He sat like a rock.

"If they was dumplins," moaned Mrs. Sumfit, "not four, no, nor five, 'd do till enough you'd had, and here we might stick to our chairs, but you'd go on and on; you know you would."

"That's eatin', marm;" Master Gammon condescended to explain the nature of his habits. "I'm reg'lar in my drinkin'."

Mrs. Sumfit smote her hands together. "O Lord, Mas' Gammon, the wearisomest old man I ever come across is you. More tea's in the pot, and it ain't watery, and you won't be comfortable. May you get forgiveness from above! is all I say, and I say no more. Mr. Robert, perhaps you'll be so good as let me help you, sir? It's good tea; and my Dody," she added, cajolingly, "my home girl 'll tell us what she saw. I'm pinched and starved to hear."

"By-and-by, mother," interposed the farmer; "tomorrow." He spoke gently, but frowned.

Both Rhoda and Robert perceived that they were peculiarly implicated in the business which was to be discussed without Mrs. Sumfit's assistance. Her father's manner forbade Rhoda from making any proposal for the relief of the forlorn old woman.

"And me not to hear to-night about your play-going!" sighed Mrs. Sumfit. "Oh, it's hard on me. I do call it cruel. And how my sweet was dressed--like as for a Ball."

She saw the farmer move his foot impatiently.

"Then, if nobody drinks this remaining cup, I will," she pursued.

No voice save her own was heard till the cup was emptied, upon which Master Gammon, according to his wont, departed for bed to avoid the seduction of suppers, which he shunned as apoplectic, and Mrs. Sumfit prepared, in a desolate way, to wash the tea-things, but the farmer, saying that it could be done in the morning, went to the door and opened it for her.

She fetched a great sigh and folded her hands resignedly. As she was passing him to make her miserable enforced exit, the heavy severity of his face afflicted her with a deep alarm; she fell on her knees, crying,--

"Oh, William! it ain't for sake of hearin' talk; but you, that went to see our Dahly, the blossom, 've come back streaky under the eyes, and you make the house feel as if we neighboured Judgement Day. Down to tea you set the first moment, and me alone with none of you, and my love for my girl known well to you. And now to be marched off! How can I go a-bed and sleep, and my heart jumps so? It ain't Christian to ask me to. I got a heart, dear, I have. Do give a bit of comfort to it. Only a word of my Dahly to me."

The farmer replied: "Mother, let's have no woman's nonsense. What we've got to bear, let us bear. And you go on your knees to the Lord, and don't be a heathen woman, I say. Get up. There's a Bible in your bedroom. Find you out comfort in that."

"No, William, no!" she sobbed, still kneeling: "there ain't a dose o' comfort there when poor souls is in the dark, and haven't got patience for passages. And me and my Bible!--how can I read it, and not know my ailing, and a'stract one good word, William? It'll seem only the devil's shootin' black lightnings across the page, as poor blessed granny used to say, and she believed witches could do it to you in her time, when they was evil-minded. No! To-night I look on the binding of the Holy Book, and I don't, and I won't, I sha' n't open it."

This violent end to her petition was wrought by the farmer grasping her arm to bring her to her feet.

"Go to bed, mother."

"I shan't open it," she repeated, defiantly. "And it ain't," she

gathered up her comfortable fat person to assist the words "it ain't good--no, not the best pious ones--I shall, and will say it! as is al'ays ready to smack your face with the Bible."

"Now, don't ye be angry," said the farmer.

She softened instantly.

"William, dear, I got fifty-seven pounds sterling, and odd shillings, in a Savings-bank, and that I meant to go to Dahly, and not to yond' dark thing sitting there so sullen, and me in my misery; I'd give it to you now for news of my darlin'. Yes, William; and my poor husband's cottage, in Sussex--seventeen pound per annum. That, if you'll be goodness itself, and let me hear a word."

"Take her upstairs," said the farmer to Rhoda, and Rhoda went by her and took her hands, and by dint of pushing from behind and dragging in front, Mrs. Sumfit, as near on a shriek as one so fat and sleek could be, was ejected. The farmer and Robert heard her struggles and exclamations along the passage, but her resistance subsided very suddenly.

"There's power in that girl," said the farmer, standing by the shut door.

Robert thought so, too. It affected his imagination, and his heart began to beat sickeningly.

"Perhaps she promised to speak--what has happened, whatever that may be," he suggested.

"Not she; not she. She respects my wishes."

Robert did not ask what had happened.

Mr. Fleming remained by the door, and shut his mouth from a further word till he heard Rhoda's returning footstep. He closed the door again behind her, and went up to the square deal table, leaned his body forward on the knuckles of his trembling fist, and said, "We're pretty well broken up, as it is. I've lost my taste for life."

There he paused. Save by the shining of a wet forehead, his face betrayed nothing of the anguish he suffered. He looked at neither of them, but sent his gaze straight away under labouring brows to an arm of the fireside chair, while his shoulders drooped on the wavering support of his hard-shut hands. Rhoda's eyes, ox-like, as were her father's,

smote full upon Robert's, as in a pang of apprehension of what was about to be uttered.

It was a quick blaze of light, wherein he saw that the girl's spirit was not with him. He would have stopped the farmer at once, but he had not the heart to do it, even had he felt in himself strength to attract an intelligent response from that strange, grave, bovine fixity of look, over which the human misery sat as a thing not yet taken into the dull brain.

"My taste for life," the old man resumed, "that's gone. I didn't bargain at set-out to go on fighting agen the world. It's too much for a man o' my years. Here's the farm. Shall 't go to pieces?--I'm a farmer of thirty year back--thirty year back, and more: I'm about no better'n a farm labourer in our time, which is to-day. I don't cost much. I ask to be fed, and to work for it, and to see my poor bit o' property safe, as handed to me by my father. Not for myself, 't ain't; though perhaps there's a bottom of pride there too, as in most things. Say it's for the name. My father seems to demand of me out loud, 'What ha' ye done with Queen Anne's Farm, William?' and there's a holler echo in my ears. Well; God wasn't merciful to give me a son. He give me daughters."

Mr. Fleming bowed his head as to the very weapon of chastisement.

"Daughters!" He bent lower.

His hearers might have imagined his headless address to them to be also without a distinct termination, for he seemed to have ended as abruptly as he had begun; so long was the pause before, with a wearied lifting of his body, he pursued, in a sterner voice:

"Don't let none interrupt me." His hand was raised as toward where Rhoda stood, but he sent no look with it; the direction was wide of her.

The aspect of the blank blind hand motioning to the wall away from her, smote an awe through her soul that kept her dumb, though his next words were like thrusts of a dagger in her side.

"My first girl--she's brought disgrace on this house. She's got a mother in heaven, and that mother's got to blush for her. My first girl's gone to harlotry in London."

It was Scriptural severity of speech. Robert glanced quick with intense commiseration at Rhoda. He saw her hands travel upward till they fixed

in at her temples with crossed fingers, making the pressure of an iron band for her head, while her lips parted, and her teeth, and cheeks, and eyeballs were all of one whiteness. Her tragic, even, in and out breathing, where there was no fall of the breast, but the air was taken and given, as it were the square blade of a sharp-edged sword, was dreadful to see. She had the look of a risen corpse, recalling some one of the bloody ends of life.

The farmer went on,--

"Bury her! Now you here know the worst. There's my second girl. She's got no stain on her; if people 'll take her for what she is herself. She's idle. But I believe the flesh on her bones she'd wear away for any one that touched her heart. She's a temper. But she's clean both in body and in spirit, as I believe, and say before my God. I--what I'd pray for is, to see this girl safe. All I have shall go to her. That is, to the man who will--won't be ashamed--marry her, I mean!"

The tide of his harshness failed him here, and he began to pick his words, now feeble, now emphatic, but alike wanting in natural expression, for he had reached a point of emotion upon the limits of his nature, and he was now wilfully forcing for misery and humiliation right and left, in part to show what a black star Providence had been over him.

"She'll be grateful. I shall be gone. What disgrace I bring to their union, as father of the other one also, will, I'm bound to hope, be buried with me in my grave; so that this girl's husband shan't have to complain that her character and her working for him ain't enough to cover any harm he's like to think o' the connexion. And he won't be troubled by relationships after that.

"I used to think Pride a bad thing. I thank God we've all got it in our blood--the Flemings. I thank God for that now, I do. We don't face again them as we offend. Not, that is, with the hand out. We go. We're seen no more. And she'll be seen no more. On that, rely.

"I want my girl here not to keep me in the fear of death. For I fear death while she's not safe in somebody's hands--kind, if I can get him for her. Somebody--young or old!"

The farmer lifted his head for the first time, and stared vacantly at Robert.

"I'd marry her," he said, "if I was knowing myself dying now or to-morrow

morning, I'd marry her, rather than leave her alone--I'd marry her to that old man, old Gammon."

The farmer pointed to the ceiling. His sombre seriousness cloaked and carried even that suggestive indication to the possible bridegroom's age and habits, and all things associated with him, through the gates of ridicule; and there was no laughter, and no thought of it.

"It stands to reason for me to prefer a young man for her husband. He'll farm the estate, and won't sell it; so that it goes to our blood, if not to a Fleming. If, I mean, he's content to farm soberly, and not play Jack o' Lantern tricks across his own acres. Right in one thing's right, I grant; but don't argue right in all. It's right only in one thing. Young men, when they've made a true hit or so, they're ready to think it's themselves that's right."

This was of course a reminder of the old feud with Robert, and sufficiently showed whom the farmer had in view for a husband to Rhoda, if any doubt existed previously.

Having raised his eyes, his unwonted power of speech abandoned him, and he concluded, wavering in look and in tone,--

"I'd half forgotten her uncle. I've reckoned his riches when I cared for riches. I can't say th' amount; but, all--I've had his word for it--all goes to this--God knows how much!--girl. And he don't hesitate to say she's worth a young man's fancying. May be so. It depends upon ideas mainly, that does. All goes to her. And this farm.--I wish ye good-night."

He gave them no other sign, but walked in his oppressed way quietly to the inner door, and forth, leaving the rest to them.

CHAPTER XIV

The two were together, and all preliminary difficulties had been cleared for Robert to say what he had to say, in a manner to make the saying of it well-nigh impossible. And yet silence might be misinterpreted by her. He would have drawn her to his heart at one sign of tenderness. There came none. The girl was frightfully torn with a great wound of shame.

She was the first to speak.

"Do you believe what father says of my sister?"

"That she--?" Robert swallowed the words. "No!" and he made a thunder with his fist.

"No!" She drank up the word. "You do not? No! You know that Dahlia is innocent?"

Rhoda was trembling with a look for the asseveration; her pale face eager as a cry for life; but the answer did not come at once hotly as her passion for it demanded. She grew rigid, murmuring faintly: "speak! Do speak!"

His eyes fell away from hers. Sweet love would have wrought in him to think as she thought, but she kept her heart closed from him, and he stood sadly judicial, with a conscience of his own, that would not permit him to declare Dahlia innocent, for he had long been imagining the reverse.

Rhoda pressed her hands convulsively, moaning, "Oh!" down a short deep breath.

"Tell me what has happened?" said Robert, made mad by that reproachful agony of her voice. "I'm in the dark. I'm not equal to you all. If Dahlia's sister wants one to stand up for her, and defend her, whatever she has done or not done, ask me. Ask me, and I'll revenge her. Here am I, and I know nothing, and you despise me because--don't think me rude or unkind. This hand is yours, if you will. Come, Rhoda. Or, let me hear the case, and I'll satisfy you as best I can. Feel for her? I feel for her as you do. You don't want me to stand a liar to your question? How can I speak?"

A woman's instinct at red heat pierces the partial disingenuousness which Robert could only have avoided by declaring the doubts he entertained. Rhoda desired simply to be supported by his conviction of her sister's innocence, and she had scorn of one who would not chivalrously advance upon the risks of right and wrong, and rank himself prime champion of a woman belied, absent, and so helpless. Besides, there was but one virtue possible in Rhoda's ideas, as regarded Dahlia: to oppose facts, if necessary, and have her innocent perforce, and fight to the death them that dared cast slander on the beloved head.

Her keen instinct served her so far.

His was alive when she refused to tell him what had taken place during their visit to London.

She felt that a man would judge evil of the circumstances. Her father and her uncle had done so: she felt that Robert would. Love for him would have prompted her to confide in him absolutely. She was not softened by love; there was no fire on her side to melt and make them run in one stream, and they could not meet.

"Then, if you will not tell me," said Robert, "say what you think of your father's proposal? He meant that I may ask you to be my wife. He used to fancy I cared for your sister. That's false. I care for her--yes; as my sister too; and here is my hand to do my utmost for her, but I love you, and I've loved you for some time. I'd be proud to marry you and help on with the old farm. You don't love me yet--which is a pretty hard thing for me to see to be certain of. But I love you, and I trust you. I like the stuff you're made of--and nice stuff I'm talking to a young woman," he added, wiping his forehead at the idea of the fair and flattering addresses young women expect when they are being wooed.

As it was, Rhoda listened with savage contempt of his idle talk. Her brain was beating at the mystery and misery wherein Dahlia lay engulfed. She had no understanding for Robert's sentimentality, or her father's requisition. Some answer had to be given, and she said,--

"I'm not likely to marry a man who supposes he has anything to pardon."

"I don't suppose it," cried Robert.

"You heard what father said."

"I heard what he said, but I don't think the same. What has Dahlia to do with you?"

He was proceeding to rectify this unlucky sentence. All her covert hostility burst out on it.

"My sister?--what has my sister to do with me?--you mean!--you mean--you can only mean that we are to be separated and thought of as two people; and we are one, and will be till we die. I feel my sister's hand in mine, though she's away and lost. She is my darling for ever and ever. We're one!"

A spasm of anguish checked the girl.

"I mean," Robert resumed steadily, "that her conduct, good or bad, doesn't touch you. If it did, it'd be the same to me. I ask you to take me for your husband. Just reflect on what your father said, Rhoda."

The horrible utterance her father's lips had been guilty of flashed through her, filling her with mastering vindictiveness, now that she had a victim.

"Yes! I'm to take a husband to remind me of what he said."

Robert eyed her sharpened mouth admiringly; her defence of her sister had excited his esteem, wilfully though she rebutted his straightforward earnestness and he had a feeling also for the easy turns of her neck, and the confident poise of her figure.

"Ha! well!" he interjected, with his eyebrows queerly raised, so that she could make nothing of his look. It seemed half maniacal, it was so ridged with bright eagerness.

"By heaven! the task of taming you--that's the blessing I'd beg for in my prayers! Though you were as wild as a cat of the woods, by heaven! I'd rather have the taming of you than go about with a leash of quiet"--he checked himself--"companions."

Such was the sudden roll of his tongue, that she was lost in the astounding lead he had taken, and stared.

"You're the beauty to my taste, and devil is what I want in a woman! I can make something out of a girl with a temper like yours. You don't know me, Miss Rhoda. I'm what you reckon a good young man. Isn't that it?"

Robert drew up with a very hard smile.

"I would to God I were! Mind, I feel for you about your sister. I like you the better for holding to her through thick and thin. But my sheepishness has gone, and I tell you I'll have you whether you will or no. I can help you and you can help me. I've lived here as if I had no more fire in me than old Gammon snoring on his pillow up aloft; and who kept me to it? Did you see I never touched liquor? What did you guess from that?--that I was a mild sort of fellow? So I am: but I haven't got

that reputation in other parts. Your father 'd like me to marry you, and I'm ready. Who kept me to work, so that I might learn to farm, and be a man, and be able to take a wife? I came here--I'll tell you how. I was a useless dog. I ran from home and served as a trooper. An old aunt of mine left me a little money, which just woke me up and gave me a lift of what conscience I had, and I bought myself out.

"I chanced to see your father's advertisement--came, looked at you all, and liked you--brought my traps and settled among you, and lived like a good young man. I like peace and orderliness, I find. I always thought I did, when I was dancing like mad to hell. I know I do now, and you're the girl to keep me to it. I've learnt that much by degrees. With any other, I should have been playing the fool, and going my old ways, long ago. I should have wrecked her, and drunk to forget. You're my match. By-and-by you'll know, me yours! You never gave me, or anybody else that I've seen, sly sidelooks.

"Come! I'll speak out now I'm at work. I thought you at some girl's games in the Summer. You went out one day to meet a young gentleman. Offence or no offence, I speak and you listen. You did go out. I was in love with you then, too. I saw London had been doing its mischief. I was down about it. I felt that he would make nothing of you, but I chose to take the care of you, and you've hated me ever since.

"That Mr. Algernon Blancove's a rascal. Stop! You'll say as much as you like presently. I give you a warning--the man's a rascal. I didn't play spy on your acts, but your looks. I can read a face like yours, and it's my home, my home!--by heaven, it is. Now, Rhoda, you know a little more of me. Perhaps I'm more of a man than you thought. Marry another, if you will; but I'm the man for you, and I know it, and you'll go wrong if you don't too. Come! let your father sleep well. Give me your hand."

All through this surprising speech of Robert's, which was a revelation of one who had been previously dark to her, she had steeled her spirit as she felt herself being borne upon unexpected rapids, and she marvelled when she found her hand in his.

Dismayed, as if caught in a trap, she said,--

"You know I've no love for you at all."

"None--no doubt," he answered.

The fit of verbal energy was expended, and he had become listless, though

he looked frankly at her and assumed the cheerfulness which was failing within him.

"I wish to remain as I am," she faltered, surprised again by the equally astonishing recurrence of humility, and more spiritually subdued by it. "I've no heart for a change. Father will understand. I am safe."

She ended with a cry: "Oh! my dear, my own sister! I wish you were safe. Get her here to me and I'll do what I can, if you're not hard on her. She's so beautiful, she can't do wrong. My Dahlia's in some trouble. Mr. Robert, you might really be her friend?"

"Drop the Mister," said Robert.

"Father will listen to you," she pleaded. "You won't leave us? Tell him you know I am safe. But I haven't a feeling of any kind while my sister's away. I will call you Robert, if you like." She reached her hand forth.

"That's right," he said, taking it with a show of heartiness: "that's a beginning, I suppose."

She shrank a little in his sensitive touch, and he added: "Oh never fear. I've spoken out, and don't do the thing too often. Now you know me, that's enough. I trust you, so trust me. I'll talk to your father. I've got a dad of my own, who isn't so easily managed. You and I, Rhoda--we're about the right size for a couple. There--don't be frightened! I was only thinking--I'll let go your hand in a minute. If Dahlia's to be found, I'll find her. Thank you for that squeeze. You'd wake a dead man to life, if you wanted to. To-morrow I set about the business. That's settled. Now your hand's loose. Are you going to say good night? You must give me your hand again for that. What a rough fellow I must seem to you! Different from the man you thought I was? I'm just what you choose to make me, Rhoda; remember that. By heaven! go at once, for you're an armful--"

She took a candle and started for the door.

"Aha! you can look fearful as a doe. Out! make haste!"

In her hurry at his speeding gestures, the candle dropped; she was going to pick it up, but as he approached, she stood away frightened.

"One kiss, my girl," he said. "Don't keep me jealous as fire. One! and

I'm a plighted man. One!--or I shall swear you know what kisses are. Why did you go out to meet that fellow? Do you think there's no danger in it? Doesn't he go about boasting of it now, and saying--that girl! But kiss me and I'll forget it; I'll forgive you. Kiss me only once, and I shall be certain you don't care for him. That's the thought maddens me outright. I can't bear it now I've seen you look soft. I'm stronger than you, mind." He caught her by the waist.

"Yes," Rhoda gasped, "you are. You are only a brute."

"A brute's a lucky dog, then, for I've got you!"

"Will you touch me?"

"You're in my power."

"It's a miserable thing, Robert."

"Why don't you struggle, my girl? I shall kiss you in a minute."

"You're never my friend again."

"I'm not a gentleman, I suppose!"

"Never! after this."

"It isn't done. And first you're like a white rose, and next you're like a red. Will you submit?"

"Oh! shame!" Rhoda uttered.

"Because I'm not a gentleman?"

"You are not."

"So, if I could make you a lady--eh? the lips 'd be ready in a trice. You think of being made a lady--a lady!"

His arm relaxed in the clutch of her figure.

She got herself free, and said: "We saw Mr. Blancove at the theatre with Dahlia."

It was her way of meeting his accusation that she had cherished an

ambitious feminine dream.

He, to hide a confusion that had come upon him, was righting the fallen candle.

"Now I know you can be relied on; you can defend yourself," he said, and handed it to her, lighted. "You keep your kisses for this or that young gentleman. Quite right. You really can defend yourself. That's all I was up to. So let us hear that you forgive me. The door's open. You won't be bothered by me any more; and don't hate me overmuch."

"You might have learned to trust me without insulting me, Robert," she said.

"Do you fancy I'd take such a world of trouble for a kiss of your lips, sweet as they are?"

His blustering beginning ended in a speculating glance at her mouth.

She saw it would be wise to accept him in his present mood, and go; and with a gentle "Good night," that might sound like pardon, she passed through the doorway.

CHAPTER XV

Next day, while Squire Blancove was superintending the laying down of lines for a new carriage drive in his park, as he walked slowly up the green slope he perceived Farmer Fleming, supported by a tall young man; and when the pair were nearer, he had the gratification of noting likewise that the worthy yeoman was very much bent, as with an acute attack of his well-known chronic malady of a want of money.

The squire greatly coveted the freehold of Queen Anne's Farm. He had made offers to purchase it till he was tired, and had gained for himself the credit of being at the bottom of numerous hypothetical cabals to injure and oust the farmer from his possession. But if Naboth came with his vineyard in his hand, not even Wrexby's rector (his quarrel with whom haunted every turn in his life) could quote Scripture against him for taking it at a proper valuation.

The squire had employed his leisure time during service in church to

discover a text that might be used against him in the event of the farmer's reduction to a state of distress, and his, the squire's, making the most of it. On the contrary, according to his heathenish reading of some of the patriarchal doings, there was more to be said in his favour than not, if he increased his territorial property: nor could he, throughout the Old Testament, hit on one sentence that looked like a personal foe to his projects, likely to fit into the mouth of the rector of Wrexby.

"Well, farmer," he said, with cheerful familiarity, "winter crops looking well? There's a good show of green in the fields from my windows, as good as that land of yours will allow in heavy seasons."

To this the farmer replied, "I've not heart or will to be round about, squire. If you'll listen to me--here, or where you give command."

"Has it anything to do with pen and paper, Fleming? In that case you'd better be in my study," said the squire.

"I don't know that it have. I don't know that it have." The farmer sought Robert's face.

"Best where there's no chance of interruption," Robert counselled, and lifted his hat to the squire.

"Eh? Well, you see I'm busy." The latter affected a particular indifference, that in such cases, when well acted (as lords of money can do--squires equally with usurers), may be valued at hundreds of pounds in the pocket. "Can't you put it off? Come again to-morrow."

"To-morrow's a day too late," said the farmer, gravely. Where to replying, "Oh! well, come along in, then," the squire led the way.

"You're two to one, if it's a transaction," he said, nodding to Robert to close the library door. "Take seats. Now then, what is it? And if I make a face, just oblige me by thinking nothing about it, for my gout's beginning to settle in the leg again, and shoots like an electric telegraph from purgatory."

He wheezed and lowered himself into his arm-chair; but the farmer and Robert remained standing, and the farmer spoke:--

"My words are going to be few, squire. I've got a fact to bring to your knowledge, and a question to ask."

Surprise, exaggerated on his face by a pain he had anticipated, made the squire glare hideously.

"Confound it, that's what they say to a prisoner in the box. Here's a murder committed:--Are you the guilty person? Fact and question! Well, out with 'em, both together."

"A father ain't responsible for the sins of his children," said the farmer.

"Well, that's a fact," the squire emphasized. "I've always maintained it; but, if you go to your church, farmer--small blame to you if you don't; that fellow who preaches there--I forget his name--stands out for just the other way. You are responsible, he swears. Pay your son's debts, and don't groan over it:--He spent the money, and you're the chief debtor; that's his teaching. Well: go on. What's your question?"

"A father's not to be held responsible for the sins of his children, squire. My daughter's left me. She's away. I saw my daughter at the theatre in London. She saw me, and saw her sister with me. She disappeared. It's a hard thing for a man to be saying of his own flesh and blood. She disappeared. She went, knowing her father's arms open to her. She was in company with your son."

The squire was thrumming on the arm of his chair. He looked up vaguely, as if waiting for the question to follow, but meeting the farmer's settled eyes, he cried, irritably, "Well, what's that to me?"

"What's that to you, squire?"

"Are you going to make me out responsible for my son's conduct? My son's a rascal--everybody knows that. I paid his debts once, and I've finished with him. Don't come to me about the fellow. If there's a greater curse than the gout, it's a son."

"My girl," said the farmer, "she's my flesh and blood, and I must find her, and I'm here to ask you to make your son tell me where she's to be found. Leave me to deal with that young man--leave you me! but I want my girl."

"But I can't give her to you," roared the squire, afflicted by his two great curses at once. "Why do you come to me? I'm not responsible for the doings of the dog. I'm sorry for you, if that's what you want to

know. Do you mean to say that my son took her away from your house?"

"I don't do so, Mr. Blancove. I'm seeking for my daughter, and I see her in company with your son."

"Very well, very well," said the squire; "that shows his habits; I can't say more. But what has it got to do with me?"

The farmer looked helplessly at Robert.

"No, no," the squire sung out, "no interlopers, no interpreting here. I listen to you. My son--your daughter. I understand that, so far. It's between us two. You've got a daughter who's gone wrong somehow: I'm sorry to hear it. I've got a son who never went right; and it's no comfort to me, upon my word. If you were to see the bills and the letters I receive! but I don't carry my grievances to my neighbours. I should think, Fleming, you'd do best, if it's advice you're seeking, to keep it quiet. Don't make a noise about it. Neighbours' gossip I find pretty well the worst thing a man has to bear, who's unfortunate enough to own children."

The farmer bowed his head with that bitter humbleness which characterized his reception of the dealings of Providence toward him.

"My neighbours 'll soon be none at all," he said. "Let 'em talk. I'm not abusing you, Mr. Blancove. I'm a broken man: but I want my poor lost girl, and, by God, responsible for your son or not, you must help me to find her. She may be married, as she says. She mayn't be. But I must find her."

The squire hastily seized a scrap of paper on the table and wrote on it.

"There!" he handed the paper to the farmer; "that's my son's address, 'Boyne's Bank, City, London.' Go to him there, and you'll find him perched on a stool, and a good drubbing won't hurt him. You've my hearty permission, I can assure you: you may say so. 'Boyne's Bank.' Anybody will show you the place. He's a rascally clerk in the office, and precious useful, I dare swear. Thrash him, if you think fit."

"Ay," said the farmer, "Boyne's Bank. I've been there already. He's absent from work, on a visit down into Hampshire, one of the young gentlemen informed me; Fairly Park was the name of the place: but I came to you, Mr. Blancove; for you're his father."

"Well now, my good Fleming, I hope you think I'm properly punished for that fact." The squire stood up with horrid contortions.

Robert stepped in advance of the farmer.

"Pardon me, sir," he said, though the squire met his voice with a prodigious frown; "this would be an ugly business to talk about, as you observe. It would hurt Mr. Fleming in these parts of the country, and he would leave it, if he thought fit; but you can't separate your name from your son's--begging you to excuse the liberty I take in mentioning it--not in public: and your son has the misfortune to be well known in one or two places where he was quartered when in the cavalry. That matter of the jeweller--"

"Hulloa," the squire exclaimed, in a perturbation.

"Why, sir, I know all about it, because I was a trooper in the regiment your son, Mr. Algernon Blancove, quitted: and his name, if I may take leave to remark so, won't bear printing. How far he's guilty before Mr. Fleming we can't tell as yet; but if Mr. Fleming holds him guilty of an offence, your son 'll bear the consequences, and what's done will be done thoroughly. Proper counsel will be taken, as needn't be said. Mr. Fleming applied to you first, partly for your sake as well as his own. He can find friends, both to advise and to aid him."

"You mean, sir," thundered the squire, "that he can find enemies of mine, like that infernal fellow who goes by the title of Reverend, down below there. That'll do, that will do; there's some extortion at the bottom of this. You're putting on a screw."

"We're putting on a screw, sir," said Robert, coolly.

"Not a penny will you get by it."

Robert flushed with heat of blood.

"You don't wish you were a young man half so much as I do just now," he remarked, and immediately they were in collision, for the squire made a rush to the bell-rope, and Robert stopped him. "We're going," he said; "we don't want man-servants to show us the way out. Now mark me, Mr. Blancove, you've insulted an old man in his misery: you shall suffer for it, and so shall your son, whom I know to be a rascal worthy of transportation. You think Mr. Fleming came to you for money. Look at this old man, whose only fault is that he's too full of kindness; he came

to you just for help to find his daughter, with whom your rascal of a son was last seen, and you swear he's come to rob you of money. Don't you know yourself a fattened cur, squire though you be, and called gentleman? England's a good place, but you make England a hell to men of spirit. Sit in your chair, and don't ever you, or any of you cross my path; and speak a word to your servants before we're out of the house, and I stand in the hall and give 'em your son's history, and make Wrexby stink in your nostril, till you're glad enough to fly out of it. Now, Mr. Fleming, there's no more to be done here; the game lies elsewhere."

Robert took the farmer by the arm, and was marching out of the enemy's territory in good order, when the squire, who had presented many changing aspects of astonishment and rage, arrested them with a call. He began to say that he spoke to Mr. Fleming, and not to the young ruffian of a bully whom the farmer had brought there: and then asked in a very reasonable manner what he could do--what measures he could adopt to aid the farmer in finding his child. Robert hung modestly in the background while the farmer laboured on with a few sentences to explain the case, and finally the squire said, that his foot permitting (it was an almost pathetic reference to the weakness of flesh), he would go down to Fairly on the day following and have a personal interview with his son, and set things right, as far as it lay in his power, though he was by no means answerable for a young man's follies.

He was a little frightened by the farmer's having said that Dahlia, according to her own declaration was married, and therefore himself the more anxious to see Mr. Algernon, and hear the truth from his estimable offspring, whom he again stigmatized as a curse terrible to him as his gouty foot, but nevertheless just as little to be left to his own devices. The farmer bowed to these observations; as also when the squire counselled him, for his own sake, not to talk of his misfortune all over the parish.

"I'm not a likely man for that, squire; but there's no telling where gossips get their crumbs. It's about. It's about."

"About my son?" cried the squire.

"My daughter!"

"Oh, well, good-day," the squire resumed more cheerfully. "I'll go down to Fairly, and you can't ask more than that."

When the farmer was out of the house and out of hearing, he rebuked

Robert for the inconsiderate rashness of his behaviour, and pointed out how he, the farmer, by being patient and peaceful, had attained to the object of his visit. Robert laughed without defending himself.

"I shouldn't ha' known ye," the farmer repeated frequently; "I shouldn't ha' known ye, Robert."

"No, I'm a trifle changed, may be," Robert agreed. "I'm going to claim a holiday of you. I've told Rhoda that if Dahlia's to be found, I'll find her, and I can't do it by sticking here. Give me three weeks. The land's asleep. Old Gammon can hardly turn a furrow the wrong way. There's nothing to do, which is his busiest occupation, when he's not interrupted at it."

"Mas' Gammon's a rare old man," said the farmer, emphatically.

"So I say. Else, how would you see so many farms flourishing!"

"Come, Robert: you hit th' old man hard; you should learn to forgive."

"So I do, and a telling blow's a man's best road to charity. I'd forgive the squire and many another, if I had them within two feet of my fist."

"Do you forgive my girl Rhoda for putting of you off?"

Robert screwed in his cheek.

"Well, yes, I do," he said. "Only it makes me feel thirsty, that's all."

The farmer remembered this when they had entered the farm.

"Our beer's so poor, Robert," he made apology; "but Rhoda shall get you some for you to try, if you like. Rhoda, Robert's solemn thirsty."

"Shall I?" said Rhoda, and she stood awaiting his bidding.

"I'm not a thirsty subject," replied Robert. "You know I've avoided drink of any kind since I set foot on this floor. But when I drink," he pitched his voice to a hard, sparkling heartiness, "I drink a lot, and the stuff must be strong. I'm very much obliged to you, Miss Rhoda, for what you're so kind as to offer to satisfy my thirst, and you can't give better, and don't suppose that I'm complaining; but your father's right, it is rather weak, and wouldn't break the tooth of my thirst if I drank at it till Gammon left off thinking about his dinner."

With that he announced his approaching departure.

The farmer dropped into his fireside chair, dumb and spiritless. A shadow was over the house, and the inhabitants moved about their domestic occupations silent as things that feel the thunder-cloud. Before sunset Robert was gone on his long walk to the station, and Rhoda felt a woman's great envy of the liberty of a man, who has not, if it pleases him not, to sit and eat grief among familiar images, in a home that furnishes its altar-flame.

CHAPTER XVI

Fairly, Lord Elling's seat in Hampshire, lay over the Warbeach river; a white mansion among great oaks, in view of the summer sails and winter masts of the yachting squadron. The house was ruled, during the congregation of the Christmas guests, by charming Mrs. Lovell, who relieved the invalid Lady of the house of the many serious cares attending the reception of visitors, and did it all with ease. Under her sovereignty the place was delightful, and if it was by repute pleasanter to young men than to any other class, it will be admitted that she satisfied those who are loudest in giving tongue to praise.

Edward and Algernon journeyed down to Fairly together, after the confidence which the astute young lawyer had been compelled to repose in his cousin. Sir William Blancove was to be at Fairly, and it was at his father's pointed request that Edward had accepted Mrs. Lovell's invitation. Half in doubt as to the lady's disposition toward him, Edward eased his heart with sneers at the soft, sanguinary graciousness they were to expect, and racked mythology for spiteful comparisons; while Algernon vehemently defended her with a battering fire of British adjectives in superlative. He as much as hinted, under instigation, that he was entitled to defend her; and his claim being by-and-by yawningly allowed by Edward, and presuming that he now had Edward in his power and need not fear him, he exhibited his weakness in the guise of a costly gem, that he intended to present to Mrs. Lovell--an opal set in a cross pendant from a necklace; a really fine opal, coquetting with the lights of every gem that is known: it shot succinct red flashes, and green, and yellow; the emerald, the amethyst, the topaz lived in it, and a remote ruby; it was veined with lightning hues, and at times it slept in a milky cloud, innocent of fire, quite maidenlike.

"That will suit her," was Edward's remark.

"I didn't want to get anything common," said Algernon, making the gem play before his eyes.

"A pretty stone," said Edward.

"Do you think so?"

"Very pretty indeed."

"Harlequin pattern."

"To be presented to Columbine!"

"The Harlequin pattern is of the best sort, you know. Perhaps you like the watery ones best? This is fresh from Russia. There's a set I've my eye on. I shall complete it in time. I want Peggy Lovell to wear the jolliest opals in the world. It's rather nice, isn't it?"

"It's a splendid opal," said Edward.

"She likes opals," said Algernon.

"She'll take your meaning at once," said Edward.

"How? I'll be hanged if I know what my meaning is, Ned."

"Don't you know the signification of your gift?"

"Not a bit."

"Oh! you'll be Oriental when you present it."

"The deuce I shall!"

"It means, 'You're the prettiest widow in the world.'"

"So she is. I'll be right there, old boy."

"And, 'You're a rank, right-down widow, and no mistake; you're everything to everybody; not half so innocent as you look: you're green as jealousy, red as murder, yellow as jaundice, and put on the whiteness of a virgin

when you ought to be blushing like a penitent.' In short, 'You have no heart of your own, and you pretend to possess half a dozen: you're devoid of one steady beam, and play tricks with every scale of colour: you're an arrant widow, and that's what you are.' An eloquent gift, Algy."

"Gad, if it means all that, it'll be rather creditable to me," said Algernon. "Do opals mean widows?"

"Of course," was the answer.

"Well, she is a widow, and I suppose she's going to remain one, for she's had lots of offers. If I marry a girl I shall never like her half as much as Peggy Lovell. She's done me up for every other woman living. She never lets me feel a fool with her; and she has a way, by Jove, of looking at me, and letting me know she's up to my thoughts and isn't angry. What's the use of my thinking of her at all? She'd never go to the Colonies, and live in a log but and make cheeses, while I tore about on horseback gathering cattle."

"I don't think she would," observed Edward, emphatically; "I don't think she would."

"And I shall never have money. Confound stingy parents! It's a question whether I shall get Wrexby: there's no entail. I'm heir to the governor's temper and his gout, I dare say. He'll do as he likes with the estate. I call it beastly unfair."

Edward asked how much the opal had cost.

"Oh, nothing," said Algernon; "that is, I never pay for jewellery."

Edward was curious to know how he managed to obtain it.

"Why, you see," Algernon explained, "they, the jewellers--I've got two or three in hand--the fellows are acquainted with my position, and they speculate on my expectations. There is no harm in that if they like it. I look at their trinkets, and say, 'I've no money;' and they say, 'Never mind;' and I don't mind much. The understanding is, that I pay them when I inherit."

"In gout and bad temper?"

"Gad, if I inherit nothing else, they'll have lots of that for indemnification. It's a good system, Ned; it enables a young fellow like

me to get through the best years of his life--which I take to be his youth--without that squalid poverty bothering him. You can make presents, and wear a pin or a ring, if it takes your eye. You look well, and you make yourself agreeable; and I see nothing to complain of in that."

"The jewellers, then, have established an institution to correct one of the errors of Providence."

"Oh! put it in your long-winded way, if you like," said Algernon; "all I know is, that I should often have wanted a five-pound note, if--that is, if I hadn't happened to be dressed like a gentleman. With your prospects, Ned, I should propose to charming Peggy tomorrow morning early. We mustn't let her go out of the family. If I can't have her, I'd rather you would."

"You forget the incumbrances on one side," said Edward, his face darkening.

"Oh! that's all to be managed," Algernon rallied him. "Why, Ned, you'll have twenty thousand a-year, if you have a penny; and you'll go into Parliament, and give dinners, and a woman like Peggy Lovell 'd intrigue for you like the deuce."

"A great deal too like," Edward muttered.

"As for that pretty girl," continued Algernon; but Edward peremptorily stopped all speech regarding Dahlia. His desire was, while he made holiday, to shut the past behind a brazen gate; which being communicated sympathetically to his cousin, the latter chimed to it in boisterous shouts of anticipated careless jollity at Fairly Park, crying out how they would hunt and snap fingers at Jews, and all mortal sorrows, and have a fortnight, or three weeks, perhaps a full month, of the finest life possible to man, with good horses, good dinners, good wines, good society, at command, and a queen of a woman to rule and order everything. Edward affected a disdainful smile at the prospect; but was in reality the weaker of the two in his thirst for it.

They arrived at Fairly in time to dress for dinner, and in the drawing-room Mrs. Lovell sat to receive them. She looked up to Edward's face an imperceptible half-second longer than the ordinary form of welcome accords--one of the looks which are nothing at all when there is no spiritual apprehension between young people, and are so much when there is. To Algernon, who was gazing opals on her, she simply gave her fingers. At her right hand, was Sir John Capes, her antique devotee; a

pure milky-white old gentleman, with sparkling fingers, who played Apollo to his Daphne, and was out of breath. Lord Suckling, a boy with a boisterous constitution, and a guardsman, had his place near her left hand, as if ready to seize it at the first whisper of encouragement or opportunity. A very little lady of seventeen, Miss Adeline Gosling, trembling with shyness under a cover of demureness, fell to Edward's lot to conduct down to dinner, where he neglected her disgracefully. His father, Sir William, was present at the table, and Lord Elling, with whom he was in repute as a talker and a wit. Quickened with his host's renowned good wine (and the bare renown of a wine is inspiriting), Edward pressed to be brilliant. He had an epigrammatic turn, and though his mind was prosaic when it ran alone, he could appear inventive and fanciful with the rub of other minds. Now, at a table where good talking is cared for, the triumphs of the excelling tongue are not for a moment to be despised, even by the huge appetite of the monster Vanity. For a year, Edward had abjured this feast. Before the birds appeared and the champagne had ceased to make its circle, he felt that he was now at home again, and that the term of his wandering away from society was one of folly. He felt the joy and vigour of a creature returned to his element. Why had he ever quitted it? Already he looked back upon Dahlia from a prodigious distance. He knew that there was something to be smoothed over; something written in the book of facts which had to be smeared out, and he seemed to do it, while he drank the babbling wine and heard himself talk. Not one man at that table, as he reflected, would consider the bond which held him in any serious degree binding. A lady is one thing, and a girl of the class Dahlia had sprung from altogether another. He could not help imagining the sort of appearance she would make there; and the thought even was a momentary clog upon his tongue. How he used to despise these people! Especially he had despised the young men as brainless cowards in regard to their views of women and conduct toward them. All that was changed. He fancied now that they, on the contrary, would despise him, if only they could be aware of the lingering sense he entertained of his being in bondage under a sacred obligation to a farmer's daughter.

But he had one thing to discover, and that was, why Sir William had made it a peculiar request that he should come to meet him here. Could the desire possibly be to reconcile him with Mrs. Lovell? His common sense rejected the idea at once: Sir William boasted of her wit and tact, and admired her beauty, but Edward remembered his having responded tacitly to his estimate of her character, and Sir William was not the man to court the alliance of his son with a woman like Mrs. Lovell. He perceived that his father and the fair widow frequently took counsel together. Edward laughed at the notion that the grave senior had himself become

fascinated, but without utterly scouting it, until he found that the little lady whom he had led to dinner the first day, was an heiress; and from that, and other indications, he exactly divined the nature of his father's provident wishes. But this revelation rendered Mrs. Lovell's behaviour yet more extraordinary. Could it be credited that she was abetting Sir William's schemes with all her woman's craft? "Has she," thought Edward, "become so indifferent to me as to care for my welfare?" He determined to put her to the test. He made love to Adeline Gosling. Nothing that he did disturbed the impenetrable complacency of Mrs. Lovell. She threw them together as she shuffled the guests. She really seemed to him quite indifferent enough to care for his welfare. It was a point in the mysterious ways of women, or of widows, that Edward's experience had not yet come across. All the parties immediately concerned were apparently so desperately acquiescing in his suit, that he soon grew uneasy. Mrs. Lovell not only shuffled him into places with the raw heiress, but with the child's mother; of whom he spoke to Algernon as of one too strongly breathing of matrimony to appease the cravings of an eclectic mind.

"Make the path clear for me, then," said Algernon, "if you don't like the girl. Pitch her tales about me. Say, I've got a lot in me, though I don't let it out. The game's up between you and Peggy Lovell, that's clear. She don't forgive you, my boy."

"Ass!" muttered Edward, seeing by the light of his perception, that he was too thoroughly forgiven.

A principal charm of the life at Fairly to him was that there was no one complaining. No one looked reproach at him. If a lady was pale and reserved, she did not seem to accuse him, and to require coaxing. All faces here were as light as the flying moment, and did not carry the shadowy weariness of years, like that burdensome fair face in the London lodging-house, to which the Fates had terribly attached themselves. So, he was gay. He closed, as it were, a black volume, and opened a new and a bright one. Young men easily fancy that they may do this, and that when the black volume is shut the tide is stopped. Saying, "I was a fool," they believe they have put an end to the foolishness. What father teaches them that a human act once set in motion flows on for ever to the great account? Our deathlessness is in what we do, not in what we are. Comfortable Youth thinks otherwise.

The days at a well-ordered country-house, where a divining lady rules, speed to the measure of a waltz, in harmonious circles, dropping like crystals into the gulfs of Time, and appearing to write nothing in his

book. Not a single hinge of existence is heard to creak. There is no after-dinner bill. You are waited on, without being elbowed by the humanity of your attendants. It is a civilized Arcadia. Only, do not desire, that you may not envy. Accept humbly what rights of citizenship are accorded to you upon entering. Discard the passions when you cross the threshold. To breathe and to swallow merely, are the duties which should prescribe your conduct; or, such is the swollen condition of the animal in this enchanted region, that the spirit of man becomes dangerously beset.

Edward breathed and swallowed, and never went beyond the prescription, save by talking. No other junior could enter the library, without encountering the scorn of his elders; so he enjoyed the privilege of hearing all the scandal, and his natural cynicism was plentifully fed. It was more of a school to him than he knew.

These veterans, in their arm-chairs, stripped the bloom from life, and showed it to be bare bones: They took their wisdom for an experience of the past: they were but giving their sensations in the present. Not to perceive this, is Youth's, error when it hears old gentlemen talking at their ease.

On the third morning of their stay at Fairly, Algernon came into Edward's room with a letter in his hand.

"There! read that!" he said. "It isn't ill-luck; it's infernal persecution! What, on earth!--why, I took a close cab to the station. You saw me get out of it. I'll swear no creditor of mine knew I was leaving London. My belief is that the fellows who give credit have spies about at every railway terminus in the kingdom. They won't give me three days' peace. It's enough to disgust any man with civilized life; on my soul, it is!"

Edward glanced at the superscription of the letter. "Not posted," he remarked.

"No; delivered by some confounded bailiff, who's been hounding me."

"Bailiffs don't generally deal in warnings."

"Will you read it!" Algernon shouted.

The letter ran thus:--

"Mr. Algernon Blancove,--

"The writer of this intends taking the first opportunity of meeting you, and gives you warning, you will have to answer his question with a Yes or a No; and speak from your conscience. The respectfulness of his behaviour to you as a gentleman will depend upon that."

Algernon followed his cousin's eye down to the last letter in the page.

"What do you think of it?" he asked eagerly.

Edward's broad thin-lined brows were drawn down in gloom. Mastering some black meditation in his brain, he answered Algernon's yells for an opinion,--

"I think--well, I think bailiffs have improved in their manners, and show you they are determined to belong to the social march in an age of universal progress. Nothing can be more comforting."

"But, suppose this fellow comes across me?"

"Don't know him."

"Suppose he insists on knowing me?"

"Don't know yourself."

"Yes; but hang it! if he catches hold of me?"

"Shake him off."

"Suppose he won't let go?"

"Cut him with your horsewhip."

"You think it's about a debt, then?"

"Intimidation, evidently."

"I shall announce to him that the great Edward Blancove is not to be intimidated. You'll let me borrow your name, old Ned. I've stood by you in my time. As for leaving Fairly, I tell you I can't. It's too delightful to be near Peggy Lovell."

Edward smiled with a peculiar friendliness, and Algernon went off, very well contented with his cousin.

CHAPTER XVII

Within a mile of Fairly Park lay the farm of another yeoman; but he was of another character. The Hampshireman was a farmer of renown in his profession; fifth of a family that had cultivated a small domain of one hundred and seventy acres with sterling profit, and in a style to make Sutton the model of a perfect farm throughout the country. Royal eyes had inspected his pigs approvingly; Royal wits had taken hints from Jonathan Eccles in matters agricultural; and it was his comforting joke that he had taught his Prince good breeding. In return for the service, his Prince had transformed a lusty Radical into a devoted Royalist. Framed on the walls of his parlours were letters from his Prince, thanking him for specimen seeds and worthy counsel: veritable autograph letters of the highest value. The Prince had steamed up the salt river, upon which the Sutton harvests were mirrored, and landed on a spot marked in honour of the event by a broad grey stone; and from that day Jonathan Eccles stood on a pinnacle of pride, enabling him to see horizons of despondency hitherto unknown to him. For he had a son, and the son was a riotous devil, a most wild young fellow, who had no taste for a farmer's life, and openly declared his determination not to perpetuate the Sutton farm in the hands of the Eccleses, by running off one day and entering the ranks of the British army.

Those framed letters became melancholy objects for contemplation, when Jonathan thought that no posterity of his would point them out gloryingly in emulation. Man's aim is to culminate; but it is the saddest thing in the world to feel that we have accomplished it. Mr. Eccles shrugged with all the philosophy he could summon, and transferred his private disappointment to his country, whose agricultural day was, he said, doomed. "We shall be beaten by those Yankees." He gave Old England twenty years of continued pre-eminence (due to the impetus of the present generation of Englishmen), and then, said he, the Yankees will flood the market. No more green pastures in Great Britain; no pretty clean-footed animals; no yellow harvests; but huge chimney pots everywhere; black earth under black vapour, and smoke-begrimed faces. In twenty years' time, sooty England was to be a gigantic manufactory, until the Yankees beat us out of that field as well; beyond which Jonathan Eccles did not

care to spread any distinct border of prophecy; merely thanking the Lord that he should then be under grass. The decay of our glory was to be edged with blood; Jonathan admitted that there would be stuff in the fallen race to deliver a sturdy fight before they went to their doom.

For this prodigious curse, England had to thank young Robert, the erratic son of Jonathan.

It was now two years since Robert had inherited a small legacy of money from an aunt, and spent it in waste, as the farmer bitterly supposed. He was looking at some immense seed-melons in his garden, lying about in morning sunshine--a new feed for sheep, of his own invention,--when the call of the wanderer saluted his ears, and he beheld his son Robert at the gate.

"Here I am, sir," Robert sang out from the exterior.

"Stay there, then," was his welcome.

They were alike in their build and in their manner of speech. The accost and the reply sounded like reports from the same pistol. The old man was tall, broad-shouldered, and muscular--a grey edition of the son, upon whose disorderly attire he cast a glance, while speaking, with settled disgust. Robert's necktie streamed loose; his hair was uncombed; a handkerchief dangled from his pocket. He had the look of the prodigal, returned with impudence for his portion instead of repentance.

"I can't see how you are, sir, from this distance," said Robert, boldly assuming his privilege to enter.

"Are you drunk?" Jonathan asked, as Robert marched up to him.

"Give me your hand, sir."

"Give me an answer first. Are you drunk?"

Robert tried to force the complacent aspect of a mind unabashed, but felt that he made a stupid show before that clear-headed, virtuously-living old, man of iron nerves. The alternative to flying into a passion, was the looking like a fool.

"Come, father," he said, with a miserable snigger, like a yokel's smile; "here I am at last. I don't say, kill the fatted calf, and take a lesson from Scripture, but give me your hand. I've done no man harm but myself-

-damned if I've done a mean thing anywhere! and there's no shame to you in shaking your son's hand after a long absence."

Jonathan Eccles kept both hands firmly in his pockets.

"Are you drunk?" he repeated.

Robert controlled himself to answer, "I'm not."

"Well, then, just tell me when you were drunk last."

"This is a pleasant fatherly greeting!" Robert interjected.

"You get no good by fighting shy of a simple question, Mr. Bob," said Jonathan.

Robert cried querulously, "I don't want to fight shy of a simple question."

"Well, then; when were you drunk last? answer me that."

"Last night."

Jonathan drew his hand from his pocket to thump his leg.

"I'd have sworn it!"

All Robert's assurance had vanished in a minute, and he stood like a convicted culprit before his father.

"You know, sir, I don't tell lies. I was drunk last night. I couldn't help it."

"No more could the little boy."

"I was drunk last night. Say, I'm a beast."

"I shan't!" exclaimed Jonathan, making his voice sound as a defence to this vile charge against the brutish character.

"Say, I'm worse than a beast, then," cried Robert, in exasperation.

"Take my word that it hasn't happened to me to be in that state for a year and more. Last night I was mad. I can't give you any reasons. I thought I was cured but I've trouble in my mind, and a tide swims you

over the shallows--so I felt. Come, sir--father, don't make me mad again."

"Where did you get the liquor?" inquired Jonathan.

"I drank at 'The Pilot.'"

"Ha! there's talk there of 'that damned old Eccles' for a month to come-- 'the unnatural parent.' How long have you been down here?"

"Eight and twenty hours."

"Eight and twenty hours. When are you going?"

"I want lodging for a night."

"What else?"

"The loan of a horse that'll take a fence."

"Go on."

"And twenty pounds."

"Oh!" said Jonathan. "If farming came as easy to you as face, you'd be a prime agriculturalist. Just what I thought! What's become of that money your aunt Jane was fool enough to bequeath to you?"

"I've spent it."

"Are you a Deserter?"

For a moment Robert stood as if listening, and then white grew his face, and he swayed and struck his hands together. His recent intoxication had unmanned him.

"Go in--go in," said his father in some concern, though wrath was predominant.

"Oh, make your mind quiet about me." Robert dropped his arms. "I'm weakened somehow--damned weak, I am--I feel like a woman when my father asks me if I've been guilty of villany. Desert? I wouldn't desert from the hulks. Hear the worst, and this is the worst: I've got no money--I don't owe a penny, but I haven't got one."

"And I won't give you one," Jonathan appended; and they stood facing one another in silence.

A squeaky voice was heard from the other side of the garden hedge of clipped yew.

"Hi! farmer, is that the missing young man?" and presently a neighbour, by name John Sedgett, came trotting through the gate, and up the garden path.

"I say," he remarked, "here's a rumpus. Here's a bobbery up at Fairly. Oh! Bob Eccles! Bob Eccles! At it again!"

Mr. Sedgett shook his wallet of gossip with an enjoying chuckle. He was a thin-faced creature, rheumy of eye, and drawing his breath as from a well; the ferret of the village for all underlying scandal and tattle, whose sole humanity was what he called pitifully 'a peakin' at his chest, and who had retired from his business of grocer in the village upon the fortune brought to him in the energy and capacity of a third wife to conduct affairs, while he wandered up and down and knitted people together--an estimable office in a land where your house is so grievously your castle.

"What the devil have you got in you now?" Jonathan cried out to him.

Mr. Sedgett was seized by his complaint and demanded commiseration, but, recovering, he chuckled again.

"Oh, Bob Eccles! Don't you never grow older? And the first day down among us again, too. Why, Bob, as a military man, you ought to acknowledge your superiors. Why, Stephen Bilton, the huntsman, says, Bob, you pulled the young gentleman off his horse--you on foot, and him mounted. I'd ha' given pounds to be there. And ladies present! Lord help us! I'm glad you're returned, though. These melons of the farmer's, they're a wonderful invention; people are speaking of 'em right and left, and says, says they, Farmer Eccles, he's best farmer going--Hampshire ought to be proud of him--he's worth two of any others: that they are fine ones! And you're come back to keep 'em up, eh, Bob? Are ye, though, my man?"

"Well, here I am, Mr. Sedgett," said Robert, "and talking to my father."

"Oh! I wouldn't be here to interrupt ye for the world." Mr. Sedgett made

a show of retiring, but Jonathan insisted upon his disburdening himself of his tale, saying: "Damn your raw beginnings, Sedgett! What's been up? Nobody can hurt me."

"That they can't, neighbour; nor Bob neither, as far as stand up man to man go. I give him three to one--Bob Eccles! He took 'em when a boy. He may, you know, he may have the law agin him, and by George! if he do-- why, a man's no match for the law. No use bein' a hero to the law. The law masters every man alive; and there's law in everything, neighbour Eccles; eh, sir? Your friend, the Prince, owns to it, as much as you or me. But, of course, you know what Bob's been doing. What I dropped in to ask was, why did ye do it, Bob? Why pull the young gentleman off his horse? I'd ha' given pounds to be there!"

"Pounds o' tallow candles don't amount to much," quoth Robert.

"That's awful bad brandy at 'The Pilot,'" said Mr. Sedgett, venomously.

"Were you drunk when you committed this assault?" Jonathan asked his son.

"I drank afterwards," Robert replied.

"'Pilot' brandy's poor consolation," remarked Mr. Sedgett.

Jonathan had half a mind to turn his son out of the gate, but the presence of Sedgett advised him that his doings were naked to the world.

"You kicked up a shindy in the hunting-field--what about? Who mounted ye?"

Robert remarked that he had been on foot.

"On foot--eh? on foot!" Jonathan speculated, unable to realize the image of his son as a foot-man in the hunting-field, or to comprehend the insolence of a pedestrian who should dare to attack a mounted huntsman. "You were on foot? The devil you were on foot! Foot? And caught a man out of his saddle?"

Jonathan gave up the puzzle. He laid out his fore finger decisively,--

"If it's an assault, mind, you stand damages. My land gives and my land takes my money, and no drunken dog lives on the produce. A row in the hunting-field's un-English, I call it."

"So it is, sir," said Robert.

"So it be, neighbour," said Mr. Sedgett.

Whereupon Robert took his arm, and holding the scraggy wretch forward, commanded him to out with what he knew.

"Oh, I don't know no more than what I've told you." Mr. Sedgett twisted a feeble remonstrance of his bones, that were chiefly his being, at the gripe; "except that you got hold the horse by the bridle, and wouldn't let him go, because the young gentleman wouldn't speak as a gentleman, and--oh! don't squeeze so hard--"

"Out with it!" cried Robert.

"And you said, Steeve Bilton said, you said, 'Where is she?' you said, and he swore, and you swore, and a lady rode up, and you pulled, and she sang out, and off went the gentleman, and Steeve said she said, "For shame.""

"And it was the truest word spoken that day!" Robert released him. "You don't know much, Mr. Sedgett; but it's enough to make me explain the cause to my father, and, with your leave, I'll do so."

Mr. Sedgett remarked: "By all means, do;" and rather preferred that his wits should be accused of want of brightness, than that he should miss a chance of hearing the rich history of the scandal and its origin. Something stronger than a hint sent him off at a trot, hugging in his elbows.

"The postman won't do his business quicker than Sedgett 'll tap this tale upon every door in the parish," said Jonathan.

"I can only say I'm sorry, for your sake;" Robert was expressing his contrition, when his father caught him up,--

"Who can hurt me?--my sake? Have I got the habits of a sot?--what you'd call 'a beast!' but I know the ways o' beasts, and if you did too, you wouldn't bring them in to bear your beastly sins. Who can hurt me?-- You've been quarrelling with this young gentleman about a woman--did you damage him?"

"If knuckles could do it, I should have brained him, sir," said Robert.

"You struck him, and you got the best of it?"

"He got the worst of it any way, and will again."

"Then the devil take you for a fool! why did you go and drink I could understand it if you got licked. Drown your memory, then, if that filthy soaking's to your taste; but why, when you get the prize, we'll say, you go off headlong into a manure pond?--There! except that you're a damned idiot!" Jonathan struck the air, as to observe that it beat him, but for the foregoing elucidation: thundering afresh, "Why did you go and drink?"

"I went, sir, I went--why did I go?" Robert slapped his hand despairingly to his forehead. "What on earth did I go for?--because I'm at sea, I suppose. Nobody cares for me. I'm at sea, and no rudder to steer me. I suppose that's it. So, I drank. I thought it best to take spirits on board. No; this was the reason--I remember: that lady, whoever she was, said something that stung me. I held the fellow under her eyes, and shook him, though she was begging me to let him off. Says she--but I've drunk it clean out of my mind."

"There, go in and look at yourself in the glass," said Jonathan.

"Give me your hand first,"--Robert put his own out humbly.

"I'll be hanged if I do," said Jonathan firmly. "Bed and board you shall have while I'm alive, and a glass to look at yourself in; but my hand's for decent beasts. Move one way or t' other: take your choice."

Seeing Robert hesitate, he added, "I shall have a damned deal more respect for you if you toddle." He waved his hand away from the premises.

"I'm sorry you've taken so to swearing of late, sir," said Robert.

"Two flints strike fire, my lad. When you keep distant, I'm quiet enough in my talk to satisfy your aunt Anne."

"Look here, sir; I want to make use of you, so I'll go in."

"Of course you do," returned Jonathan, not a whit displeased by his son's bluntness; "what else is a father good for? I let you know the limit, and that's a brick wall; jump it, if you can. Don't fancy it's your aunt Jane you're going in to meet."

Robert had never been a favourite with his aunt Anne, who was Jonathan's housekeeper.

"No, poor old soul! and may God bless her in heaven!" he cried.

"For leaving you what you turned into a thundering lot of liquor to consume--eh?"

"For doing all in her power to make a man of me; and she was close on it--kind, good old darling, that she was! She got me with that money of hers to the best footing I've been on yet--bless her heart, or her memory, or whatever a poor devil on earth may bless an angel for! But here I am."

The fever in Robert blazed out under a pressure of extinguishing tears.

"There, go along in," said Jonathan, who considered drunkenness to be the main source of water in a man's eyes. "It's my belief you've been at it already this morning."

Robert passed into the house in advance of his father, whom he quite understood and appreciated. There was plenty of paternal love for him, and a hearty smack of the hand, and the inheritance of the farm, when he turned into the right way. Meantime Jonathan was ready to fulfil his parental responsibility, by sheltering, feeding, and not publicly abusing his offspring, of whose spirit he would have had a higher opinion if Robert had preferred, since he must go to the deuce, to go without troubling any of his relatives; as it was, Jonathan submitted to the infliction gravely. Neither in speech nor in tone did he solicit from the severe maiden, known as Aunt Anne, that snub for the wanderer whom he introduced, which, when two are agreed upon the infamous character of a third, through whom they are suffering, it is always agreeable to hear. He said, "Here, Anne; here's Robert. He hasn't breakfasted."

"He likes his cold bath beforehand," said Robert, presenting his cheek to the fleshless, semi-transparent woman.

Aunt Anne divided her lips to pronounce a crisp, subdued "Ow!" to Jonathan after inspecting Robert; and she shuddered at sight of Robert, and said "Ow!" repeatedly, by way of an interjectory token of comprehension, to all that was uttered; but it was a horrified "No!" when Robert's cheek pushed nearer.

"Then, see to getting some breakfast for him," said Jonathan. "You're not

anyway bound to kiss a drunken--"

"Dog's the word, sir," Robert helped him. "Dogs can afford it. I never saw one in that state; so they don't lose character."

He spoke lightly, but dejection was in his attitude. When his aunt Anne had left the room, he exclaimed,--

"By jingo! women make you feel it, by some way that they have. She's a religious creature. She smells the devil in me."

"More like, the brandy," his father responded.

"Well! I'm on the road, I'm on the road!" Robert fetched a sigh.

"I didn't make the road," said his father.

"No, sir; you didn't. Work hard: sleep sound that's happiness. I've known it for a year. You're the man I'd imitate, if I could. The devil came first the brandy's secondary. I was quiet so long. I thought myself a safe man."

He sat down and sent his hair distraught with an effort at smoothing it.

"Women brought the devil into the world first. It's women who raise the devil in us, and why they--"

He thumped the table just as his aunt Anne was preparing to spread the cloth.

"Don't be frightened, woman," said Jonathan, seeing her start fearfully back. "You take too many cups of tea, morning and night--hang the stuff!"

"Never, never till now have you abused me, Jonathan," she whimpered, severely.

"I don't tell you to love him; but wait on him. That's all. And I'll about my business. Land and beasts--they answer to you."

Robert looked up.

"Land and beasts! They sound like blessed things. When next I go to church, I shall know what old Adam felt. Go along, sir. I shall break

nothing in the house."

"You won't go, Jonathan?" begged the trembling spinster.

"Give him some of your tea, and strong, and as much of it as he can take--he wants bringing down," was Jonathan's answer; and casting a glance at one of the framed letters, he strode through the doorway, and Aunt Anne was alone with the flushed face and hurried eyes of her nephew, who was to her little better than a demon in the flesh. But there was a Bible in the room.

An hour later, Robert was mounted and riding to the meet of hounds.

CHAPTER XVIII

A single night at the Pilot Inn had given life and vigour to Robert's old reputation in Warbeach village, as the stoutest of drinkers and dear rascals throughout a sailor-breeding district, where Dibdin was still thundered in the ale-house, and manhood in a great degree measured by the capacity to take liquor on board, as a ship takes ballast. There was a profound affectation of deploring the sad fact that he drank as hard as ever, among the men, and genuine pity expressed for him by the women of Warbeach; but his fame was fresh again. As the Spring brings back its flowers, Robert's presence revived his youthful deeds. There had not been a boxer in the neighbourhood like Robert Eccles, nor such a champion in all games, nor, when he set himself to it, such an invincible drinker. It was he who thrashed the brute, Nic Sedgett, for stabbing with his clasp-knife Harry Boulby, son of the landlady of the Pilot Inn; thrashed him publicly, to the comfort of all Warbeach. He had rescued old Dame Garble from her burning cottage, and made his father house the old creature, and worked at farming, though he hated it, to pay for her subsistence. He vindicated the honour of Warbeach by drinking a match against a Yorkshire skipper till four o'clock in the morning, when it was a gallant sight, my boys, to see Hampshire steadying the defeated North-countryman on his astonished zigzag to his flattish-bottomed billyboy, all in the cheery sunrise on the river--yo-ho! ahoy!

Glorious Robert had tried, first the sea, and then soldiering. Now let us hope he'll settle to farming, and follow his rare old father's ways, and be back among his own people for good. So chimed the younger ones, and many of the elder.

Danish blood had settled round Warbeach. To be a really popular hero anywhere in Britain, a lad must still, I fear, have something of a Scandinavian gullet; and if, in addition to his being a powerful drinker, he is pleasant in his cups, and can sing, and forgive, be freehanded, and roll out the grand risky phrases of a fired brain, he stamps himself, in the apprehension of his associates, a king.

Much of the stuff was required to deal King Robert of Warbeach the capital stroke, and commonly he could hold on till a puff of cold air from the outer door, like an admonitory messenger, reminded him that he was, in the greatness of his soul, a king of swine; after which his way of walking off, without a word to anybody, hoisting his whole stature, while others were staggering, or roaring foul rhymes, or feeling consciously mortal in their sensation of feverishness, became a theme for admiration; ay, and he was fresh as an orchard apple in the morning! there lay his commandership convincingly. What was proved overnight was confirmed at dawn.

Mr. Robert had his contrast in Sedgett's son, Nicodemus Sedgett, whose unlucky Christian name had assisted the wits of Warbeach in bestowing on him a darkly-luminous relationship. Young Nic loved also to steep his spirit in the bowl; but, in addition to his never paying for his luxury, he drank as if in emulation of the colour of his reputed patron, and neighbourhood to Nic Sedgett was not liked when that young man became thoughtful over his glass.

The episode of his stabbing the landlady's son Harry clung to him fatally. The wound was in the thigh, and nothing serious. Harry was up and off to sea before Nic had ceased to show the marks of Robert's vengeance upon him; but blood-shedding, even on a small scale, is so detested by Englishmen, that Nic never got back to his right hue in the eyes of Warbeach. None felt to him as to a countryman, and it may be supposed that his face was seen no more in the house of gathering, the Pilot Inn.

He rented one of the Fairly farms, known as the Three-Tree Farm, subsisting there, men fancied, by the aid of his housekeeper's money. For he was of those evil fellows who disconcert all righteous prophecy, and it was vain for Mrs. Boulby and Warbeach village to declare that no good could come to him, when Fortune manifestly kept him going.

He possessed the rogue's most serviceable art: in spite of a countenance that was not attractive, this fellow could, as was proved by evidence,

make himself pleasing to women. "The truth of it is," said Mrs. Boulby, at a loss for any other explanation, and with a woman's love of sharp generalization, "it's because my sex is fools."

He had one day no money to pay his rent, and forthwith (using for the purpose his last five shillings, it was said) advertized for a housekeeper; and before Warbeach had done chuckling over his folly, an agreeable woman of about thirty-five was making purchases in his name; she made tea, and the evening brew for such friends as he could collect, and apparently paid his rent for him, after a time; the distress was not in the house three days. It seemed to Warbeach an erratic proceeding on the part of Providence, that Nic should ever be helped to swim; but our modern prophets have small patience, and summon Destiny to strike without a preparation of her weapons or a warning to the victim.

More than Robert's old occasional vice was at the bottom of his popularity, as I need not say. Let those who generalize upon ethnology determine whether the ancient opposition of Saxon and Norman be at an end; but it is certain, to my thinking, that when a hero of the people can be got from the common popular stock, he is doubly dear. A gentleman, however gallant and familiar, will hardly ever be as much beloved, until he dies to inform a legend or a ballad: seeing that death only can remove the peculiar distinctions and distances which the people feel to exist between themselves and the gentleman-class, and which, not to credit them with preternatural discernment, they are carefully taught to feel. Dead Britons are all Britons, but live Britons are not quite brothers.

It was as the son of a yeoman, showing comprehensible accomplishments, that Robert took his lead. He was a very brave, a sweet-hearted, and a handsome young man, and he had very chivalrous views of life, that were understood by a sufficient number under the influence of ale or brandy, and by a few in default of that material aid; and they had a family pride in him. The pride was mixed with fear, which threw over it a tender light, like a mother's dream of her child. The people, I have said, are not so lost in self-contempt as to undervalue their best men, but it must be admitted that they rarely produce young fellows wearing the undeniable chieftain's stamp, and the rarity of one like Robert lent a hue of sadness to him in their thoughts.

Fortune, moreover, the favourer of Nic Sedgett, blew foul whichever the way Robert set his sails. He would not look to his own advantage; and the belief that man should set his little traps for the liberal hand of his God, if he wishes to prosper, rather than strive to be merely

honourable in his Maker's eye, is almost as general among poor people as it is with the moneyed classes, who survey them from their height.

When jolly Butcher Billing, who was one of the limited company which had sat with Robert at the Pilot last night, reported that he had quitted the army, he was hearkened to dolefully, and the feeling was universal that glorious Robert had cut himself off from his pension and his hospital.

But when gossip Sedgett went his rounds, telling that Robert was down among them again upon the darkest expedition their minds could conceive, and rode out every morning for the purpose of encountering one of the gentlemen up at Fairly, and had already pulled him off his horse and laid him in the mud, calling him scoundrel and challenging him either to yield his secret or to fight; and that he followed him, and was out after him publicly, and matched himself against that gentleman, who had all the other gentlemen, and the earl, and the law to back him, the little place buzzed with wonder and alarm. Faint hearts declared that Robert was now done for. All felt that he had gone miles beyond the mark. Those were the misty days when fogs rolled up the salt river from the winter sea, and the sun lived but an hour in the clotted sky, extinguished near the noon.

Robert was seen riding out, and the tramp of his horse was heard as he returned homeward. He called no more at the Pilot. Darkness and mystery enveloped him. There were nightly meetings under Mrs. Boulby's roof, in the belief that he could not withstand her temptations; nor did she imprudently discourage them; but the woman at last overcame the landlady within her, and she wailed: "He won't come because of the drink. Oh! why was I made to sell liquor, which he says sends him to the devil, poor blessed boy? and I can't help begging him to take one little drop. I did, the first night he was down, forgetting his ways; he looked so desperate, he did, and it went on and went on, till he was primed, and me proud to see him get out of his misery. And now he hates the thought of me."

In her despair she encouraged Sedgett to visit her bar and parlour, and he became everywhere a most important man.

Farmer Eccles's habits of seclusion (his pride, some said), and more especially the dreaded austere Aunt Anne, who ruled that household, kept people distant from the Warbeach farm-house, all excepting Sedgett, who related that every night on his return, she read a chapter from the Bible to Robert, sitting up for him patiently to fulfil her duty; and that the farmer's words to his son had been: "Rest here; eat and drink, and ride

my horse; but not a penny of my money do you have."

By the help of Steeve Bilton, the Fairly huntsman, Sedgett was enabled to relate that there was a combination of the gentlemen against Robert, whose behaviour none could absolutely approve, save the landlady and jolly Butcher Billing, who stuck to him with a hearty blind faith.

"Did he ever," asked the latter, "did Bob Eccles ever conduct himself disrespectful to his superiors? Wasn't he always found out at his wildest for to be right--to a sensible man's way of thinking?--though not, I grant ye, to his own interests--there's another tale." And Mr. Billing's staunch adherence to the hero of the village was cried out to his credit when Sedgett stated, on Stephen Bilton's authority, that Robert's errand was the defence of a girl who had been wronged, and whose whereabouts, that she might be restored to her parents, was all he wanted to know. This story passed from mouth to mouth, receiving much ornament in the passage. The girl in question became a lady; for it is required of a mere common girl that she should display remarkable character before she can be accepted as the fitting companion of a popular hero. She became a young lady of fortune, in love with Robert, and concealed by the artifice of the offending gentleman whom Robert had challenged. Sedgett told this for truth, being instigated to boldness of invention by pertinacious inquiries, and the dignified sense which the whole story hung upon him.

Mrs. Boulby, who, as a towering woman, despised Sedgett's weak frame, had been willing to listen till she perceived him to be but a man of fiction, and then she gave him a flat contradiction, having no esteem for his custom.

"Eh! but, Missis, I can tell you his name--the gentleman's name," said Sedgett, placably. "He's a Mr. Algernon Blancove, and a cousin by marriage, or something, of Mrs. Lovell."

"I reckon you're right about that, goodman," replied Mrs. Boulby, with intuitive discernment of the true from the false, mingled with a desire to show that she was under no obligation for the news. "All t' other's a tale of your own, and you know it, and no more true than your rigmaroles about my brandy, which is French; it is, as sure as my blood's British."

"Oh! Missis," quoth Sedgett, maliciously, "as to tales, you've got witnesses enough it crassed chann'l. Aha! Don't bring 'em into the box. Don't you bring 'em into ne'er a box."

"You mean to say, Mr. Sedgett, they won't swear?"

"No, Missis; they'll swear, fast and safe, if you teach 'em. Dashed if they won't run the Pilot on a rock with their swearin'. It ain't a good habit."

"Well, Mr. Sedgett, the next time you drink my brandy and find the consequences bad, you let me hear of it."

"And what'll you do, Missis, may be?"

Listeners were by, and Mrs. Boulby cruelly retorted; "I won't send you home to your wife;" which created a roar against this hen-pecked man.

"As to consequences, Missis, it's for your sake I'm looking at them," Sedgett said, when he had recovered from the blow.

"You say that to the Excise, Mr. Sedgett; it, belike, 'll make 'em sorry."

"Brandy's your weak point, it appears, Missis."

"A little in you would stiffen your back, Mr. Sedgett."

"Poor Bob Eccles didn't want no stiffening when he come down first," Sedgett interjected.

At which, flushing enraged, Mrs. Boulby cried: "Mention him, indeed! And him and you, and that son of your'n--the shame of your cheeks if people say he's like his father. Is it your son, Nic Sedgett, thinks to inform against me, as once he swore to, and to get his wage that he may step out of a second bankruptcy? and he a farmer! You let him know that he isn't feared by me, Sedgett, and there's one here to give him a second dose, without waiting for him to use clasp-knives on harmless innocents."

"Pacify yourself, ma'am, pacify yourself," remarked Sedgett, hardened against words abroad by his endurance of blows at home. "Bob Eccles, he's got his hands full, and he, maybe, 'll reach the hulks before my Nic do, yet. And how 'm I answerable for Nic, I ask you?"

"More luck to you not to be, I say; and either, Sedgett, you does woman's work, gossipin' about like a cracked bell-clapper, or men's the biggest gossips of all, which I believe; for there's no beating you at your work, and one can't wish ill to you, knowing what you catch."

"In a friendly way, Missis,"--Sedgett fixed on the compliment to his power of propagating news--"in a friendly way. You can't accuse me of leavin' out the "I" in your name, now, can you? I make that observation,"--the venomous tattler screwed himself up to the widow insinuatingly, as if her understanding could only be seized at close quarters, "I make that observation, because poor Dick Boulby, your lamented husband--eh! poor Dick! You see, Missis, it ain't the tough ones last longest: he'd sing, 'I'm a Sea Booby,' to the song, 'I'm a green Mermaid:' poor Dick! 'a-shinin' upon the sea-deeps.' He kept the liquor from his head, but didn't mean it to stop down in his leg."

"Have you done, Mr. Sedgett?" said the widow, blandly.

"You ain't angry, Missis?"

"Not a bit, Mr. Sedgett; and if I knock you over with the flat o' my hand, don't you think so."

Sedgett threw up the wizened skin of his forehead, and retreated from the bar. At a safe distance, he called: "Bad news that about Bob Eccles swallowing a blow yesterday!"

Mrs. Boulby faced him complacently till he retired, and then observed to those of his sex surrounding her, "Don't "woman-and-dog-and-walnut-tree" me! Some of you men 'd be the better for a drubbing every day of your lives. Sedgett yond' 'd be as big a villain as his son, only for what he gets at home."

That was her way of replying to the Parthian arrow; but the barb was poisoned. The village was at fever heat concerning Robert, and this assertion that he had swallowed a blow, produced almost as great a consternation as if a fleet of the enemy had been reported off Sandy Point.

Mrs. Boulby went into her parlour and wrote a letter to Robert, which she despatched by one of the loungers about the bar, who brought back news that three of the gentlemen of Fairly were on horseback, talking to Farmer Eccles at his garden gate. Affairs were waxing hot. The gentlemen had only to threaten Farmer Eccles, to make him side with his son, right or wrong. In the evening, Stephen Bilton, the huntsman, presented himself at the door of the long parlour of the Pilot, and loud cheers were his greeting from a full company.

"Gentlemen all," said Stephen, with dapper modesty; and acted as if no excitement were current, and he had nothing to tell.

"Well, Steeve?" said one, to encourage him.

"How about Bob, to-day?" said another.

Before Stephen had spoken, it was clear to the apprehension of the whole room that he did not share the popular view of Robert. He declined to understand who was meant by "Bob." He played the questions off; and then shrugged, with, "Oh, let's have a quiet evening."

It ended in his saying, "About Bob Eccles? There, that's summed up pretty quick--he's mad."

"Mad!" shouted Warbeach.

"That's a lie," said Mrs. Boulby, from the doorway.

"Well, mum, I let a lady have her own opinion." Stephen nodded to her. "There ain't a doubt as t' what the doctors 'd bring him in I ain't speaking my ideas alone. It's written like the capital letters in a newspaper. Lunatic's the word! And I'll take a glass of something warm, Mrs. Boulby. We had a stiff run to-day."

"Where did ye kill, Steeve?" asked a dispirited voice.

"We didn't kill at all: he was one of those "longshore dog-foxes, and got away home on the cliff." Stephen thumped his knee. "It's my belief the smell o' sea gives 'em extra cunning."

"The beggar seems to have put ye out rether--eh, Steeve?"

So it was generally presumed: and yet the charge of madness was very staggering; madness being, in the first place, indefensible, and everybody's enemy when at large; and Robert's behaviour looked extremely like it. It had already been as a black shadow haunting enthusiastic minds in the village, and there fell a short silence, during which Stephen made his preparations for filling and lighting a pipe.

"Come; how do you make out he's mad?"

Jolly Butcher Billing spoke; but with none of the irony of confidence.

"Oh!" Stephen merely clapped both elbows against his sides.

Several pairs of eyes were studying him. He glanced over them in turn, and commenced leisurely the puff contemplative.

"Don't happen to have a grudge of e'er a kind against old Bob, Steeve?"

"Not I!"

Mrs. Boulby herself brought his glass to Stephen, and, retreating, left the parlour-door open.

"What causes you for to think him mad, Steeve?"

A second "Oh!" as from the heights dominating argument, sounded from Stephen's throat, half like a grunt. This time he condescended to add,--

"How do you know when a dog's gone mad? Well, Robert Eccles, he's gone in like manner. If you don't judge a man by his actions, you've got no means of reckoning. He comes and attacks gentlemen, and swears he'll go on doing it."

"Well, and what does that prove?" said jolly Butcher Billing.

Mr. William Moody, boatbuilder, a liver-complexioned citizen, undertook to reply.

"What does that prove? What does that prove when the midshipmite was found with his head in the mixedpickle jar? It proved that his head was lean, and t' other part was rounder."

The illustration appeared forcible, but not direct, and nothing more was understood from it than that Moody, and two or three others who had been struck by the image of the infatuated young naval officer, were going over to the enemy. The stamp of madness upon Robert's acts certainly saved perplexity, and was the easiest side of the argument. By this time Stephen had finished his glass, and the effect was seen.

"Hang it!" he exclaimed, "I don't agree he deserves shooting. And he may have had harm done to him. In that case, let him fight. And I say, too, let the gentleman give him satisfaction."

"Hear! hear!" cried several.

"And if the gentleman refuse to give him satisfaction in a fair stand-up fight, I say he ain't a gentleman, and deserves to be treated as such. My objection's personal. I don't like any man who spoils sport, and ne'er a rascally vulpeci' spoils sport as he do, since he's been down in our parts again. I'll take another brimmer, Mrs. Boulby."

"To be sure you will, Stephen," said Mrs. Boulby, bending as in a curtsy to the glass; and so soft with him that foolish fellows thought her cowed by the accusation thrown at her favourite.

"There's two questions about they valpecies, Master Stephen," said Farmer Wainsby, a farmer with a grievance, fixing his elbow on his knee for serious utterance. "There's to ask, and t' ask again. Sport, I grant ye. All in doo season. But," he performed a circle with his pipe stem, and darted it as from the centre thereof toward Stephen's breast, with the poser, "do we s'pport thieves at public expense for them to keep thievin'--black, white, or brown--no matter, eh? Well, then, if the public wunt bear it, dang me if I can see why individles shud bear it. It ent no manner o' reason, net as I can see; let gentlemen have their opinion, or let 'em not. Foxes be hanged!"

Much slow winking was interchanged. In a general sense, Farmer Wainsby's remarks were held to be un-English, though he was pardoned for them as one having peculiar interests at stake.

"Ay, ay! we know all about that," said Stephen, taking succour from the eyes surrounding him.

"And so, may be, do we," said Wainsby.

"Fox-hunting 'll go on when your great-grandfather's your youngest son, farmer; or t' other way."

"I reckon it'll be a stuffed fox your chil'ern 'll hunt, Mr. Steeve; more straw in 'em than bow'ls."

"If the country," Stephen thumped the table, "were what you'd make of it, hang me if my name 'd long be Englishman!"

"Hear, hear, Steeve!" was shouted in support of the Conservative principle enunciated by him.

"What I say is, flesh and blood afore foxes!"

Thus did Farmer Wainsby likewise attempt a rallying-cry; but Stephen's retort, "Ain't foxes flesh and blood?" convicted him of clumsiness, and, buoyed on the uproar of cheers, Stephen pursued, "They are; to kill 'em in cold blood's beast-murder, so it is. What do we do? We give 'em a fair field--a fair field and no favour! We let 'em trust to the instincts Nature, she's given 'em; and don't the old woman know best? If they cap, get away, they win the day. All's open, and honest, and aboveboard. Kill your rats and kill your rabbits, but leave foxes to your betters. Foxes are gentlemen. You don't understand? Be hanged if they ain't! I like the old fox, and I don't like to see him murdered and exterminated, but die the death of a gentleman, at the hands of gentlemen--"

"And ladies," sneered the farmer.

All the room was with Stephen, and would have backed him uproariously, had he not reached his sounding period without knowing it, and thus allowed his opponent to slip in that abominable addition.

"Ay, and ladies," cried the huntsman, keen at recovery. "Why shouldn't they? I hate a field without a woman in it; don't you? and you? and you? And you, too, Mrs. Boulby? There you are, and the room looks better for you--don't it, lads? Hurrah!"

The cheering was now aroused, and Stephen had his glass filled again in triumph, while the farmer meditated thickly over the ruin of his argument from that fatal effort at fortifying it by throwing a hint to the discredit of the sex, as many another man has meditated before.

"Eh! poor old Bob!" Stephen sighed and sipped. "I can cry that with any of you. It's worse for me to see than for you to hear of him. Wasn't I always a friend of his, and said he was worthy to be a gentleman, many a time? He's got the manners of a gentleman now; offs with his hat, if there's a lady present, and such a neat way of speaking. But there, acting's the thing, and his behaviour's beastly bad! You can't call it no other. There's two Mr. Blancoves up at Fairly, relations of Mrs. Lovell's--whom I'll take the liberty of calling My Beauty, and no offence meant: and it's before her that Bob only yesterday rode up--one of the gentlemen being Mr. Algernon, free of hand and a good seat in the saddle, t' other's Mr. Edward; but Mr. Algernon, he's Robert Eccles's man--up rides Bob, just as we was tying Mr. Reenard's brush to the pommel of the lady's saddle, down in Ditley Marsh; and he bows to the lady. Says he--but he's mad, stark mad!"

Stephen resumed his pipe amid a din of disappointment that made the walls ring and the glasses leap.

"A little more sugar, Stephen?" said Mrs. Boulby, moving in lightly from the doorway.

"Thank ye, mum; you're the best hostess that ever breathed."

"So she be; but how about Bob?" cried her guests--some asking whether he carried a pistol or flourished a stick.

"Ne'er a blessed twig, to save his soul; and there's the madness written on him;" Stephen roared as loud as any of them. "And me to see him riding in the ring there, and knowing what the gentleman had sworn to do if he came across the hunt; and feeling that he was in the wrong! I haven't got a oath to swear how mad I was. Fancy yourselves in my place. I love old Bob. I've drunk with him; I owe him obligations from since I was a boy up'ard; I don't know a better than Bob in all England. And there he was: and says to Mr. Algernon, 'You know what I'm come for.' I never did behold a gentleman so pale--shot all over his cheeks as he was, and pinkish under the eyes; if you've ever noticed a chap laid hands on by detectives in plain clothes. Smack at Bob went Mr. Edward's whip."

"Mr. Algernon's," Stephen was corrected.

"Mr. Edward's, I tell ye--the cousin. And right across the face. My Lord! it made my blood tingle."

A sound like the swish of a whip expressed the sentiments of that assemblage at the Pilot.

"Bob swallowed it?"

"What else could he do, the fool? He had nothing to help him but his hand. Says he, 'That's a poor way of trying to stop me. My business is with this gentleman;' and Bob set his horse at Mr. Algernon, and Mrs. Lovell rode across him with her hand raised; and just at that moment up jogged the old gentleman, Squire Blancove, of Wrexby: and Robert Eccles says to him, 'You might have saved your son something by keeping your word.' It appears according to Bob, that the squire had promised to see his son, and settle matters. All Mrs. Lovell could do was hardly enough to hold back Mr. Edward from laying out at Bob. He was like a white devil, and speaking calm and polite all the time. Says Bob, 'I'm willing to take one when I've done with the other;' and the squire began talking

to his son, Mrs. Lovell to Mr. Edward, and the rest of the gentlemen all round poor dear old Bob, rather bullying--like for my blood; till Bob couldn't help being nettled, and cried out, 'Gentlemen, I hold him in my power, and I'm silent so long as there's a chance of my getting him to behave like a man with human feelings.' If they'd gone at him then, I don't think I could have let him stand alone: an opinion's one thing, but blood's another, and I'm distantly related to Bob; and a man who's always thinking of the value of his place, he ain't worth it. But Mrs. Lovell, she settled the case--a lady, Farmer Wainsby, with your leave. There's the good of having a lady present on the field. That's due to a lady!"

"Happen she was at the bottom of it," the farmer returned Stephen's nod grumpily.

"How did it end, Stephen, my lad?" said Butcher Billing, indicating a "never mind him."

"It ended, my boy, it ended like my glass here--hot and strong stuff, with sugar at the bottom. And I don't see this, so glad as I saw that, my word of honour on it! Boys all!" Stephen drank the dregs.

Mrs. Boulby was still in attendance. The talk over the circumstances was sweeter than the bare facts, and the replenished glass enabled Stephen to add the picturesque bits of the affray, unspurred by a surrounding eagerness of his listeners--too exciting for imaginative effort. In particular, he dwelt on Robert's dropping the reins and riding with his heels at Algernon, when Mrs. Lovell put her horse in his way, and the pair of horses rose like waves at sea, and both riders showed their horsemanship, and Robert an adroit courtesy, for which the lady thanked him with a bow of her head.

"I got among the hounds, pretending to pacify them, and call 'em together," said Stephen, "and I heard her say--just before all was over, and he turned off--I heard her say: 'Trust this to me: I will meet you.' I'll swear to them exact words, though there was more, and a 'where' in the bargain, and that I didn't hear. Aha! by George! thinks I, old Bob, you're a lucky beggar, and be hanged if I wouldn't go mad too for a minute or so of short, sweet, private talk with a lovely young widow lady as ever the sun did shine upon so boldly--oho!

You've seen a yacht upon the sea,
She dances and she dances, O!
As fair is my wild maid to me...

Something about 'prances, O!' on her horse, you know, or you're a hem'd fool if you don't. I never could sing; wish I could! It's the joy of life! It's utterance! Hey for harmony!"

"Eh! brayvo! now you're a man, Steeve! and welcomer and welcomest; yi--yi, O!" jolly Butcher Billing sang out sharp. "Life wants watering. Here's a health to Robert Eccles, wheresoever and whatsoever! and ne'er a man shall say of me I didn't stick by a friend like Bob. Cheers, my lads!"

Robert's health was drunk in a thunder, and praises of the purity of the brandy followed the grand roar. Mrs. Boulby received her compliments on that head.

"'Pends upon the tide, Missis, don't it?" one remarked with a grin broad enough to make the slyness written on it easy reading.

"Ah! first a flow and then a ebb," said another.

"It's many a keg I plant i' the mud,
Coastguardsman, come! and I'll have your blood!"

Instigation cried, "Cut along;" but the defiant smuggler was deficient in memory, and like Steeve Bilton, was reduced to scatter his concluding rhymes in prose, as "something about;" whereat jolly Butcher Billing, a reader of song-books from a literary delight in their contents, scraped his head, and then, as if he had touched a spring, carolled,--

"In spite of all you Gov'ment pack,
I'll land my kegs of the good Cognyac"--

"though," he took occasion to observe when the chorus and a sort of cracker of irrelevant rhymes had ceased to explode; "I'm for none of them games. Honesty!--there's the sugar o' my grog."

"Ay, but you like to be cock-sure of the stuff you drink, if e'er a man did," said the boatbuilder, whose eye blazed yellow in this frothing season of song and fun.

"Right so, Will Moody!" returned the jolly butcher: "which means--not wrong this time!"

"Then, what's understood by your sticking prongs into your hostess here concerning of her brandy? Here it is--which is enough, except for

discontented fellows."

"Eh, Missus?" the jolly butcher appealed to her, and pointed at Moody's complexion for proof.

It was quite a fiction that kegs of the good cognac were sown at low water, and reaped at high, near the river-gate of the old Pilot Inn garden; but it was greatly to Mrs. Boulby's interest to encourage the delusion which imaged her brandy thus arising straight from the very source, without villanous contact with excisemen and corrupting dealers; and as, perhaps, in her husband's time, the thing had happened, and still did, at rare intervals, she complacently gathered the profitable fame of her brandy being the best in the district.

"I'm sure I hope you're satisfied, Mr. Billing," she said.

The jolly butcher asked whether Will Moody was satisfied, and Mr. William Moody declaring himself thoroughly satisfied, "then I'm satisfied too!" said the jolly butcher; upon which the boatbuilder heightened the laugh by saying he was not satisfied at all; and to escape from the execrations of the majority, pleaded that it was because his glass was empty: thus making his peace with them. Every glass in the room was filled again.

The young fellows now loosened tongue; and Dick Curtis, the promising cricketer of Hampshire, cried, "Mr. Moody, my hearty! that's your fourth glass, so don't quarrel with me, now!"

"You!" Moody fired up in a bilious frenzy, and called him a this and that and t' other young vagabond; for which the company, feeling the ominous truth contained in Dick Curtis's remark more than its impertinence, fined Mr. Moody in a song. He gave the--

"So many young Captains have walked o'er my pate,
It's no wonder you see me quite bald, sir,"

with emphatic bitterness, and the company thanked him. Seeing him stand up as to depart, however, a storm of contempt was hurled at him; some said he was like old Sedgett, and was afraid of his wife; and some, that he was like Nic Sedgett, and drank blue.

"You're a bag of blue devils, oh dear! oh dear!"

sang Dick to the tune of "The Campbells are coming."

"I ask e'er a man present," Mr. Moody put out his fist, "is that to be borne? Didn't you," he addressed Dick Curtis,--"didn't you sing into my chorus--"

'It's no wonder to hear how you squall'd, sir?'

"You did!"

"Don't he,"--Dick addressed the company, "make Mrs. Boulby's brandy look ashamed of itself in his face? I ask e'er a gentleman present."

Accusation and retort were interchanged, in the course of which, Dick called Mr. Moody Nic Sedgett's friend; and a sort of criminal inquiry was held. It was proved that Moody had been seen with Nic Sedgett; and then three or four began to say that Nic Sedgett was thick with some of the gentlemen up at Fairly;--just like his luck! Stephen let it be known that he could confirm this fact; he having seen Mr. Algernon Blancove stop Nic on the road and talk to him.

"In that case," said Butcher Billing, "there's mischief in a state of fermentation. Did ever anybody see Nic and the devil together?"

"I saw Nic and Mr. Moody together," said Dick Curtis. "Well, I'm only stating a fact," he exclaimed, as Moody rose, apparently to commence an engagement, for which the company quietly prepared, by putting chairs out of his way: but the recreant took his advantage from the error, and got away to the door, pursued.

"Here's an example of what we lose in having no President," sighed the jolly butcher. "There never was a man built for the chair like Bob Eccles I say! Our evening's broke up, and I, for one, 'd ha' made it morning. Hark, outside; By Gearge! they're snowballing."

An adjournment to the front door brought them in view of a white and silent earth under keen stars, and Dick Curtis and the bilious boatbuilder, foot to foot, snowball in hand. A bout of the smart exercise made Mr. Moody laugh again, and all parted merrily, delivering final shots as they went their several ways.

"Thanks be to heaven for snowing," said Mrs. Boulby; "or when I should have got to my bed, Goodness only can tell!" With which, she closed the door upon the empty inn.

CHAPTER XIX

The night was warm with the new-fallen snow, though the stars sparkled coldly. A fleet of South-westerly rainclouds had been met in mid-sky by a sharp puff from due North, and the moisture had descended like a woven shroud, covering all the land, the house-tops, and the trees.

Young Harry Boulby was at sea, and this still weather was just what a mother's heart wished for him. The widow looked through her bed-room window and listened, as if the absolute stillness must beget a sudden cry. The thought of her boy made her heart revert to Robert. She was thinking of Robert when the muffled sound of a horse at speed caused her to look up the street, and she saw one coming--a horse without a rider. The next minute he was out of sight.

Mrs. Boulby stood terrified. The silence of the night hanging everywhere seemed to call on her for proof that she had beheld a real earthly spectacle, and the dead thump of the hooves on the snow-floor in passing struck a chill through her as being phantom-like. But she had seen a saddle on the horse, and the stirrups flying, and the horse looked affrighted. The scene was too earthly in its suggestion of a tale of blood. What if the horse were Robert's? She tried to laugh at her womanly fearfulness, and had almost to suppress a scream in doing so. There was no help for it but to believe her brandy as good and efficacious as her guests did, so she went downstairs and took a fortifying draught; after which her blood travelled faster, and the event galloped swiftly into the recesses of time, and she slept.

While the morning was still black, and the streets without a sign of life, she was aroused by a dream of some one knocking at her grave-stone. "Ah, that brandy!" she sighed. "This is what a poor woman has to pay for custom!" Which we may interpret as the remorseful morning confession of a guilt she had been the victim of over night. She knew that good brandy did not give bad dreams, and was self-convicted. Strange were her sensations when the knocking continued; and presently she heard a voice in the naked street below call in a moan, "Mother!"

"My darling!" she answered, divided in her guess at its being Harry or Robert.

A glance from the open window showed Robert leaning in the quaint old porch, with his head bound by a handkerchief; but he had no strength to

reply to a question at that distance, and when she let him in he made two steps and dropped forward on the floor.

Lying there, he plucked at her skirts. She was shouting for help, but with her ready apprehension of the pride in his character, she knew what was meant by his broken whisper before she put her ear to his lips, and she was silent, miserable sight as was his feeble efforts to rise on an elbow that would not straighten.

His head was streaming with blood, and the stain was on his neck and chest. He had one helpless arm; his clothes were torn as from a fierce struggle.

"I'm quite sensible," he kept repeating, lest she should relapse into screams.

"Lord love you for your spirit!" exclaimed the widow, and there they remained, he like a winged eagle, striving to raise himself from time to time, and fighting with his desperate weakness. His face was to the ground; after a while he was still. In alarm the widow stooped over him: she feared that he had given up his last breath; but the candle-light showed him shaken by a sob, as it seemed to her, though she could scarce believe it of this manly fellow. Yet it proved true; she saw the very tears. He was crying at his helplessness.

"Oh, my darling boy!" she burst out; "what have they done to ye? the cowards they are! but do now have pity on a woman, and let me get some creature to lift you to a bed, dear. And don't flap at me with your hand like a bird that's shot. You're quite, quite sensible, I know; quite sensible, dear; but for my sake, Robert, my Harry's good friend, only for my sake, let yourself be carried to a clean, nice bed, till I get Dr. Bean to you. Do, do."

Her entreaties brought on a succession of the efforts to rise, and at last, getting round on his back, and being assisted by the widow, he sat up against the wall. The change of posture stupified him with a dizziness. He tried to utter the old phrase, that he was sensible, but his hand beat at his forehead before the words could be shaped.

"What pride is when it's a man!" the widow thought, as he recommenced the grievous struggle to rise on his feet; now feeling them up to the knee with a questioning hand, and pausing as if in a reflective wonder, and then planting them for a spring that failed wretchedly; groaning and leaning backward, lost in a fit of despair, and again beginning, patient

as an insect imprisoned in a circle.

The widow bore with his man's pride, until her nerves became afflicted by the character of his movements, which, as her sensations conceived them, were like those of a dry door jarring loose. She caught him in her arms: "It's let my back break, but you shan't fret to death there, under my eyes, proud or humble, poor dear," she said, and with a great pull she got him upright. He fell across her shoulder with so stiff a groan that for a moment she thought she had done him mortal injury.

"Good old mother," he said boyishly, to reassure her.

"Yes; and you'll behave to me like a son," she coaxed him.

They talked as by slow degrees the stairs were ascended.

"A crack o' the head, mother--a crack o' the head," said he.

"Was it the horse, my dear?"

"A crack o' the head, mother."

"What have they done to my boy Robert?"

"They've,"--he swung about humorously, weak as he was and throbbing with pain--"they've let out some of your brandy, mother...got into my head."

"Who've done it, my dear?"

"They've done it, mother."

"Oh, take care o' that nail at your foot; and oh, that beam to your poor poll--poor soul! he's been and hurt himself again. And did they do it to him? and what was it for?" she resumed in soft cajolery.

"They did it, because--"

"Yes, my dear; the reason for it?"

"Because, mother, they had a turn that way."

"Thanks be to Above for leaving your cunning in you, my dear," said the baffled woman, with sincere admiration. "And Lord be thanked, if you're not hurt bad, that they haven't spoilt his handsome face," she added.

In the bedroom, he let her partially undress him, refusing all doctor's aid, and commanding her to make no noise about him. and then he lay down and shut his eyes, for the pain was terrible--galloped him and threw him with a shock--and galloped him and threw him again, whenever his thoughts got free for a moment from the dizzy aching.

"My dear," she whispered, "I'm going to get a little brandy."

She hastened away upon this mission.

He was in the same posture when she returned with bottle and glass.

She poured out some, and made much of it as a specific, and of the great things brandy would do; but he motioned his hand from it feebly, till she reproached him tenderly as perverse and unkind.

"Now, my dearest boy, for my sake--only for my sake. Will you? Yes, you will, my Robert!"

"No brandy, mother."

"Only one small thimbleful?"

"No more brandy for me!"

"See, dear, how seriously you take it, and all because you want the comfort."

"No brandy," was all he could say.

She looked at the label on the bottle. Alas! she knew whence it came, and what its quality. She could cheat herself about it when herself only was concerned--but she wavered at the thought of forcing it upon Robert as trusty medicine, though it had a pleasant taste, and was really, as she conceived, good enough for customers.

She tried him faintly with arguments in its favour; but his resolution was manifested by a deaf ear.

With a perfect faith in it she would, and she was conscious that she could, have raised his head and poured it down his throat. The crucial test of her love for Robert forbade the attempt. She burst into an uncontrollable fit of crying.

"Halloa! mother," said Robert, opening his eyes to the sad candlelight surrounding them.

"My darling boy! whom I do love so; and not to be able to help you! What shall I do--what shall I do!"

With a start, he cried, "Where's the horse!"

"The horse?"

"The old dad 'll be asking for the horse to-morrow."

"I saw a horse, my dear, afore I turned to my prayers at my bedside, coming down the street without his rider. He came like a rumble of deafness in my ears. Oh, my boy, I thought, Is it Robert's horse?--knowing you've got enemies, as there's no brave man has not got 'em --which is our only hope in the God of heaven!"

"Mother, punch my ribs."

He stretched himself flat for the operation, and shut his mouth.

"Hard, mother!--and quick!--I can't hold out long."

"Oh! Robert," moaned the petrified woman "strike you?"

"Straight in the ribs. Shut your fist and do it--quick."

My dear!--my boy!--I haven't the heart to do it!"

"Ah!" Robert's chest dropped in; but tightening his muscles again, he said, "now do it--do it!"

"Oh! a poke at a poor fire puts it out, dear. And make a murderess of me, you call mother! Oh! as I love the name, I'll obey you, Robert. But!--there!"

"Harder, mother."

"There!--goodness forgive me!"

"Hard as you can--all's right."

"There!--and there!--oh!--mercy!"

"Press in at my stomach."

She nerved herself to do his bidding, and, following his orders, took his head in her hands, and felt about it. The anguish of the touch wrung a stifled scream from him, at which she screamed responsive. He laughed, while twisting with the pain.

"You cruel boy, to laugh at your mother," she said, delighted by the sound of safety in that sweet human laughter. "Hey! don't ye shake your brain; it ought to lie quiet. And here's the spot of the wicked blow-- and him in love--as I know he is! What would she say if she saw him now? But an old woman's the best nurse--ne'er a doubt of it."

She felt him heavy on her arm, and knew that he had fainted. Quelling her first impulse to scream, she dropped him gently on the pillow, and rapped to rouse up her maid.

The two soon produced a fire and hot water, bandages, vinegar in a basin, and every crude appliance that could be thought of, the maid followed her mistress's directions with a consoling awe, for Mrs. Boulby had told her no more than that a man was hurt.

"I do hope, if it's anybody, it's that ther' Moody," said the maid.

"A pretty sort of a Christian you think yourself, I dare say," Mrs. Boulby replied.

"Christian or not, one can't help longin' for a choice, mum. We ain't all hands and knees."

"Better for you if you was," said the widow. "It's tongues, you're to remember, you're not to be. Now come you up after me--and you'll not utter a word. You'll stand behind the door to do what I tell you. You're a soldier's daughter, Susan, and haven't a claim to be excitable."

"My mother was given to faints," Susan protested on behalf of her possible weakness.

"You may peep." Thus Mrs. Boulby tossed a sop to her frail woman's nature.

But for her having been appeased by the sagacious accordance of this

privilege, the maid would never have endured to hear Robert's voice in agony, and to think that it was really Robert, the beloved of Warbeach, who had come to harm. Her apprehensions not being so lively as her mistress's, by reason of her love being smaller, she was more terrified than comforted by Robert's jokes during the process of washing off the blood, cutting the hair from the wound, bandaging and binding up the head.

His levity seemed ghastly; and his refusal upon any persuasion to see a doctor quite heathenish, and a sign of one foredoomed.

She believed that his arm was broken, and smarted with wrath at her mistress for so easily taking his word to the contrary. More than all, his abjuration of brandy now when it would do him good to take it, struck her as an instance of that masculine insanity in the comprehension of which all women must learn to fortify themselves. There was much whispering in the room, inarticulate to her, before Mrs. Boulby came out; enjoining a rigorous silence, and stating that the patient would drink nothing but tea.

"He begged," she said half to herself, "to have the window blinds up in the morning, if the sun wasn't strong, for him to look on our river opening down to the ships."

"That looks as if he meant to live," Susan remarked.

"He!" cried the widow, "it's Robert Eccles. He'd stand on his last inch."

"Would he, now!" ejaculated Susan, marvelling at him, with no question as to what footing that might be.

"Leastways," the widow hastened to add, "if he thought it was only devils against him. I've heard him say, 'It's a fool that holds out against God, and a coward as gives in to the devil;' and there's my Robert painted by his own hand."

"But don't that bring him to this so often, Mum?" Susan ruefully inquired, joining teapot and kettle.

"I do believe he's protected," said the widow.

With the first morning light Mrs. Boulby was down at Warbeach Farm, and being directed to Farmer Eccles in the stables, she found the sturdy

yeoman himself engaged in grooming Robert's horse.

"Well, Missis," he said, nodding to her; "you win, you see. I thought you would; I'd have sworn you would. Brandy's stronger than blood, with some of our young fellows."

"If you please, Mr. Eccles," she replied, "Robert's sending of me was to know if the horse was unhurt and safe."

"Won't his legs carry him yet, Missis?"

"His legs have been graciously spared, Mr. Eccles; it's his head."

"That's where the liquor flies, I'm told."

"Pray, Mr. Eccles, believe me when I declare he hasn't touched a drop of anything but tea in my house this past night."

"I'm sorry for that; I'd rather have him go to you. If he takes it, let him take it good; and I'm given to understand that you've a reputation that way. Just tell him from me, he's at liberty to play the devil with himself, but not with my beasts."

The farmer continued his labour.

"No, you ain't a hard man, surely," cried the widow. "Not when I say he was sober, Mr. Eccles; and was thrown, and made insensible?"

"Never knew such a thing to happen to him, Missis, and, what's more, I don't believe it. Mayhap you're come for his things: his Aunt Anne's indoors, and she'll give 'em up, and gladly. And my compliments to Robert, and the next time he fancies visiting Warbeach, he'd best forward a letter to that effect."

Mrs. Boulby curtsied humbly. "You think bad of me, sir, for keeping a public; but I love your son as my own, and if I might presume to say so, Mr. Eccles, you will be proud of him too before you die. I know no more than you how he fell yesterday, but I do know he'd not been drinking, and have got bitter bad enemies."

"And that's not astonishing, Missis."

"No, Mr. Eccles; and a man who's brave besides being good soon learns that."

"Well spoken, Missis."

"Is Robert to hear he's denied his father's house?"

"I never said that, Mrs. Boulby. Here's my principle--My house is open to my blood, so long as he don't bring downright disgrace on it, and then any one may claim him that likes I won't give him money, because I know of a better use for it; and he shan't ride my beasts, because he don't know how to treat 'em. That's all."

"And so you keep within the line of your duty, sir," the widow summed his speech.

"So I hope to," said the farmer.

"There's comfort in that," she replied.

"As much as there's needed," said he.

The widow curtsied again. "It's not to trouble you, sir, I called. Robert--thanks be to Above!--is not hurt serious, though severe."

"Where's he hurt?" the farmer asked rather hurriedly.

"In the head, it is."

"What have you come for?"

"First, his best hat."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the farmer. "Well, if that 'll mend his head it's at his service, I'm sure."

Sick at his heartlessness, the widow scattered emphasis over her concluding remarks. "First, his best hat, he wants; and his coat and clean shirt; and they mend the looks of a man, Mr. Eccles; and it's to look well is his object: for he's not one to make a moan of himself, and doctors may starve before he'd go to any of them. And my begging prayer to you is, that when you see your son, you'll not tell him I let you know his head or any part of him was hurt. I wish you good morning, Mr. Eccles."

"Good morning to you, Mrs. Boulby. You're a respectable woman."

"Not to be soaped," she murmured to herself in a heat.

The apparently medicinal articles of attire were obtained from Aunt Anne, without a word of speech on the part of that pale spinster. The deferential hostility between the two women acknowledged an intervening chasm. Aunt Anne produced a bundle, and placed the hat on it, upon which she had neatly pinned a tract, "The Drunkard's Awakening!" Mrs. Boulby glanced her eye in wrath across this superscription, thinking to herself, "Oh, you good people! how you make us long in our hearts for trouble with you." She controlled the impulse, and mollified her spirit on her way home by distributing stray leaves of the tract to the outlying heaps of rubbish, and to one inquisitive pig, who was looking up from a badly-smelling sty for what the heavens might send him.

She found Robert with his arm doubled over a basin, and Susan sponging cold water on it.

"No bones broken, mother!" he sang out. "I'm sound; all right again. Six hours have done it this time. Is it a thaw? You needn't tell me what the old dad has been saying. I shall be ready to breakfast in half an hour."

"Lord, what a big arm it is!" exclaimed the widow. "And no wonder, or how would you be a terror to men? You naughty boy, to think of stirring! Here you'll lie."

"Ah, will I?" said Robert: and he gave a spring, and sat upright in the bed, rather white with the effort, which seemed to affect his mind, for he asked dubiously, "What do I look like, mother?"

She brought him the looking-glass, and Susan being dismissed, he examined his features.

"Dear!" said the widow, sitting down on the bed; "it ain't much for me to guess you've got an appointment."

"At twelve o'clock, mother."

"With her?" she uttered softly.

"It's with a lady, mother."

"And so many enemies prowling about, Robert, my dear! Don't tell me they

didn't fall upon you last night. I said nothing, but I'd swear it on the Book. Do you think you can go?"

"Why, mother, I go by my feelings, and there's no need to think at all, or God knows what I should think."

The widow shook her head. "Nothing 'll stop you, I suppose?"

"Nothing inside of me will, mother."

"Doesn't she but never mind. I've no right to ask, Robert; and if I have curiosity, it's about last night, and why you should let villains escape. But there's no accounting for a man's notions; only, this I say, and I do say it, Nic Sedgett, he's at the bottom of any mischief brewed against you down here. And last night Stephen Bilton, or somebody, declared that Nic Sedgett had been seen up at Fairly."

"Selling eggs, mother. Why shouldn't he? We mustn't complain of his getting an honest livelihood."

"He's black-blooded, Robert; and I never can understand why the Lord did not make him a beast in face. I'm told that creature's found pleasing by the girls."

"Ugh, mother, I'm not."

"She won't have you, Robert?"

He laughed. "We shall see to-day."

"You deceiving boy!" cried the widow; "and me not know it's Mrs. Lovell you're going to meet! and would to heaven she'd see the worth of ye, for it's a born lady you ought to marry."

"Just feel in my pockets, mother, and you won't be so ready with your talk of my marrying. And now I'll get up. I feel as if my legs had to learn over again how to bear me. The old dad, bless his heart! gave me sound wind and limb to begin upon, so I'm not easily stumped, you see, though I've been near on it once or twice in my life."

Mrs. Boulby murmured, "Ah! are you still going to be at war with those gentlemen, Robert?"

He looked at her steadily, while a shrewd smile wrought over his face,

and then taking her hand, he said, "I'll tell you a little; you deserve it, and won't tattle. My curse is, I'm ashamed to talk about my feelings; but there's no shame in being fond of a girl, even if she refuses to have anything to say to you, is there? No, there isn't. I went with my dear old aunt's money to a farmer in Kent, and learnt farming; clear of the army first, by--But I must stop that burst of swearing. Half the time I've been away, I was there. The farmer's a good, sober, downhearted man--a sort of beaten Englishman, who don't know it, tough, and always backing. He has two daughters: one went to London, and came to harm, of a kind. The other I'd prick this vein for and bleed to death, singing; and she hates me! I wish she did. She thought me such a good young man! I never drank; went to bed early, was up at work with the birds. Mr. Robert Armstrong! That changeing of my name was like a lead cap on my head. I was never myself with it, felt hang-dog--it was impossible a girl could care for such a fellow as I was. Mother, just listen: she's dark as a gipsy. She's the faithfullest, stoutest-hearted creature in the world. She has black hair, large brown eyes; see her once! She's my mate. I could say to her, 'Stand there; take guard of a thing;' and I could be dead certain of her--she'd perish at her post. Is the door locked? Lock the door; I won't be seen when I speak of her. Well, never mind whether she's handsome or not. She isn't a lady; but she's my lady; she's the woman I could be proud of. She sends me to the devil! I believe a woman 'd fall in love with her cheeks, they are so round and soft and kindly coloured. Think me a fool; I am. And here am I, away from her, and I feel that any day harm may come to her, and she 'll melt, and be as if the devils of hell were mocking me. Who's to keep harm from her when I'm away? What can I do but drink and forget? Only now, when I wake up from it, I'm a crawling wretch at her feet. If I had her feet to kiss! I've never kissed her--never! And no man has kissed her. Damn my head! here's the ache coming on. That's my last oath, mother. I wish there was a Bible handy, but I'll try and stick to it without. My God! when I think of her, I fancy everything on earth hangs still and doubts what's to happen. I'm like a wheel, and go on spinning. Feel my pulse now. Why is it I can't stop it? But there she is, and I could crack up this old world to know what's coming. I was mild as milk all those days I was near her. My comfort is, she don't know me. And that's my curse too! If she did, she'd know as clear as day I'm her mate, her match, the man for her. I am, by heaven!--that's an oath permitted. To see the very soul I want, and to miss her! I'm down here, mother; she loves her sister, and I must learn where her sister's to be found. One of those gentlemen up at Fairly's the guilty man. I don't say which; perhaps I don't know. But oh, what a lot of lightnings I see in the back of my head!"

Robert fell back on the pillow. Mrs. Boulby wiped her eyes. Her feelings were overwhelmed with mournful devotion to the passionate young man; and she expressed them practically: "A rump-steak would never digest in his poor stomach!"

He seemed to be of that opinion too, for when, after lying till eleven, he rose and appeared at the breakfast-table, he ate nothing but crumbs of dry bread. It was curious to see his precise attention to the neatness of his hat and coat, and the nervous eye he cast upon the clock, while brushing and accurately fixing these garments. The hat would not sit as he was accustomed to have it, owing to the bruise on his head, and he stood like a woman petulant with her milliner before the glass; now pressing the hat down till the pain was insufferable, and again trying whether it presented him acceptably in the enforced style of his wearing it. He persisted in this, till Mrs. Boulby's exclamation of wonder admonished him of the ideas received by other eyes than his own. When we appear most incongruous, we are often exposing the key to our characters; and how much his vanity, wounded by Rhoda, had to do with his proceedings down at Warbeach, it were unfair to measure just yet, lest his finer qualities be cast into shade, but to what degree it affected him will be seen.

Mrs. Boulby's persuasions induced him to take a stout silver-topped walking-stick of her husband's, a relic shaped from the wood of the Royal George; leaning upon which rather more like a Naval pensioner than he would have cared to know, he went forth to his appointment with the lady.

CHAPTER XX

The park-sward of Fairly, white with snow, rolled down in long sweeps to the salt water: and under the last sloping oak of the park there was a gorse-bushed lane, green in Summer, but now bearing cumbrous blossom--like burdens of the crisp snow-fall. Mrs. Lovell sat on horseback here, and alone, with her gauntleted hand at her waist, charmingly habited in tone with the landscape. She expected a cavalier, and did not perceive the approach of a pedestrian, but bowed quietly when Robert lifted his hat.

"They say you are mad. You see, I trust myself to you."

"I wish I could thank you for your kindness, madam."

"Are you ill?"

"I had a fall last night, madam."

The lady patted her horse's neck.

"I haven't time to inquire about it. You understand that I cannot give you more than a minute."

She glanced at her watch.

"Let us say five exactly. To begin: I can't affect to be ignorant of the business which brings you down here. I won't pretend to lecture you about the course you have taken; but, let me distinctly assure you, that the gentleman you have chosen to attack in this extraordinary manner, has done no wrong to you or to any one. It is, therefore, disgracefully unjust to single him out. You know he cannot possibly fight you. I speak plainly."

"Yes, madam," said Robert. "I'll answer plainly. He can't fight a man like me. I know it. I bear him no ill-will. I believe he's innocent enough in this matter, as far as acts go."

"That makes your behaviour to him worse!"

Robert looked up into her eyes.

"You are a lady. You won't be shocked at what I tell you."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Lovell, hastily: "I have learnt--I am aware of the tale. Some one has been injured or, you think so. I don't accuse you of madness, but, good heavens! what means have you been pursuing! Indeed, sir, let your feelings be as deeply engaged as possible, you have gone altogether the wrong way to work."

"Not if I have got your help by it, madam."

"Gallantly spoken."

She smiled with a simple grace. The next moment she consulted her watch.

"Time has gone faster than I anticipated. I must leave you. Let this be our stipulation"

She lowered her voice.

"You shall have the address you require. I will undertake to see her myself, when next I am in London. It will be soon. In return, sir, favour me with your word of honour not to molest this gentleman any further. Will you do that? You may trust me."

"I do, madam, with all my soul!" said Robert.

"That's sufficient. I ask no more. Good morning."

Her parting bow remained with him like a vision. Her voice was like the tinkling of harp-strings about his ears. The colour of her riding-habit this day, harmonious with the snow-faced earth, as well as the gentle mission she had taken upon herself, strengthened his vivid fancy in blessing her as something quite divine.

He thought for the first time in his life bitterly of the great fortune which fell to gentlemen in meeting and holding equal converse with so adorable a creature; and he thought of Rhoda as being harshly earthly; repulsive in her coldness as that black belt of water contrasted against the snow on the shores.

He walked some paces in the track of Mrs. Lovell's horse, till his doing so seemed too presumptuous, though to turn the other way and retrace his steps was downright hateful: and he stood apparently in profound contemplation of a ship of war and the trees of the forest behind the masts. Either the fatigue of standing, or emotion, caused his head to throb, so that he heard nothing, not even men's laughter; but looking up suddenly, he beheld, as in a picture, Mrs. Lovell with some gentlemen walking their horses toward him. The lady gazed softly over his head, letting her eyes drop a quiet recognition in passing; one or two of the younger gentlemen stared mockingly.

Edward Blancove was by Mrs. Lovell's side. His eyes fixed upon Robert with steady scrutiny, and Robert gave him a similar inspection, though not knowing why. It was like a child's open look, and he was feeling childish, as if his brain had ceased to act. One of the older gentlemen, with a military aspect, squared his shoulders, and touching an end of his moustache, said, half challengingly,--

"You are dismounted to-day?"

"I have only one horse," Robert simply replied.

Algernon Blancove came last. He neither spoke nor looked at his enemy, but warily clutched his whip. All went by, riding into line some paces distant; and again they laughed as they bent forward to the lady, shouting.

"Odd, to have out the horses on a day like this," Robert thought, and resumed his musing as before. The lady's track now led him homeward, for he had no will of his own. Rounding the lane, he was surprised to see Mrs. Boulby by the hedge. She bobbed like a beggar woman, with a rueful face.

"My dear," she said, in apology for her presence, "I shouldn't ha' interfered, if there was fair play. I'm Englishwoman enough for that. I'd have stood by, as if you was a stranger. Gentlemen always give fair play before a woman. That's why I come, lest this appointment should ha' proved a pitfall to you. Now you'll come home, won't you; and forgive me?"

"I'll come to the old Pilot now, mother," said Robert, pressing her hand.

"That's right; and ain't angry with me for following of you?"

"Follow your own game, mother."

"I did, Robert; and nice and vexed I am, if I'm correct in what I heard say, as that lady and her folk passed, never heeding an old woman's ears. They made a bet of you, dear, they did."

"I hope the lady won," said Robert, scarce hearing.

"And it was she who won, dear. She was to get you to meet her, and give up, and be beaten like, as far as I could understand their chatter; gentlefolks laugh so when they talk; and they can afford to laugh, for they has the best of it. But I'm vexed; just as if I'd felt big and had burst. I want you to be peaceful, of course I do; but I don't like my boy made a bet of."

"Oh, tush, mother," said Robert impatiently.

"I heard 'em, my dear; and complimenting the lady they was, as they passed me. If it vexes you my thinking it, I won't, dear; I reelly won't. I see it lowers you, for there you are at your hat again. It is

lowering, to be made a bet of. I've that spirit, that if you was well and sound, I'd rather have you fighting 'em. She's a pleasant enough lady to look at, not a doubt; small-boned, and slim, and fair."

Robert asked which way they had gone.

"Back to the stables, my dear; I heard 'em say so, because one gentleman said that the spectacle was over, and the lady had gained the day; and the snow was balling in the horses' feet; and go they'd better, before my lord saw them out. And another said, you were a wild man she'd tamed; and they said, you ought to wear a collar, with Mrs. Lovell's, her name, graved on it. But don't you be vexed; you may guess they're not my Robert's friends. And, I do assure you, Robert, your hat's neat, if you'd only let it be comfortable: such fidgeting worries the brim. You're best in appearance--and I always said it--when stripped for boxing. Hats are gentlemen's things, and becomes them like as if a title to their heads; though you'd bear being Sir Robert, that you would; and for that matter, your hat is agreeable to behold, and not like the run of our Sunday hats; only you don't seem easy in it. Oh, oh! my tongue's a yard too long. It's the poor head aching, and me to forget it. It's because you never will act invalidly; and I remember how handsome you were one day in the field behind our house, when you boxed a wager with Simon Billet, the waterman; and you was made a bet of then, for my husband betted on you; and that's what made me think of comparisons of you out of your hat and you in it."

Thus did Mrs. Boulby chatter along the way. There was an eminence a little out of the road, overlooking the Fairly stables. Robert left her and went to this point, from whence he beheld the horsemen with the grooms at the horses' heads.

"Thank God, I've only been a fool for five minutes!" he summed up his sensations at the sight. He shut his eyes, praying with all his might never to meet Mrs. Lovell more. It was impossible for him to combat the suggestion that she had befooled him; yet his chivalrous faith in women led him to believe, that as she knew Dahlia's history, she would certainly do her best for the poor girl, and keep her word to him. The throbbing of his head stopped all further thought. It had become violent. He tried to gather his ideas, but the effort was like that of a light dreamer to catch the sequence of a dream, when blackness follows close up, devouring all that is said and done. In despair, he thought with kindness of Mrs. Boulby's brandy.

"Mother," he said, rejoining her, "I've got a notion brandy can't hurt a

man when he's in bed. I'll go to bed, and you shall brew me some; and you'll let no one come nigh me; and if I talk light-headed, it's blank paper and scribble, mind that."

The widow promised devoutly to obey all his directions; but he had begun to talk light-headed before he was undressed. He called on the name of a Major Waring, of whom Mrs. Boulby had heard him speak tenderly as a gentleman not ashamed to be his friend; first reproaching him for not being by, and then by the name of Percy, calling to him endearingly, and reproaching himself for not having written to him.

"Two to one, and in the dark!" he kept moaning "and I one to twenty, Percy, all in broad day. Was it fair, I ask?"

Robert's outcries became anything but "blank paper and scribble" to the widow, when he mentioned Nic Sedgett's name, and said: "Look over his right temple he's got my mark a second time."

Hanging by his bedside, Mrs. Boulby strung together, bit by bit, the history of that base midnight attack, which had sent her glorious boy bleeding to her. Nic Sedgett; she could understand, was the accomplice of one of the Fairly gentlemen; but of which one, she could not discover, and consequently set him down as Mr. Algernon Blancove.

By diligent inquiry, she heard that Algernon had been seen in company with the infamous Nic, and likewise that the countenance of Nicodemus was reduced to accept the consolation of a poultice, which was confirmation sufficient. By nightfall Robert was in the doctor's hands, unconscious of Mrs. Boulby's breach of agreement. His father and his aunt were informed of his condition, and prepared, both of them, to bow their heads to the close of an ungodly career. It was known over Warbeach, that Robert lay in danger, and believed that he was dying.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

A fleet of South-westerly rainclouds had been met in mid-sky
Borrower to be dancing on Fortune's tight-rope above the old abyss
Childish faith in the beneficence of the unseen Powers who feed us
Dead Britons are all Britons, but live Britons are not quite brothers
He had no recollection of having ever dined without drinking wine
He tried to gather his ideas, but the effort was like that of a light dreamer

Land and beasts! They sound like blessed things
My first girl--she's brought disgrace on this house
Then, if you will not tell me
To be a really popular hero anywhere in Britain (must be a drinker)
You're a rank, right-down widow, and no mistake

Add yourself as a volunteer or giver, to promote the growing and diffusion of
[Biblioteca Virtual Universal](http://www.biblioteca.org.ar). www.biblioteca.org.ar

If you take notice of any kind of mistake, or you want to make any suggestion
please visit our link www.biblioteca.org.ar/comentario

