

THE
CROOKED FURROW

JEFFERY FARNOL

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THE
CROOKED FURROW

BY
JEFFERY FARNOL

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To
RONALD OAKESHOTT

A BROTHER OF THE PEN AND OF CHOICE
THIS ROMANCE IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED
BY JACK

Sussex, 1937 JEFFERY FARNOL

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The Crooked Furrow

CHAPTER I

A ROLAND FOR AN OLIVER

It was as Oliver swung his plough-horses to make the difficult turn at the end of the Five Acre that he espied his henchman, Sam, approaching.

“Gotten a letter for ee I ’ave, zur.”

“Oh?” said Oliver, busy with his team. “A letter?”

“Ar! In me ’at it be,” answered Sam, surveying the long, new-turned furrows with the keenly appraising eye of long experience.

“Pretty straight, eh, Sam?” enquired his young master a little anxiously, quick to note this so critical scrutiny.

“As—arrers, zur! As so many arrers! There beant no man in arl Sussex nor not nowheres else wot never druv no straighter furrer.”

“Except yourself, Sam.”

“Why, zur,” quoth Sam, his sunburnt, good-natured face beaming, “I were born wi’ a nat’ral turn for a plough, cut me teeth on a coulter, as you might say, an’ tes growed on me wi’ the years. But you, Must’ Oliver, considerin’ as you ’adn’t never ’andled no plough till I larned ee—”

“You think I may have a chance in the match then, Sam?”

“Zur, me an’ Silas an’ Joel be a-layin’ fif-teen shillin’ on ee! Fif-teen shillin’, Must’ Oliver, that’s wot,—an’ a mort o’ money it be!”

“Lord, Sam! And quite too much to risk.”

“Ay, it do be a tidy sum, sure-ly!”

“And suppose I lose? I’ve never ploughed in a match before, remember.”

Here Sam, finding no answer, lifted weather-beaten old hat to scratch his grizzled poll and—down tumbled the forgotten letter.

“Well—dannel me!” he exclaimed and stooping, gave it to Oliver, who beholding the superscription, whistled, opened his grey eyes wider than usual and ruffled his crisp, yellow hair; then he broke the seal, unfolded the letter and read this:

“DEAR NEPHEW OLIVER,—On receipt of this you will pack and prepare for what may be a protracted journey. Choose your best horse and come to me here this day at three o’clock precisely,

when I will further instruct you. Be punctual and fail not for your own sake.

“Pray know me for

“Your very dutiful uncle to obey,

“EVERARD MATRAVERS.”

Having read this epistle twice, Oliver whistled again, and, looking at the watchful Sam rather woefully, shook his yellow head.

“Well, Sam, I shan’t be ploughing in the match to-morrow,” he sighed. “So at least your money will be safe.”

“Eh—not plough, zur? Lordy-lord! And whyfore not, zur, if I may ax.”

“This letter from my uncle.”

“Wot—Sir Everard, zur?”

“And he is for sending me on some journey or other.”

“Why then dannel arl, I sez! An’ wot o’ your farm, Must’ Oliver, wot o’ Daplemere?”

“You must take charge again, Sam, you and your Mary. After all, it was yourself with Silas and Joel have made my Daplemere all that it is, and—” He stopped suddenly and narrowed his keen eyes as over an adjacent hedge a horseman came bounding, a slim, very shapely young exquisite, supremely elegant from spurred heels to jaunty hat, and mounted upon steed of such fire and high breeding that, having cleared the hedge with a somewhat contemptuous ease, this excessively proud animal reared haughtily and, spurning the newly-turned furrows beneath scornful hoofs, snorted disdainfully.

“So—there you are, Oliver!” cried this rider, with look and in tone contemptuous almost as his horse.

“Yes,” answered Oliver, squaring his wide shoulders, “as you say, Cousin Roland, here I am.”

“I was informed,” said Roland, sitting his fretful steed with graceful ease, “a buxom body, though rather long in the tooth, assured me—”

“Can you mean my housekeeper, Mrs. Purdy?”

“Probably. However, she told me I should find ‘young master a ploughing,’ and egad—there you are, Noll,—precisely where you should be. Your natural place is a furrow, your weapon a plough.”

“A plough,—yes!” nodded Oliver, frowning up into his cousin’s handsome, mocking face. “A plough is far better tool than your damned swords and muskets.”

“And ploughing a very gentlemanly diversion, eh, Noll?”

“No, it’s a man’s work and cleaner business than cutting throats, Roland. Humanity itself is of and by the plough! All man was, all he is and all he has comes by the plough.”

“And you, my noble Noll and virtuous varlet, should be the perfect ploughman and are—so far as looks go. Nice and muddy! Plenty of sweat! Boots and gaiters—and a smock!”

“Well,” retorted Oliver, dwelling upon the word and scowling contemptuous on his elegant cousin’s foppish person, “w-e-ll, I’d rather grow a turnip than slaughter an enemy.”

“To-be-sure!” drawled Roland. “It is somewhat less hazardous.”

Oliver’s youthful cheek flushed hotly, his grey, wide-set eyes flared, then—reading gleeful triumph in his cousin’s sneering smile, he shut grim lips on the fierce rejoinder and leaning against the ploughshaft, folded his powerful arms and contrived to smile also.

“Roly-poly,” said he, using the silly, boyish nick-name that in their more youthful days had always bred strife instant and bitter, “you always had a miss’s shrewish tongue, even as a little damp-nosed lad—”

“Ha,—but a masculine fist to back it, Mister Cloddish Ploughman!”

“Ah, those were the days!” sighed Oliver, shaking his curly head. “However, now that I am indeed a ploughman, and proud of it, you are to know that, standing here in the mud of my own furrow, I am content.”

“Content—yes, of course, certainly and most naturally,” drawled Roland, surveying his stalwart cousin from miry boots and gaiters to sweat-pearled brow, “you are, so very emphatically, a thing of the mud, Mr. Oafish Chawbackon!”

“But also, so are you, Mr. Arrogant Donothing, for mud is our common mother, good Mother Earth. All that is best and truly good comes up out of the soil! Remember this, my poor, benighted lad and don’t, in your woeful ignorance, scorn the good mud whence you and the rest of us came and that shall cradle us till the judgment.”

“Well now ’pon m’ soul,” exclaimed Roland, forgetting to smile and urging his mettlesome prancer a little nearer, “I find you more smugly kickable than ever you were.”

“And you, as I remember, Roly, were always such a very ready kicker.”

“And am yet!” nodded Roland, freeing slim, polished riding-boot from the stirrup.

“No, Roly—no!” sighed Oliver. “Such superlative fine gentleman shouldn’t soil such boots on mere ploughman.”

“It will be a joy!” said Roland, between curling lips.

“I know, Roly, I know. But when I’m kicked I prefer my kicker to be a real man, say a ploughing cove who works for his living as all men should,—not a gentlemanly idler in a red jacket, a swaggering, peace-time warrior —”

“Da-damnation!” cried Roland, in choking voice, “will you . . . actually . . . dare contemn my noble profession . . .?”

“Heartily,—as you do mine.”

“Ha—this,” gasped Roland, making to dismount, “this passes all endurance! Hi, you fellow . . . come and hold my horse!”

“Sam,” quoth his master, “you may go,—off with you.”

And thus, Son of the Sword and Son of the Plough, they scowled on each other while Sam, this grey-headed Son of the Soil, glanced shrewdly from the slender, arrogant beauty of black-haired Roland, all fire and high mettle like his horse, to the serene might and more rugged power of grey-eyed, comely Oliver, then, baring grizzled head to the one he touched shaggy eyebrow to the other and trudged heavily away.

“If only,” cried Roland, battling with his restive horse that, startled by his rider’s fierce voice and gestures, was capering and snorting again, “if only this . . . dev’lish brute would . . . stand—”

“We should probably half kill each other,” added Oliver, “so let’s be thankful he won’t. Though why it is we always rouse the devil in each other —”

“Because you . . . are Oliver and I’m . . . Roland! Because it’s our nature . . . we’ve hated each other since we were born!”

“And I wonder why?” mused Oliver. “And now remembering this, I can’t imagine what in the world brings you so far from your beloved London and, of all places,—here?”

“Because,” answered Roland, so soon as he had quieted his fretful animal sufficiently, “I happened to pass on my way to Abbeymead.”

“What then, have you been summoned too?”

“I have, for three o’clock, and I’m wondering what His Uncleship can want with me this time . . . debts and so forth as usual, I suppose, confound him—”

“Three o’clock!” exclaimed Oliver. “God love me! I’d clean forgotten. I must get ready—”

“Aha! So his Superlative Arrogance has commanded you also, eh? Well then, my virtuous Noll, why not go as you are,—honest ploughman fresh from furrow all soil and sweat?”

Deigning no answer, Oliver unhitched his plough-horses and began to lead them stablewards.

“Tell me,” demanded Roland, pacing beside him, “have you the least idea why Uncle Everard has called us so dashed unexpectedly?”

“Not the least. Have you?”

“No, confound him again! To be sure I’m a trifle dipped . . . but he’s such a dashed formidable, cold fish . . . icily serene and remote as an infernal iceberg and as hard and sympathetic, give him an aitch and there you have him to the life. Ever-Hard! I tell you, Noll, if we weren’t so dependent on his dashed bounty—”

“But we’re not, thanks to our mothers. You have two hundred a year in your own right and I have my farm here, thank God!”

“Two hundred a year!” snarled Roland so fiercely that his horse capered again instantly. “How the devil can a fellow contrive on such a cursed incompetence, such dashed pitiful pittance?”

“Very easily, I think—”

“But then you think like a lumpish ploughman—”

“And you like an improvident fool!”

“Damme, but I’m minded to lay my whip to your oaf-like carcass!”

“Try—and I’ll throw you over the hedge!”

Here, once again, they scowled and glared on each other and spoke no more until they reached the farmhouse.

A smallish, trim, well-tended place this homestead, a snug and cosy place, with its deep-thatched roof and bright lattices, and all the prettier and more homelike by reason of the bright-eyed, comely, motherly dame who, in snowy apron and dainty mob-cap, was shelling peas, and with remarkable dexterity, beside the open doorway, but who now rose to greet them with smiling curtsey.

“Mrs. Purdy, this is my cousin, Mr. Roland Verinder. You might draw him a jug of your home brew if he cares to wait.”

“’Deed and I will, Master Oliver, or a glass o’ my cowslip wine, sir,—they do all say tes better than ever this year, Mr. Verinder.”

“Your wine, pray, Mrs. Purdy,” he answered, with smiling bow, thereby winning the motherly heart of her.

So, Sam and Joel having led away the horses, the cousins entered a roomy, stone-flagged kitchen where peace reigned and everything very orderly and bright, from the great, brass jack at wide hearth where a fire glowed, the rows of shining pewter and twinkling china on shelf above, to the very mats upon the floor.

And when Oliver had vanished to array himself for the cold, avuncular eye, as more befitted his station, Roland, gracefully asprawl on high-backed settle, sipped of the cowslip wine with due gusto and held familiar converse with Mrs. Purdy as she bustled softly to and fro busied on her many household concerns.

“Things seem very prosperous here, Mrs. Purdy, very cosily homelike.”

“Lord bless ee, sir, I be proud and glad ee do think so,” said she, dimpling. “For here was Sam and me and Silas and Joel a-working and a-working year after year for to make the place a real home fit and worthy for our young Master Oliver when home he should come from that Oxford Vertisey.”

“Then I hope he’s sufficiently grateful?”

“That he be, sir, so grateful and so proud o’ the place, so free and joyful-hearted as we can’t nowise do enough for him, bless him!”

“One might almost imagine,” said Roland, glancing at the solid, homely comfort about him, “that you almost—loved the fellow.”

“Meaning Master Oliver? Oh we do, sir, we do indeed, every one of us do.”

“I wonder why?”

“Well, sir, I think ’tes because he be ever and always so kind and gentle like.”

“Is he though!” muttered Roland. At this moment the subject of their talk was heard roaring cheerily from window above for someone to saddle “old Dobbin”; whereupon, from yard without, a voice roared as cheerily in answer:

“Ay, ay, Must’ Oliver!”

And presently, with light quick tread of spurred feet, appeared Oliver himself, transformed from brawny ploughman to young gentleman sufficiently slim by reason of varnished riding-boots, skin-tight buckskins, and bottle-green coat that moulded the shape of him from broad shoulders to slender waist.

“How am I, Mary?” he enquired, glancing down at himself. “Shall I do?”

“Oh—lovely, Master Oliver! ’Cepting for your cravat.”

“Ah yes, I never can manage the ridiculous things. Pray tie it for me.” So, while he bent to her, Mrs. Purdy performed this intricate business with quick, deft hands that seemed almost as they would have caressed him also; during which, Oliver’s grey eyes chancing to meet his cousin’s dark glance, saw for once none of the expected mockery there, nor was it in his voice when he spoke:

“Mrs. Purdy, I fancy you must be aware that your Mr. Oliver never knew his mother, she died too young . . . so did mine, for that matter.”

“Oh yes, sir,” answered Mrs. Purdy, “my Sam telled me . . . and two poor, motherless lambs you must ha’ been! Ah, and so lonesome, poor mites!”

“Yes,” mused Roland, “it never occurred to me before, but I suspect we were . . . lonesome—”

At this moment in through the open lattice came Sam’s tanned visage to announce their horses were ready.

So, bidding good-bye to Mrs. Purdy, the cousins went forth into the afternoon sunshine and mounting, rode away together to this so fateful interview that was to change them and alter their lives so strangely.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCES AN UNCLE

A PERSON of many physical contradictions was Sir Everard Matravers, for, though his hair was snow white, he bore himself proudly erect and, despite a certain weary languor, his every motion betrayed a latent strength and vigour; moreover, these abundant silvery locks, that should have aged him, served, in contrast with his thick black brows, only to enhance the look of power and inflexible resolution stamped by experience upon his leanly aquiline features; lastly and notably, his eyes, darkly bright beneath droop of long-lashed, sleepy lids, though sombre with a wistful melancholy, were vitally keen and, flashing suddenly wide, could show fierce and remorseless as the mobile, too-sensitive mouth.

Thought Oliver, looking at these eyes: "Have I truly seen there an ageless grief that goes beyond expression, or was it always my fancy?"

Thought Roland, looking at this mouth: "Damme, but I'm in for it again! Well, curse all uncles!"

But just at present the eyes in question were (or seemed) at their sleepest, this mouth, even as Roland watched, was curving to faint smile as, leaning back in his deep, elbow-chair Sir Everard glanced from one to other of his two nephews to whom this luxurious chamber seemed uncommonly oppressive as they waited somewhat apprehensively for their stately relative to address them.

He did so at last and in his usual gentle, deliberate manner:

"Considering you are first cousins and sons of my twin sisters, you are strangely dissimilar and seem to be growing even more so with the years."

"Thank God!" murmured Roland, softly though fervently.

"You each," continued Sir Everard, ignoring the interruption, "take after the father you never knew—"

"Then, sir, may I venture to suggest—"

"Nothing, Roland! Until you have my permission, favour me with your silence. Ever since you were both left doubly orphaned, helpless infants to my care, for your two young mothers died of grief—"

"How, sir . . . of . . . grief?"

"Indeed, Oliver. Or shall I say . . . of broken hearts?"

“Sir . . . sir,” gasped Oliver. “You never told me of this—”

“The time was not ripe, nephew. . . . However, since then, I have made your upbringing my peculiar and unceasing care, and thus, standing *in loco parentis*, have striven to perform a parent’s duties to you both—”

“And I, at least, am eternally grateful, sir!” said Roland, very heartily.

“From the first,” continued Sir Everard, placidly unheeding, “from the very first you have both contrived to make of yourselves anything but a sinecure, for, even as children you quarrelled, as boys you were continually fighting, and to-day I fear this antagonism still persists.”

“A Roland for his Oliver, sir!” murmured Roland.

“And your father’s words, Roland, when he named you!” nodded Sir Everard, frowning slightly. “Thus it was that I sent you to different schools and universities. Yet to-day this unreasoning ill-will you bear for each other is so manifest as greatly to perplex me. I am concerned to know if this senseless . . . animus, I will not call it hate . . . be real or no, a matter of heredity . . . a black curse transmitted in your blood. For, though your fathers indeed were deadly enemies, I would end the feud by any means possible if only for your dead mothers’ sakes who loved each other dearly, as do most twins, I believe. You, Oliver, descend on your father’s side, through a sturdy yeoman ancestry, your great-grandfather was a cornet in Oliver Cromwell’s famous Ironsides. You, Roland, were sired by an aristocrat of proud and ancient lineage and himself a wild—” The speaker’s shapely lips, so very like Roland’s own, shut down on the word and he shook stately head, saying: “He is dead these twenty odd years and the dark folly of him should be forgotten . . . but your great-grandfather, Roland, died for his King on Marston Moor—”

“Now all honour to him!” said Roland, his dark, long-lashed eyes a gleam.

“This,” continued Sir Everard even more deliberately as he glanced from Roland’s darkly handsome features to Oliver’s grey-eyed Saxon might, “this may perhaps explain your . . . mutual antipathy . . . and the further . . . dreadful fact that your fathers . . . killed each other—”

“Good . . . God!” whispered Roland, in breathless, shaken accents, while Oliver, sinking back in his chair, leaned thus a while, dumb and motionless.

“Killed . . . each other?” gasped Roland. “You mean . . . a duel?”

“Of course, boy!”

“But how is it,” cried Roland rather wildly. “Sir, why have we never heard of this until now? All these years and no word, no hint, no least whisper.”

“This is easily explained—”

“Then, uncle, pray do so—”

“And why,” said Oliver hoarsely, “why . . . did they . . . fight . . . to death?”

Sir Everard, always his stately self, glanced from one horrified young face to the other with the serene, coldly-dispassionate interest of one utterly immune, an Olympian high above all mere human emotion and weakness, and setting his long, white fingers together and these beneath his square chin, he continued in his pleasant, tranquil voice, much as though discussing the weather:

“Your two fathers, always bitterly opposed, were, by a trick of quirkish fortune, neighbours with estates adjoining. They quarrelled over a miserable right of way, and by this and for this, ruined each other with protracted litigation. Crippled thus in their resources your parents, Roland, went to live on a property I owned in the South of France. But your two mothers so yearned and pined for each other, they were twins remember, that some time later your parents, Oliver, migrated to France also. There, though your mothers were often together, your two fathers contrived to avoid each other for a time. But at last, upon a fatal day, meeting quite by chance, the quarrel flared more fiercely than ever, blows were struck . . . and in that same hour, with no witness except one devoted servant, was fought this most irregular and desperate duel that made each of you twice orphans and myself your guardian. For, as I have said, your mothers, my twin sisters, died of shock and grief.”

The pleasant, murmurous voice hushed and for a long moment was an unnatural stillness, a rather dreadful quiet; then, leaping afoot, Roland crossed to the window and stood there gazing across the wide, sunny park, while Oliver, still motionless in his chair, surveyed his uncle’s handsome, placid face in troublous speculation.

“And why, sir,” he enquired suddenly, “why do you tell us this ghastly news to-day?”

“Because from to-day, being men grown, you shall begin to prove to me precisely what sorts of men you are, your weaknesses and strengths, the good and evil of you, your powers and capacities physical and mental.”

“As how, sir, pray?”

“It was to tell you this that I summoned you here together. Roland, favour me by returning to your chair.”

Back came Roland, very grim and stern, to seat himself obediently and with no word.

“And now,” quoth Sir Everard after a moment of tense silence, “now, with your kind and patient attention, I will explain my purposes in regard to your several futures. You, Oliver, are twenty-four and five months, and at present amusing your leisure with the little farm I have held in trust for you from your mother. You, Roland, are twenty-four and two months, and with the small annuity from your father’s ruined estate and a further allowance from myself, hold a commission in the Guards, have seen service in the Peninsula and at Waterloo, are a member of several famous clubs and are, I believe, quite a dashing fellow. . . . Well, Oliver, from to-day you will give up your farming and you, Roland, will relinquish your commission—”

“Eh, sir . . . what, sir . . . what—” stammered Roland, starting up from his chair again. “Relinquish my— Great Jupiter! Uncle, you can never mean —”

“Precisely what I say, nephew! Pray be seated! And restrain your sudden ardours, I beg. . . . You are both, of course, aware that I possess much, indeed a great deal too much, of this world’s material goods, for, though great wealth is power in this poor, benighted sphere, it nevertheless bears with it heavy responsibilities, or should do. Now here, nephews, is my problem! To whom shall I leave this tremendous and dangerous power? How shall I dispose of this terrible wealth that, used rightly or wrongly, may prove a general blessing or pervading curse?”

Here again Sir Everard paused to glance keenly from one intent young face to another ere he continued:

“You have, both of you, hitherto regarded yourselves as my heirs, and with reason, since my only son Eustace is dead, and thus I might leave this vast responsibility to one of you, or both, or neither. Knowing this, I am glad to remember that you have never fawned upon or truckled to me, and for this I respect you. At the same time you have never, either of you, evinced the least spark of affection for me, not that I ever looked for or expected such,—none the less I am sufficiently curious to know why this has been so conspicuously lacking. Oliver, perhaps you will attempt me some explanation of this?”

“I think, sir, it is because, as you have said, you never looked for it. I dare to say that . . . had you only troubled yourself to do so, or . . . or even shown yourself at all . . . well, that way inclined, then sir, I’m pretty sure two desolate children might have truly . . . loved you, sir.”

“Ah?” murmured Sir Everard, musingly. “Well . . . and what say you, Roland?”

“Sir, I say it is because you are such a very particularly dashed difficult uncle . . . altogether too stately and remote, y’know! Too proudly, coldly aloof and so forth for any poor, dashed, ordinary nephew to dare entertain any warmer feelings for you than a profound and confoundedly awful respect, sir.”

Sir Everard’s keen eyes veiled themselves beneath sleepy lids, his shapely mouth twitched, became grim, twitched again and, leaning back in his chair, he laughed softly.

“So, nephews both, you prove me a ‘difficult’ uncle?”

“I have, sir, and I do—to my sorrow!” answered Roland.

“And . . . my regret!” added Sir Everard, suddenly grave. “Yes, indeed . . . my deep regret. I should have matched my acts with words, I see. And this but goes to prove that kind-sounding phrases, no matter how fulsome and insincere being mere breath, shall win more affection than good works performed as matter of course. Yes, yes—mere words of empty endearment oft uttered shall earn more gratitude than the most faithful, constant service that is dumb! So in its crass blindness wags the world.”

“Pray, Uncle, believe that you have my deepest gratitude,” cried Roland.

“And mine, sir!” said Oliver.

Sir Everard smiled faintly and shook his head.

“Why mention it?” he sighed. “But, since you have, truth compels me to admit that what I have done for you in the past was purely for sakes of your two sweet mothers . . . my sisters who were cut off so cruelly, terribly young. On the other hand, all that I shall do for you henceforth is and will be for your own sakes, though I fear you will deem me a rather more awkward uncle than ever, because I am about to rid myself of you both for a season, making you masters of your own destinies—so far as may be. At least you shall choose your own courses,—up to manhood and honour by your own unaided strength and inherent goodness, or—down to ruin and damnation

because of your own lack of will or deliberate choice of evil. . . . Nephews, I am about to jettison you upon the world—”

“But . . . egad . . . Oh, sir, I . . . we—”

“Wait, Roland! Favour me with your silence until I am done,” said Sir Everard, opening a drawer of the desk before him. “Here are two purses, each containing the sum of fifty-two guineas, that is to say, one guinea per week.” And he laid the purses on the desk. “With this money you will essay Fortune and dare Circumstance for one year and one day. You will live where or how you will, though I suggest you were wiser to keep together awhile, making the most of your money and best of yourselves. At the end of the time stipulated you will return and give me a full accounting of your achievements—if any, of your triumphs, sufferings, and failures, or—merely disappear.”

“But . . . but, Uncle,” stammered Roland. “Oh, by all that’s decent and rational I . . . I protest, sir, I—”

“By your leave, Roland! Thus, nephews, which soever of you shall prove himself the better man and more worthy either in success—or failure, him will I make my heir. And now you have permission to speak.”

“Uncle!” cried Roland, leaping afoot. “Oh, dash it, sir, you confound me . . . the . . . the whole scheme is preposterous—”

“An ordeal, Roland.”

“We . . . we shall be beggars . . . destitute in a week. . . . Fifty-two pounds is sordid, a contemptible pittance.”

“You have frequently spent far more in a week, Roland, you will say, and I shall answer that I’m aware of it.”

“But, sir . . . a year—”

“And a day, Roland!”

“But how, sir, how . . . Great Jupiter, how is a fellow to live?”

“As do other fellows, nephew, by hands and brain, and you possess both—of a sort! Yet even these may become somewhat useful the more you employ them. Hard work never degraded anyone and never will.”

“And how, sir, how if enduring such dashed privation, I am stricken down with sickness?”

“You will, I sincerely hope, have your cousin Oliver to care for and tend your weakness.”

“Sir, I hardly think so! Thus suppose that owing to lack of ordinary nourishment I am sick—lonely and utterly destitute?”

“In this sad event you may, of course, appeal to me for relief, which shall be instant, though every such appeal will be confession of a weak ineptitude, and tell heavily against your chances.”

“In fine, sir,” demanded Roland, fronting his uncle with a desperate sort of resolution, “I, that am born and bred a gentleman, must slave or perish?”

“Precisely, Roland! And I remind you that you are not alone in this,—do not let Self blind you to the fact that Oliver slaves or perishes with you.”

“Oliver, sir? Why there it is! Oliver is predisposed to slavery! Oliver has no thought above a confounded plough and the mud of a dashed furrow, mine—soar—”

“Out of sight!” nodded Oliver; then, rising in turn and facing his uncle, “Sir,” said he, “since you deny me my farm and Roland his commission,—how shall we work?”

“Grim Circumstance shall teach you this, nephew. When your scant money is exhausted and you become sufficiently hungry you will either earn your food or steal it.”

“Sounds deuced bleak and unpleasant, sir! By heavens, Uncle, this is a very dev— You impose on us a cruelly hard test, sir.”

“Agreed, Roland. But hardship is a purging fire—”

“That may consume a man utterly, sir!”

“Certainly, Roland, if that man be dross! And so much the better. Now suffer your cousin speech. What say you, Oliver?”

“Nothing, Uncle Everard . . . except that being grateful for the past I’m hopeful of the future.”

“The sordid misery that extreme poverty must bring does not affright you then?”

“It will at least, sir, be an adventure into the unknown, thanks to your past care of us . . . and either way, win or lose, I shall be content.”

“Cockadoodledoo and snivelling cant!” exclaimed Roland. “Cringe and crawl and snuffle like your damned prick-eared, puritan ancestors, but you

love money as well as the worst of us, Mr. Meekly Righteous!”

“Stupid dolt!” retorted Oliver, “I make the best of things—”

“And I the worst, eh, Mr. Grovelling Servility?”

“And here,” quoth their uncle, rising to his commanding height, “our interview ends so far as I am concerned. Should you desire to pummel each other to better fellowship and understanding, do so by all means but—not here.”

“Uncle Everard,” cried Roland, in a sort of breathless desperation, “before I go about this preposterous business . . . this dashed test or trial, I demand . . . yes, sir, demand . . . how shall you know anything of the vile hardships, the brutal, sordid discomforts to which you are compelling me—us? You, sir, secure here in your rustical seclusion, lapped in luxury and wallowing in wealth,—what can you possibly know of suffering or misery or—”

“Misery . . .?” Sir Everard’s voice was unrecognizable, his features showed twisted and convulsed as by some fierce spasm terrible to see. “Misery?” he repeated. “I have plumbed such deeps as few wretched mortals have ever known . . . I have suffered such bitter griefs . . . so bitter—” he bowed his white head, covering distorted features with hands that seemed to clutch the face they hid; then, almost as suddenly, he was looking at them again, serene and stately as ever, only Oliver saw beneath his thick-curling, silvery hair a trickle of gleaming moisture.

“Nephews both,” he continued in his gentle, pleasant tones. “Ah, believe, I send you to endure no such bitter travail as I once endured. Go where you will, there shall meet you no such vile and grimly monster as I had once to encounter. No, it cannot be, thank God—or this poor Humanity would run mad and perish! And so,” sighed he, gesturing languidly with one white hand, “take your money, accept my fervent wishes for your welfare, and . . . Good-bye.”

So saying, and with no other glance or motion of farewell, Sir Everard Matravers turned and left them: and both of them, for the time being, at least, moved quite beyond speech.

CHAPTER III

GIVES SOME DESCRIPTION OF A VOICE AND ONE— DEBORAH

FORTH went they together, though with eyes averted from each other. Son of the Sword, proudly arrogant, Son of the Plough, grimly contemptuous,—out into the afternoon sunshine; both quick with eager youth but each still ominously silent, since for once Roland was dumb as the taciturn Oliver. But long before they reached the stables, Roland began to whistle cheerily and then to laugh and then to talk:

“Said I, as you’ll remember, to our ineffable hunks of a nunks,—‘Uncle Everard, sir, you are a confoundedly awkward uncle.’ By Jove and Jupiter I truckle to no man and no one shall muzzle me—”

“No?” enquired Oliver.

“No! By Heavens no! I, at least, dared speak my mind, or some of it, while you looked down your confounded nose and were mum as a poor dashed fish! ‘Lapped in luxury’ was one happy phrase I touched him up with you’ll please to remember! Ha, and ‘wallowing in wealth’ was another. Neat, by Jupiter Olympus, devilish neat and touched His High Mightiness on the raw! You noticed?”

“I noticed.”

“And why so cursed sullen about it? Is it a quarrel you’re after?”

“Not particularly. Just at present I’m merely pensive. I wonder at and am troubled for our uncle.”

“You mean of course troubled by him, Mr. Tom Fool.”

“Not so, Master Chucklehead Numps, I mean for him.”

“Then what the deuce are you driving at?”

“I’m wondering,” answered Oliver, glancing back at the great house, “what blasting sorrow . . . just what tremendous evil he can have known that he must sweat at the mere recollection?”

“Sweat, d’ye say? I saw nothing.”

“No,” sighed Oliver, “very young dogs are always blind.”

“What . . . what’s that?”

“I’m telling you that Uncle Everard was in a sweating agony.”

“Well, if he sweat, sweat he may, say I!”

“And there,” said Oliver, “there yapped a puppy!”

“What?” demanded Roland, confronting him with face convulsed with fury. “Say it again and be thrashed, you . . . you damned, dunghilly, yokelly yeoman.”

“A young, blind, lewd cur!” said Oliver, staring into his cousin’s blazing eyes. Roland stepped back and raised his heavy riding-whip, Oliver raised his own,—but at this moment a nobbly, battered old stick interposed itself between them, a quavering old voice arrested them:

“Not your w’ips, sirs. Oh, gen’lemen. . . . Must’ Oliver, Must’ Roly sir, not your w’ips, it beant Johnny Bull. Wot ’ave the good Lord give ee fist-es for? You knowed why well enough in th’ old days, ah and used ’em frequent when you was li’l toddlers not much ’igher than my top-boot. An’ praper li’l sportsmen you was, so werry bold an’ determinated, using your li’l fist-es on one another so ’earty an’ free it done a man’s ’eart good for to see. So, sirs, if you must be at it still, then for ’oly ’eaven’s sake use your fist-es like proper English gen’lemen should ought . . . be Johnny Bull an’ drop them murdersome w’ips, come now.”

Roland turned on the aged speaker and glared; Oliver turned and smiled, but it was Roland’s hand that clapped the bowed, old shoulder, Roland’s vigorous arm that embraced his hoary feebleness; this rosy, wrinkled ancient, very smart as to breeches, gaiters and boots and remarkably bright of eye.

“What, Ned, Old Ned, it does my heart good to see you,” cried Roland, “and a power of good to see you still about the place.”

“Ay, ’ere I be, Must’ Roly, sir, eighty an’ one years b’y au’ man, sound and ’earty. And ’ere I’ll be till it’s boot an’ saddle for the last journey, thanks to S’Everard, Lord love him for a gen’leman as don’t never nowise forget no one nor nothing.”

“Yours, Ned, has been a long and faithful service,” said Oliver, “’Twas you set us across our first ponies. Mine was a dapple-grey.”

“And mine a chestnut,” said Roland. “Lord! it seems ages ago, but I remember you coming a cropper into a furze-bush, Oliver, and squealing like a stuck pig. D’ye ride any better now?”

“Hush, young maisters, hushee!” cried hoary Ned with the authority of years, affection and long service, “’Ark, sirs! Ay, yon comes ‘Wildfire’ wi’

Must' Gregor!"

"Eh?" cried Roland. "Old Greg? Are you sure, Ned?"

"Sarten sure, sir! I knows the beat o' they hoofses ever since they was foaled."

"Aha,—it's Greg, sure enough!" nodded Roland. "Always rides like a devil, always did!"

"But never no whip nor spurs, Mr. Roly, sir! . . . Give ee back a bit, young gen'lemen!"

Into the wide stableyard swung a dusty horseman who swerved, reined his lathered animal to clattering, sliding halt and meeting the old groom's reproachful eye, nodded, sighed and spoke:

"Ay, Neddie man, Wildfire's a wee blown, ye'll be noticing, but no muckle fashed whateffer," having said which, Mr. Gregor McGregor,—their stately uncle's one friend, confidant and man of business—looked down on the cousins, shaking some of the dust from his lank person.

Gregor McGregor was tall, he was bony, his long, melancholy visage, dark with Celtic gloom and the past woes and sorrows of his tragic clan, showed grim and hard as his native crags; but his eyes,—surely never were two such arrant traitors as these grey-blue, deep-set, twinkling, dancing, kindly eyes that, just at present, seemed to be laughing his saturnine grimness quite out of countenance.

"Ha, Greg, old sportsman!" cried Roland, grasping his right hand.

"It's good to see you, Gregor!" said Oliver, clasping his left. So they stood smiling at this their boyhood's hero and comrade, this their bold intercessor with their formidable uncle,—who thus sat his foam-spattered animal woeful of visage but looking down at and loving them with his eyes; yet all he said in answer to their glad welcome was:

"Aweel, I'm ower late, then?"

"Yes!" answered Oliver.

"You are!" cried Roland. "Where the devil were you? Had you been present things might have been easier,—as it is, damme, we're done, Greg, turned adrift, outcast, jettisoned and—so on."

"Ma puir bairns, ye fair wring ma heart! I did ma best for ye wi' Everard—five hundred, twa-feefty, but a hundred was a' he'd agree."

“A hundred?” exclaimed Roland. “Then, by Jupiter, here’s some confounded error, he named a mere, dashed, beggarly fifty,—this must be amended at once.”

“Na, na, laddie! Feefty apiece is the hundred I’m meaning, and though tis no juist a fortune it should sairve ye,—wi’ economy!”

“It’s an infernal iniquity, Greg, and you know it!”

“Na, laddie, I wadna’ exactly be naming it so,—wheesht!” said he, and loosing their hands he dismounted very nimbly, and taking an arm of each, walked them across the yard.

“Look now, boys,” said he, becoming very English. “I am sensible these altered conditions may cause you some little unpleasantness at first and possible hardship,—adversity’s fire to try you out. For, my dears both, Everard, being the recluse circumstances have made him, is suddenly aware that he knows very little of your real selves and hence imposes this test to learn and prove you fully as may be.”

“Then, damme, but he should have known us!” cried Roland, petulantly “he has positively no excuse for not knowing us,—me, at least.”

“He has great and every excuse, Roland! Indeed your uncle’s life has been—anything but happy or uneventful. But, my dear boys, what I rode here so hard for was to tell you this,—should Adversity’s flame scorch too painfully. Well—now, as always, you may depend on me!”

“And that’s a dashed comfort, Greg!”

“And like you!” said Oliver.

“Also, my weans, I think ye ken I am in London for three days every month,—the toon hoosie. So gin ye should need help of any sort,—let me know.”

“Thanks, Gregory, thanks!” said Oliver, squeezing the lean, muscular arm he held, “You were always our ‘present help in time of trouble,’ the shield and comfort of two graceless urchins who often forgot even to thank you,—but one of them does so now, but, being no urchin, must of course refuse your proffered aid. God bless you!”

“Eh—refuse?” snarled Roland. “What the devil? Are you going to flourish your dam, your queasy squeamish virtue under my nose, Mr. Confounded Highsouled Piety? Suppose you were starving, how then—Mr. Smuggish Ploughman?”

“In that event, Mr. Unscrupulous Donothing Buck, I shall apply to Sir Everard as arranged.”

“Howandever,” said Gregor, patting each on the back, “take care o’ your pennies, don’t fight each other oftener than ye must and so—farewell, ma bonnie weans, God keep ye baith and teach ye tae ken each ither’s proper worth. Awa’ wi’ ye!”

So hands were shaken, hearty farewells spoken, the cousins mounted and rode away together through the warm stillness of this summer afternoon. But scarcely were they out upon the open road than Roland’s high-strung animal, as if in scorn of Oliver’s tamely plodding Dobbin, began to curvet and rear, to prance and sidle, to foam and snort till Oliver laughed, and Roland scowled, saying:

“Ha, confound you, ride man, ride! If you can’t prod that poor screw of yours to better pace, I’m off. . . .”

“Good!” nodded Oliver. “If you can’t hold that dancing flibbetijibbet of yours, off with you . . . good luck and good riddance.”

“Ha, want to be alone, eh, Mr. Sullen?”

“No, merely to be rid of you and your dust.”

“Then damme you shall!” And away went Roland at breakneck gallop until, suddenly changing his mind, he checked as suddenly, wheeled his rearing steed and came galloping back again.

“And why,” he demanded, so soon as his animal permitted him coherent speech, “what’s your game?”

“I prefer my own company.”

“Amazing!”

“Not under the circumstances.”

“What circumstances, pray?”

“Yourself and that four-legged teetotum you straddle.”

“If you’re pleased to allude to Highflier here, let me tell you, my lad, he’s by Cannon Ball out of Shuttlecock and—”

“Goes like a kangaroo!” nodded Oliver. “So touch him with your persuaders, Roly-poly,—hop him out of sight and leave me to ride in comfort.”

“Eh, ride is it?” sneered Roland, eyeing his cousin’s large-boned, steady-going animal, his bridle-hand and length of stirrup, each and all with lofty contempt. “Oliver, my poor, sorry clod, you ride with the fire and dash of a sack of potatoes! You’ve a seat like a family pew, and why you even attempt to ride a rhinoceros, only the Lord knows.”

“Better so, Roly-poly, than straddle something that’s little better than hoofs and a snort. However, our present concern should be—how are we going to live, where are we going and to what purpose?”

“To London, at least I am!” answered Roland. “To London, of course, where I shall instantly proceed to . . . ah . . . look about me.”

“For work?”

“Certainly not! Nothing so degrading! I shall negotiate for some gentlemanly employ, some dignified situation as may suit me.”

“And when your money’s all gone, Roly-poly, and you begin to starve, I’ll suggest you will suit yourself to any job that offers. As for me—”

“You!” exclaimed Roland, superbly scornful. “I suppose you’d do anything.”

“Almost!” nodded Oliver.

“Exactly!” sneered Roland. “Like the muddy, cloddish, dashed bumpkin you are.”

“Precisely, sir!” answered Oliver, reining up his horse. “And so fare you well. Will you ride forward or shall I?” Roland frowned, laughed and waved his hand airily.

“Good-bye, Ploughman!” he jeered.

“Noble gentleman, adieu!” retorted Oliver, hat in hand; whereupon his cousin flushed and, scowling blacker than ever, spurred his rearing Highflier to a furious gallop and shot off again in a whirling dust-cloud that had very soon rolled him out of sight.

Thus alone, Oliver jogged along at his usual sober gait, for, as hath been told, his horse, Dobbin, was a sedate and leisured animal while Oliver was one who seldom hurried for anything; moreover just at present his thoughts were still haunted by what he had learned so recently concerning the parents he had never known. So lost was he in these troubled musings, so utterly oblivious of all things external, that he would have passed a little, wayside inn quite unnoticed, but that he was roused by a whistling snort, and,

glancing up, beheld a tethered horse, in which foaming and capering animal he recognized his cousin's mettlesome Highflier. He was in the act of passing this lonely tavern when, with crash of glass, a quart pot came hurtling through the window with confused clamour of sudden, desperate strife.

So Oliver dismounted and peering cautiously in through the open doorway, beheld Roland backed strategically into a corner and there making play with his hunting-crop against the stick and bludgeon of two evil-looking assailants, saw Roland stagger and go down heavily; then, before their heavily-shod feet might kick and trample, Oliver was upon them, smiting heartily left and right with potent fist and flailing whip. Taken thus suddenly in their rear the enemy broke and fled amain, whereat breathless Oliver perched himself upon corner of the heavy oak table and gazed down on breathless Roland.

"And . . . who . . ." panted Roland, yet recumbent in his corner, "who the devil . . . asked you to . . . interfere?"

"Not . . . a soul!" panted Oliver.

"Then why . . . must you . . . meddle?"

"Pleasure!" answered Oliver. "Are you hurt?"

"Damme, yes—look at my hat!"

"A woeful spectacle!" nodded Oliver. "Trodden on, I fancy."

"Well, throw the confounded, dashed thing out o' the window!" snarled Roland, getting to his legs, somewhat unsteadily.

"Also," said Oliver, tossing the damaged headgear out into the road, "your left eye, or should it be ogle? will shortly put on mourning—"

"Malediction! D'ye mean it?" exclaimed Roland, feeling the eye in question with a tender solicitude. "If so, here's a dam rum go for me! So dev'lish awkward! Can't face St. James's behind a black eye. Need such a deuced lot of explaining! Never do! No, I must lie low till I'm presentable. . . . Ha—and all by reason of a curst old hag!"

"What hag? and where?"

"Deuce knows! Some old beldam I met wailing for her money . . . and her face bloody, poor old soul!"

"You mean she'd been attacked and robbed?"

“What else, my bright lad? So I chased the dam ruffians with a yoicks and tallyho, ran ’em to earth here, got damaged in the hat and a black eye for my pains. So—what about it?”

“A bit o’ steak, sir!” answered a hoarse voice from somewhere so very near Oliver’s spurred heel that he started and, glancing down, beheld a hairy visage blinking meekly up at him from beneath the table. “A nice bit o’ raw steak, sir, clapped over the young gen’leman’s peeper’ll work wonders in no time, and no error, sir.”

“And who may you be?” enquired Oliver.

“And why under the dashed table?” demanded Roland.

“Smurf be my monnicker, sir, Ed’ard, Ned or Neddy and I be landlord o’ this yer ‘Travellers’ Rest.’ And I be under this yere table ’count o’ they murderous raskells as you gen’lemen druv off so right smart an’ ’andsome ___”

“Then come out,” growled Roland, “and sport me your confounded steak, and lively!”

Mr. Smurf, in the act of crawling forth, paused as a touzled head projected itself upon them through the open lattice.

“Eh, wot be wantin’, Jarge?” he enquired.

“Gen’leman’s dicer!” answered the head, and in came a grimy fist grasping Roland’s crushed hat. Roland accepted it, cursing softly, tossed the man a groat, the hat out of the open doorway and turned to the crawling Mr. Smurf.

“Now,” said he, “about that steak—”

Mr. Smurf, in the act of rising, remained upon his knees, goggling towards the doorway whence sounded another voice, liquidly soft yet gently imperious, a young voice and all that any feminine voice should or could be,—at least so thought the cousins as they turned, instantly and as one man, to behold the owner of this most seductive voice.

Viewing her lustrous, wind-blown hair, Oliver thought of a chestnut newly from its burr; beholding all the sweetly rounded shapeliness her clinging riding-habit moulded so lovingly, Roland thought of Venus Callipyge, of Trojan Helen, of Grecian Phryne—until, becoming aware of the object she was holding out for his acceptance, he started and recoiled as if stung.

“I think this must be your hat,” said she, seeming to thrust the abhorred object upon him, “it came flying so suddenly it almost hit me. It is yours, is it not?”

“No . . . yes . . . I fear so!” he murmured, taking the thing into his reluctant grasp.

“But I came,” she went on, glancing from Roland to Oliver with long-lashed eyes that matched her hair, “to know whom . . . which of you gentlemen I am to thank?”

“To . . . ah yes,” murmured Roland, his thoughts wandering again, “of course to thank . . . I think—”

“But for what, if you please?” enquired Oliver.

“For protecting my darling aunt, sir.”

“Aunt?” repeated Roland, in gasping sort of manner, “your . . . aunt?”

“Indeed, sir, my aunt, the Countess of Mereworth, from the brutal wretches who stole her purse and might have murdered her, poor dear, but for the gallantry of . . . of one of you. Pray which of you . . . whom must I thank?”

“Madam,” answered Oliver, bowing, “I present to your gratitude my cousin, Mr. Roland Verinder, and to your service myself, Oliver Dale.”

“Then, Mr. Verinder,” said the Syren voice, “please accept my very deepest thanks, I am Deborah Standish. And now, sir, will you go with me?”

“Anywhere!” answered Roland, bowing with all his customary grace. “And where, pray, Miss Deborah?”

“To Aunt Julia, she desires to express her thanks personally, and she detests, sweet soul, to be kept waiting, so let us go.” With smooth, supple movement Mistress Deborah swept the long skirt of her habit about her arm, thus discovering the daintiest, most coquettish pair of riding-boots that Oliver had ever seen, small, shapely boots that moved with such delicate precision he must needs watch them until they had borne her from his sight. . . .

“Lord love me eyes!” exclaimed Mr. Smurf rising to his feet at last. “To think as them their scounder-eels dared for to rob the Coun-tess! I dunno wot Old England be a comin’ to that I don’t, makin’ so free wi’ the Quality an’ all! Will ee drink summat, sir?”

“No, thanks.”

“Ah, yonder they go, sir, an’ a werry ’andsome pair they make, I’m sure and . . . blow me dickey if theer beant the Coun-tess ’er werry own self . . . ay theer she be a-settin’ agin milestone yonder! Did ye say ale, sir?”

“No, but I do. You may bring me a pint.”

The ale appeared with commendable speed, and thus over tankard-rim Oliver watched that handsome, youthful pair halt before Age in the form of a somewhat stately dame of powerful though osseous structure who sat somewhat grimly on grassy bank beside the way, her mittened hands crossed upon a large, ash walking-stick; one of which hands she now thrust out at Roland who kissed it valiantly and bowed gallantly, crushed hat a-flourish. Now seeing how vigorous, bony Age smiled on him, and with what eyes youthful, rounded Beauty surveyed his handsome cousin, Oliver sighed, and, sinking down upon the adjacent settle, sipped his ale and sighed alternate until:

“Mr. Dale!” said The Voice; and never had his name sounded so ineffably sweet as up started Oliver forthwith, hat in one hand, half-emptied tankard in the other.

“Deborah—!” said he and stood dumb, somewhat confused and greatly surprised at himself. “Pray forgive me,” he pleaded, turning to set his tankard upon the table behind him. “I spoke heedlessly, I fear—”

“Indeed and you did, sir, such familiarity betokens small respect—”

“No, no!” cried Oliver, almost breathless with sincerity. “Not, oh not disrespect, never that! But I . . . I happened to be thinking of you . . . your name . . . it is a very lovely name. . . .”

“Oh, sir!” she murmured, smooth cheek dimpling and brown eyes bright with mockery between their curling lashes. “I rejoice my poor name meets with your kind approbation. Though I think it a most detestable name.”

“Detestable . . . why so, Miss Standish?”

“Because, Mr. Dale, sir, should we ever become slightly acquaint and your familiarity therefore overweening, you might call me Deb or Debby—like a cat.”

Oliver smiled, but in his honest, grey eyes such look, albeit tempered with profound reverence, that she flushed artlessly, drooped long lashes coquettishly and tapped petulantly at the old settle with the light, jewelled riding-switch she grasped in slim, gauntleted hand.

“I think,” said she, viewing him askance, “no, I’m sure your eyes are excessive bold, sir, even more so than your tongue.”

“I . . . I was wholly unaware of it—”

“No matter,” she retorted. “I am here to bring you to my great-aunt. Will you go with me, Mr. Dale?”

“To the end of the world!” he answered, gently but with such fervour that, once again, her smooth cheek showed lovelier for its richly deepening colour, and for a long moment she viewed him sidewise through half-veiling lashes.

“I wonder!” she murmured.

“What—pray what?” he pleaded.

“Nothing, sir!” she answered, demurely. “Come you to my great-aunt.”

A formidable lady this, hook-nosed, large of chin and with extremely sharp eyes agleam beneath a pent of remarkably thick, black brows.

“Well, Mr. Dale,” said she in tones loud and deep, “you behold me a victim of outrage and here, sir,—here on my own land!”

“Astonishing!” murmured Roland, since Oliver was dumb.

“And damnable!” quoth her ladyship with finality. “But I come of a fighting ancestry,—sailors, soldiers or mere fine gentlemen but fighters all. So I battled my villainous assailants with my stick or I should lie now a battered, blood-sprent corpse.”

“Gracious, Aunt!” exclaimed Beauty, shuddering.

“No, ghastly, child, ghastly!” quoth Age, scowling. “On this good earth my ancestors hallowed with their gore,—the Conqueror, you know,—would now be gore of mine, but would mine have hallowed it I wonder? However, thanks to my ash-stick and you, Mr. Verinder, I am living yet and, being alive and the clocks upon the stroke of four, I yearn consumedly for tea. You gentlemen should come and drink with me but, being males and young, you of course abominate such poor swill—”

“On the contrary, madam,” said Roland instantly, “there is nothing, no beverage I like more—”

“Calls it ‘beverage’ and I said ‘swill’,” quoth the Countess, knitting her great brows till they bristled, “ha,—I am rebuked!”

“No, no!” cried Roland, “Heaven forbid! I would but have your ladyship believe that I perfectly adore tea, occasionally—”

“With a passable-looking miss to do the honours,—eh, sir? Ha, you blush, Mr. Verinder, and this is to your credit! And Deb, never toss your vain head, no one can name you ‘beautiful’ with those blowsy cheeks, that redundancy of outline. . . . And there’s John with the carriage at last. Ho, John!” she called, in voice largely formidable as her eyebrows, as a huge chariot loomed up in thunderous approach, “John, why so sluggish, man, so snail-like . . . to keep me waiting? Miss Deborah summoned ye nigh an hour since!”

“Why, me leddy, seeing as ’ow the carriage-’osses was loose in the paddick, and seeing as—”

“Not a word, John! Such vain excuses! Thomas, let down the steps.”

“They’m down a’ready, your ladyship, mam. I ’ad ’em down in a twinkling, my lady—”

“Well, don’t brag, man, don’t vaunt! Mr. Dale,” said she, giving Oliver her large, powerful hand, “I like you quite well, so far, because you have eyes for me as well as Deborah. You may visit us in town, St. James’ Square and . . . yes, you may bring your oglesome cousin with you if so disposed.”

“Your ladyship honours me!” answered Oliver, bowing.

“I do indeed!” she nodded. “There are very few male creatures I permit to trouble me or themselves about my too coquettish grand-niece—”

“Nay, now, Aunt, I protest—”

“You do, Deb, and you may! However! Mr. Verinder, once again I am to thank you for saving my life, and you, Mr. Dale, for saving his,—oh yes he told me. . . . You are nice boys, and may someday be nice men,—probably,—perhaps! Mr. Verinder, temper your pride, and, Mr. Dale, be forbearing, remember you are his senior—”

“Pardon, madam, but by scant few weeks!” quoth Roland, flushing hotly.

“By three months, Madam!” Oliver added.

“Well, good-bye t’ye both!” said her ladyship, rising with remarkable vigour, and, scornful of assistance, mounting into the huge vehicle. “Mr. Verinder’s hand implores to aid thee, Deb, take it, child, his eyes devour thee, child, so discover him your forms gracefully as possible—admirable! Remember, gentlemen, St. James’ Square, any day next week after three o’

the clock! You shall drink something stronger than tea, a little, and flirt with my coquettish grand-niece, perhaps. Off, John, away!”

CHAPTER IV

WHICH IS MEREST INTERLUDE

“YOUR hag is a remarkable beldam!” said Oliver as they watched the ponderous vehicle rumble heavily out of sight.

“A she-dragon! But ah—that girl!” exclaimed Roland in an ecstasy. “A bewitching nymph! A perfect budding Venus! Passion’s there, Noll, fire! And her shape! Did you remark all the wonder of her? The voluptuous curve of—”

“Perfectly!” said Oliver. “But I don’t rant of it.”

“No,—because of your dashed hypocritical, curst puritanical ancestry—pah!”

“Also pish!” retorted Oliver. “Pish to your guzzling, rakehelly forbears! Which reminds me how your old hag bade me bear with you and forbear, so mum it is!” Mutely they turned together and strode back to the tavern hight “Travellers’ Rest” where stood their horses in charge of the shock-headed Jarge, at sight of whom Roland instantly took off his damaged hat, scowled at it, straightened and smoothed it the best he might, put it on again and turning to Oliver, demanded:

“How’s my eye now?”

“We fear ’twill not be so black as expected, Roly. However, perhaps a lump of clammy steak—”

Roland snorted, and thrusting head in at the open lattice called fiercely for brandy.

“Suggest ale!” murmured Oliver, “less heating—”

“Bah! Brandy’s the order, landlord, a bottle. Bring it out here. As for you, Oliver, I’ll thank you not to try teaching me what to drink and . . . and what not! Don’t come any of your damn puritanic, pragmatistical tomfoolery over me, d’ye hear?”

“Too much!” answered Oliver, and was turning to mount his horse when towards them across the wide road came a gipsy girl; she was tall, darkly handsome and rarely neat of person. She merely glanced at Oliver, she looked at Roland, smiled and reached forth to him a slim, brown hand.

“Sixpence, pretty gentleman,” said she, “cross the gipsy mort’s palm wi’ silver and let her pen thy dukkerin . . . a golden fortun’, my dainty gorgio gentleman.”

“No, no,” laughed Roland. “No fortune for me, but here’s half-a-crown for a kiss, my beauty, come!” And slipping an arm about her supple waist, he drew her near, and she coquettishly resistant.

Oliver scowled and turned away, and thus beheld another scowl, and this upon the saturnine visage of a young gipsy man who, having vaulted a stile opposite very nimbly, came striding across the road, ferocious purpose in every line of him.

“Leggo there!” cried he. “Off wi’ your fables, none o’ your games wi’ my mort, my fine rye.”

“Eh? And who the deuce are you?” demanded Roland, drawing the struggling girl yet nearer.

“I’m her choice man, that’s who!”

“Then I don’t admire her taste—”

“Come,” cried the gipsy fiercely, “put up your daddles and I’ll learn ee as a gipsy man’s better nor any high-toddling, genty cove. . . . And there’s one to begin wi’!”

Off flew Roland’s devoted hat and he himself spun round and all but fell before the sudden impact of the gipsy man’s powerful fist; then he steadied and leapt to combat.

But, though fearless, eager and skilled in the art, Roland was no match for this young gipsy, who shifted and feinted, smote and was away, all with such bewildering speed and precision that twice Roland went down before unerring left and potent right, only to leap afoot for more punishment. It was as he rose, somewhat feebly, for the third time that the gipsy lowered his fists and stood back, shaking his saturnine head.

“You’re game, I’ll allow,” quoth he, his dark features transformed by sudden smile, “but I reckon you’ve had enough, and I won’t go for to kill ee for a kiss as you never had—nor never will. So, good-arternoon, sir! Ax your pal to give ee a sloosh under the pump and you’ll be right as a trivet. Come you ’long o’ me, Zeena!” And away went these two young gipsies, very cheerily, leaving Roland outstretched upon the trampled sward somewhat winded and woebegone.

“A regular . . . gipsy milling cove . . . by Jingo!” he panted. “A pug of . . . experience! He would be! Which is just my infernal luck! But a pretty right sort of fellow, I think, a . . . sportsman, eh, Noll?”

“Yes,” answered Oliver, reaching a helping hand to his discomfited though quite undaunted cousin. “Shall we to the pump, Roly?”

“Am I so bad as that?”

“A trifle bloody. And your peeper, your unfortunate ogle—!”

“What of it, man?”

“Will certainly be black now.”

“Then devil take it!”

“No no, let’s bathe it, steak and comfort it . . . come on, old fellow.”

“And I don’t,” growled Roland, suffering himself to be aided to his feet, “I do—not desire any of your confounded sympathy, Mr. Clodhopper,—you quite understand?”

“Perfectly, my pretty gorgio gentleman! Now come and be pumped on,—no, first—your hat, sir!”

“Throw the accursed thing over the hedge!”

“No! The state of our finances forbids. Having cared for your ogle we’ll doctor your dicer—”

“Brandy, sir!” said Mr. Smurf appearing at this moment.

“Aha!” sighed Roland. He drank, blinked and squared his shoulders, enquiring: “Where’s your pump?”

“In yard be’ind, sir. I’ll show ee. An’ I got a nice bit o’ steak wot I don’t think now’ll be ’ardly big enough. Lord, sir! Why must ye go a-milling wi’ Benno, of all coves?”

“Who?”

“Benno Warmestro.”

“Never heard of him.”

“But you’ve felt ’im, sir,—frequent! Benno be purty well knowed in Sussex, sir, ah, and in Lonnon too! A werry promisin’ Cock o’ the Game be Benno, by all accounts, and promises to be good as Long John, Natty Bell and even Jessamy Todd as was too good, and now as I’ve seen him in action, thanks to you, sir, my money’ll be on ’im next time ’e tosses his ’at into the Ring,—so werry much obleeged to you I be sure-ly, sir—”

“Spare your gratitude, fellow. . . . My dashed eye feels like a boiled potato.”

“Though doesn’t look so appetizing!” murmured Oliver. “However, come and let’s see what can be done for it.”

And thus, what with bathing and poulticing, washing and brushing, the afternoon was very far spent when the cousins mounted and rode on together through the deepening glow of sunset.

CHAPTER V

TELLS OF A HIGHWAYMAN WHO TREMBLED

Now when they had travelled some distance quite speechlessly it was Roland who, becoming painfully aware of sundry unsuspected bruises and thus reminded of his damaged hat and disfiguring eye, broke this gloomy silence in characteristic manner:

“Damme!”

“What now, Roly?”

“I say damme but there’s no trouble in this poor, confounded, woeful, misguided world but a woman’s the infernal, dashed cause!”

“True!” nodded Oliver. “If there’s a man about—more especially if that man descends from an aristocratic hard-riding, hard-drinking—”

“Ha!” snarled Roland, glaring ferociously with his one good eye. “Someday, y’know, I shall be looking at you over the sights of a hair-trigger, or—”

“Not at me, Roland, oh no! Fists or even fencing-sticks any time or place convenient, but pistols and swords, no, not me!”

“You,” sneered Roland, “being a dunghilly ploughman of yokel breed!”

“Exactly!” nodded Oliver, grimly. “But now suppose we discuss the future, ways and means and so on? And, first of all, we can never reach London to-night.”

“Don’t I know it, Mr. Tom Fool? And I don’t intend to—how the deuce can I face London . . . the clubs . . . my friends with this eye, curse it?”

“What then?” demanded Oliver.

“I shall lie up somewhere or other until I’m presentable, of course.”

“How many years should that take?”

“I shall put up at some sequestered inn and kiss the hostess if not too repulsive, while you ride on and take your confounded smug phiz to the devil.”

“I shall certainly ride on.”

“And a dashed, sweet riddance!”

“I’m wondering,” said Oliver, turning to regard his cousin’s flushed and battered countenance, “if you are truly the cantankerous, arrogant incompetent you seem, the poor, ineffectual braggart, all senseless hate, or —”

“For you yes and yes a thousand times!” cried Roland, passionately. “When I look at your damned self-righteous face I know why my father killed yours, and could do the same by you . . . and probably shall yet—by heavens!”

“Forget our fathers’ hate, Roland fool, and remember our mothers, those twin sisters who so loved each other they could scarce bear to be parted—”

“Yes,” snarled Roland, “being mere females, poor, silly, sentimentally doating women creatures, two miserable—”

“Now curse your blasphemous—your vile, irreverent tongue!” panted Oliver and, raising his whip to smite, swung his powerful horse so violently as to cannon into Roland’s nervous animal that instantly began to rear and plunge in such wild manner that Oliver’s more sedate steed did likewise and, for some minutes, all was confusion. At last, quelling his Dobbin with strong wrist and goading heel, Oliver turned to scowl and yet with something of horror in his wide-set, grey-eyed stare:

“God . . . God forgive me . . . !” he panted. “I meant to . . . kill you! There is truly and indeed a curse upon us it seems . . . a curse of blood and hate! But you . . . you shan’t tempt me to murder, no by God I’ll not endure it . . . I’ll risk no next time. . . .” And, speaking, he rowelled his fretting horse and was off and away at a gallop, nor did he check this wild career until he judged himself some mile or so ahead of his cousin. Then, reining to an easy amble, he fell to a troubled muse and, being still shaken by the fury of murderous intent that had possessed him, rode on and on lost in a fearful perplexity, pondering if it could indeed be possible that this desire to kill might be transmitted from sire to son.

So deep were his meditations that he started violently at sound of a voice nearby, a voice unnaturally hoarse and yet woefully plaintive:

“If you please, sir, might I have a word wi’ you?”

Glancing round, Oliver beheld one who stood in shadow of the hedge looking up at him from beneath wide hat-brim, hand outstretched appealingly. Oliver checked his horse and leaned from the saddle to peer.

“What is it?” he enquired.

“This!” answered the man, and leapt; now glancing down, Oliver saw “this” for a long-barrelled pistol that was pressing into his flowered waistcoat rather painfully.

“A footpad?” questioned Oliver.

“No less!” answered his assailant, and instantly covered his lean visage with a black half-mask. “Which so being,” he continued, “I’ll have your money—all of it! And be speedy!”

Now as Oliver fumbled for his purse, he was surprised to see this robber’s clean-shaven lips were quivering, that the hand held out for his money was trembling and that the man seemed strangely unsteady on his legs.

“You are ill, I think,” said Oliver.

“Ay. I’m lately from bed o’ sickness and consequently so devilish jumpy I’m apt to shoot without intent, so . . . your purse, so! Now, get ye down!”

“Not my horse,” Oliver remonstrated. “No, no—”

“Yes!” cried the robber, peevishly. “Yes, yes, I say! Down with ye or I’ll certainly fire. Come—damn ye!” So perforce Oliver dismounted to back away before that threatening pistol-muzzle; then with a nervous haste the highwayman swung to saddle, gathered up the reins and, still covering Oliver with his murderous weapon, paused.

“Young sir,” said he, speaking with a certain fevered breathlessness, “some of us are so driven by harsh circumstance that, to prevent evil, evil must we do . . . may you never know such. Sir, I can ill spare it, but . . . there’s for you!” So saying, he tossed one of Oliver’s guineas to Oliver’s feet, spurred Oliver’s horse, swung him dexterously up the steep, grassy bank, burst through the hedge and vanished.

So Oliver took up his solitary guinea, his robber’s gift, stared at it, dropped it into a pocket and tossing away his useless riding-whip, trudged on along the darkening road, musing now upon this highwayman, the wistful strangeness of him, his pale, ascetic face and oddly hoarse voice. . . .

Presently borne to him upon the stilly evening air came a sound of hoofs rapidly approaching and with that rhythmic tattoo that seems to go with high mettle, blood, breeding and equine nervousness, a sound so familiar that Oliver instinctively stepped to the hedge where shadows were deepening, then, shrugging his shoulders, stepped out again and looked back; thus very soon he espied his cousin coming at a graceful yet speedy canter.

“Hallo!” cried Roland, almost gladly, and reining Highflier to his indignant haunches. “What on earth . . . why are you afoot?”

“Because I have no horse.”

“What,” chuckled Roland, “has he bolted?”

“No, I bestowed him on one who demanded him.”

“Eh? What? Bestowed . . . who . . .?”

“One who backed his demand with a pistol. He also took my money.”

“What—a highwayman?”

“Precisely.”

“And you made no least show of resistance?”

“Not the least.”

“This comes of your dashed ancestry.”

“Also a pistol. In my paunch.”

“Ha? Then I commend your prudence but damn your spirit.”

“Well, Roly-poly, suppose it had been your noble and gallant self?”

“To the which, Oliver, I merely answer: ‘blood will tell!’ Also, that ‘blood being thicker than water’ the half of what I possess is yours, to wit—the miserable fifty-odd guineas in my purse and one extreme valuable bit o’ blood between my knees.”

“Thanks, Roland, but I’m not perfectly destitute, for my robber having taken my all, bestowed upon me one guinea and therefore I—”

Rustle of leaves, snort of horse, flurry of thudding hoofs and down before them leapt a rider who glared through the slits of a black vizard and instantly levelled a long pistol in Roland’s astonished visage, and whom Oliver as instantly recognized for his highwayman.

“Sir,” quoth this miscreant, urging his (or rather Oliver’s) horse nearer and addressing himself to Roland, “Your money or life, choose and instantly! I’m one of desperate fortune so—hand over or bleed!”

“D-Damme if I . . . I do!” retorted Roland, stammering, yet with the utmost resolution.

“Then, as God’s above, you’ll cause me to put a ball through your leg, a needless agony! Choose, I’ll count three!” The unnaturally hoarse voice had

uttered “Two” when Roland’s purse thudded into the dust.

“Pick it up and give it me, damn ye!”

“Not I!” answered Roland, and folded his arms superbly, for in that moment Oliver had taken up the purse and thrust it into the robber’s ready grasp.

“Sir,” quoth the Highwayman, “I robbed your friend with reluctance. I thief from you gladly.”

“The devil you do?”

“Indeed, sir, for you are, I perceive, a cockahoop young gentleman. And your horse being the livelier beast I’ll have that also,—dismount or—” This unspoken threat was backed by look and gesture so deadly that, despite all his pride and bravado, Roland obeyed almost nimbly.

“What, must you have both our horses?” he demanded fiercely.

“No, sir, oh no,—your friend shall find his animal hereabouts on the road if he don’t run away.” Which said, the Highwayman nodded to Oliver and clattered off with their two horses along the shadowy road.

Then Oliver looked at Roland and smiled; and Roland looking at Oliver, laughed and laughed until he sank weakly beside the way and there seated guffawed until Oliver’s smile broadened and he laughed also.

And presently wiping his eyes, with great care for the one, Roland got to his feet and stood a while staring down at the hunting-crop he was fumbling in his gauntleted hands.

“Oliver,” said he at last, and with unwonted gravity, “Noll, I laughed at . . . myself. When that rascal levelled at me I almost . . . cowered! So I . . . I take it all back, I . . . retract everything I’ve said . . . everything, especially about our . . . mothers, it . . . shames me, Noll! So . . . well . . . what about it?”

Oliver merely reached out and grasped his cousin’s ready hand.

“Well, here we are afoot. Lord knows where,” sighed Roland, “and reduced to one dam guinea,—yours! Which is a confoundedly rum go, not to say dev’lish awkward situation!”

“But,” said Oliver, taking out their guinea and viewing it rather wistfully, “this shall afford us food and shelter for to-night at least.”

“And the sooner the better!” nodded Roland. “For it looks like rain to me.”

“And smells like it, Roly,—storm I think before the night’s out.”

“Then come on!” quoth Roland. So, shoulder to shoulder, useless spurs jingling, they set out along the road at good, round pace while evening deepened to night and a fugitive wind stirred in hedge and tree, sighing mournfully.

And after some time as they strode thus apace, looking with ever increasing solicitude for some inn or hedge tavern that should harbour them against the coming storm, they heard the whinney of a horse, and glancing thitherward, beheld Dobbin looking at them disconsolately across a hedge. Oliver whistled, at which familiar summons Dobbin cocked his ears and was presently nuzzling his master’s hand.

“Here’s luck, by Jupiter!” exclaimed Roland.

“Yes!” sighed Oliver. “Yet I shall hate to part with him.”

“Eh? Oh, you mean sell him?”

“Needs must!” answered Oliver, pulling Dobbin’s nearest ear. “The old fellow should bring twenty guineas, which will be ten apiece.”

“Scarcely so much, I’m afraid, Noll.”

“Well, up with you, Roly, and ride while you may.”

“Yes, but why me?”

“I notice you limp now and then.”

“Not I, my lad! Sound as a dashed drum!”

“Which has been pounded pretty severely by a pair of knowing drumsticks!”

“You mean that gipsy fellow?”

“So up with you; my ploughman legs are more used to trudging it than yours.” Roland protested very loudly, but mounted none the less nimbly, and with Oliver striding at his stirrup, rode on beneath a lowering sky where black clouds scurried against brightening stars.

CHAPTER VI

TELLS HOW THEY GLIMPSED A FACE IN THE STORM

NIGHT, pitch-black, and rain that smote and pelted them out of this blusterous darkness, with a wind that sighed dismally, rose to a wail and was gone a while, leaving a silence that seemed strangely ominous. And in one of these hushed interludes, Roland (still astride plodding Dobbin) spoke:

“Where the devil are we?” And Oliver (still trudging in the mire) answered:

“No idea. We lost the road half-an-hour ago, as I warned you.”

“I know you did. But how can a fellow see in this dashed black desolation? We seem to be out on some confounded heath or something.”

“We are!” answered Oliver, stumbling over some unseen obstruction. “And probably going round in circles.”

“Then dammit!”

“Certainly!”

“Suppose you try a turn in the saddle and see if you can do better?”

“No. Suppose you drop the reins, give Dobbin his head and trust to his instinct.”

“But I can walk as well as you and besides it’s your—”

Roland checked and they both recoiled as ’twixt black sky and glooming earth lightning flamed, a jag of vivid light that showed a wide-flung, sodden desolation ere howling blackness engulfed them; and then, above riot of wind and rain, thunder pealed, an earth-shaking crash that rolled sullenly away and nothing to hear thereafter but the hiss of rain.

“This is . . . the devil!” gasped Roland.

“And all his hosts!” answered Oliver. “Hark to ’em, and damned souls every one! Hear how they wail and stir all about us!”

“Well, dammem again! And you too for a cold-blooded fish! B’gad I believe you’re enjoying it, this most cursed rain—and mud of course. You would!”

“I make the best of them—What’s that?”

“God love us! What now?”

“Thought I glimpsed a light . . . over yonder.”

“Not a glimmer. And don’t be so damn sudden! Hallo, I believe your Dobbin has found the road again.”

“Yes. But listen! Do you hear anything?”

“Merely the wind, you ass!”

“No, there’s more than wind! Pull up and listen!”

So they halted, and thus presently above fitful wind-gusts and dismal rain, they heard another sound, vague yet insistent, that grew to the rhythm of pounding hoofs coming up behind them at furious gallop.

“Another dashed highwayman, d’ye think, Noll?”

“Perhaps. Swing this way into the hedge and wait.”

“Riding like a madman whoever he is.”

“Yes,” answered Oliver, straining wide eyes on the darkness behind them, for in the oncoming rider’s so reckless speed was suggestion of such desperate urgency that it troubled him strangely.

Again the darkness was riven asunder by jagged flame and they beheld the wet road, dripping trees and, close upon them, a speeding, foam-flecked horse with mud-spattered rider stooped low in the saddle . . . a face pale and haggard, glimpsed for a moment as he swept by, and then sight and sound of him lost in swirling blackness and roaring thunderclap.

“Did you . . . see?” cried Roland, above rush of wind.

“Yes . . . I saw!”

“Well then . . . am I mad, Noll, or did I truly see . . . our Uncle Everard?”

“You’re not mad, Roly.”

“Then it was he?”

“Ay,—though more like his troubled ghost.”

“Well, but . . . what the devil, Noll? What on earth can it mean?”

“Yes,” said Oliver, halting suddenly, “what unexpected grief or dreadful trouble can so have changed him?”

“Ay truly, Noll, our superbly-fine, arrogant nunks showed scarcely his serenely assured self! But come on—let’s find some shelter from this mud

and misery even if only a barn, there must be some such even in this cursed desolation.”

On they plodded again and in silent wretchedness until, said Oliver suddenly at last:

“Roland, what should bring him out on such a night and in such wild state, d’you suppose?”

“Who? Oh, you mean Uncle Everard! Lord only knows! Unless, b’gad, he’s chasing us! Eh, my tulip? Remorseful nunks pursues desolate, devoted nephews with proffers of limitless wealth! Be my heirs and all shall be forgiven—Hallo! Did you hear anything, a sort of cry?”

“Yes! And there it is again!” said Oliver, halting as borne to their ears came a wailing not of the wind.

“Yes . . . it was a cry!” quoth Roland, unhappily. “And I don’t like cries at night, damme if I do!”

“Nor I!” answered Oliver, peering uneasily about them. “However, we’d better see what’s amiss.”

“I suppose so,” grumbled Roland; so they advanced through the tumultuous darkness until a doleful voice reached them, but now so much nearer that they could detect words:

“Help, help . . . oh curse the wind . . . help!”

Thus guided, they presently found themselves amid rustling trees from beneath one of which the voice, furious yet pleading, hailed their cautious approach:

“Come on . . . come along! What the devil,—why hesitate? For heaven’s sake, help me! Oh blast the rain! Help me, in mercy’s name, help me!”

“Where the devil are you?” cried Roland, drawing rein.

“Here, sir, here . . . tied to a . . . a tree!”

“How do I know that?” enquired Roland.

“Come and see for yourself.”

“Who can see anything in such darkness?”

“Then get a lamp, my tilbury’s in the hedge yonder.”

After some peering and groping, Oliver found the vehicle and contrived to light one of the lamps, then with this in his hand came where its beam

showed a man lashed and buckled very securely to a tree by means of the reins and traces of the horseless tilbury; a tall man, plump though extremely passionate, who raged against his bonds cursing vehemently, scowling on them through a rain-sodden ferocity of black whisker.

“Sir,” said Roland, “you sound peevish and look nowise comfortable—”

“Comfortable?” shouted the prisoner, writhing the more furiously. “Comfortable . . . damnation! I’ve been robbed, d’ye hear, robbed—”

“Odd!” said Roland. “So have we—”

“I’ve been robbed, I tell ye . . . I! Robbed of better than a hundred and ten guineas! I’ve been struck, assaulted, outraged and brutalized by a masked villain’s whip,—look at me!”

“I am!” said Oliver.

“So am I!” nodded Roland. “In fact we both are, and I, for one, quite understand why he whipped you—”

“Pray, sir,” questioned Oliver, “what was he like, your assailant?”

“How the devil do I know, the rogue was masked, I tell ye, besides I hardly saw him. Now loose me, one of ye . . . ha, why d’ye hesitate?”

“Because,” answered Roland, “I’m wondering if you are not better as you are—”

“What, sir—what?” raged the prisoner in a very frenzy. “D’ye know who I am? My name’s Rickaby, Sir James Rickaby, a knight of the shire and Justice o’ the Peace—”

“That settles it!” nodded Roland. “We leave the knight in company with the justice and good night to both, eh, Noll?” But, taking out his penknife, Oliver proceeded laboriously to sever the bonds of this furious dignitary who, wasting no time on thanks, strode to Roland and glared up into his face, saying:

“I shall know ye again, and should we ever meet—beware!” Then, without so much as a glance for Oliver, he turned and was lost in the blustering darkness.

“A highly unpleasant person, eh, Noll? And a wicked eye, by Gad!”

“Yes. But why antagonize the fellow?”

“Blame his whiskers, Noll, they inflamed my animosity on the spot! Such whiskers might antagonize a bleating lamb and fire a sucking dove! No

wonder he got himself whipped! By heavens, I myself could have flogged him for those dam whiskers alone—”

“Well, let’s get back to the road.”

“Certainly, only—where the deuce is it?”

“Dobbin should find it,” answered Oliver, “give him his head.” So on they went again, Oliver still bearing the lamp; but after some going, instead of the road, Dobbin brought them out upon a bleak expanse where the riotous wind so buffeted them that out went the lamp.

“Well, confound everything!” exclaimed Roland pettishly. “Now where has your fool Dobbin brought us?”

“To a track of some sort,” answered Oliver, tossing away the useless lamp, “leave him to it.”

Rain, mud, darkness and blusterous wind; but at last, clapping hand to Dobbin’s powerful neck, Roland cried:

“You were right, Noll! God bless old Dobbin! There’s a light, down yonder to our left!”

“I see!” answered Oliver, grasping his wise animal’s bridle to steady him, for the track they were following now trended steeply downwards. Guided by this welcome light, they reached a wide gate, that opened readily enough, and presently made out the loom of a house.

And now it was that the pitiless rain ceased, completely and suddenly, and the scurrying cloud-wrack parted to a full-orbed moon.

“You would!” exclaimed Roland bitterly, shaking clenched hand up at her radiant splendour. “Now that we don’t want you, madam, there you are.”

Oliver, meanwhile, coming to the door of this house, proceeded to knock thereon, and for some little time to none effect; he was in the act of repeating his summons when the door opened, very suddenly, disclosing the warm comfort of glowing fire and candlelight, also a pale-faced, slender, elegant person who was gazing in strange, wide-eyed fashion on wind-blown Oliver in his miry boots and rain-sodden riding coat. Now as they viewed each other mutely thus, Oliver knew that somewhere at some time he had seen this pale, sensitive, high-bred face before; then, removing his dripping hat, Oliver bowed:

“Sir,” said he, “my cousin and I have lost our way in the storm, may we beg an hour’s warmth and shelter?”

The gentleman's wide eyes slowly narrowed, his pallid, too-sensitive lips quivered:

“Be welcome, sirs!” he answered; and, even as the words were uttered, Oliver recognized him.

CHAPTER VII

CONCERNING A MAN MYSTERIOUS

THEY had supped, plainly but well, before a noble fire whose genial heat had dried their sodden garments; they had drunk of a steaming, spicy brew that had warmed and comforted their inner men insomuch that Roland, seated in cosy, cushioned chair, was nodding in drowsy content while Oliver, leaning back upon wide settee, was gazing intently at the glowing fire though very conscious that their host was gazing as intently at him. The room was very still, the house itself very silent, for the storm had passed and the rageful wind was hushed. A tall grandfather clock ticked with soft deliberation in shadowy corner, the logs upon the wide hearth crackled pleasantly and Roland snored gently.

And after some while their host spoke in tone soft and deliberate as the clock in its corner:

“Your cousin, Mr. Verinder, being asleep, will you be so obliging to step aside with me?”

For answer Oliver rose and followed whither he was led . . . to a room whose panelled walls showed the marks of vanished pictures, a chamber barren of all furniture save a small table whereon his host set down the candle-stick and thereafter stood very still, staring down into the steady flame, one hand in the breast of his coat, then he sighed deeply and, without stirring or lifting head, looked at Oliver beneath level brows:

“Sir,” said he, gently, “it grieves me to suppose that I am known . . . you recognize me, I think?”

Oliver glanced from that hidden hand to the pale, set face, the narrow eyes, the quivering lips and answered with what resolution he might:

“Yes, sir, you are the highwayman who robbed us to-night.”

“My life therefore is in your hands, sir.”

“No!” answered Oliver, “I do not accept a man’s hospitality and betray that man to death.”

“Even though he be a . . . felon?”

“No!” repeated Oliver. “Not even then.”

Once again was an irksome silence wherein they viewed each other eye to eye and both utterly still. At last and to Oliver’s relief the soft voice spoke again:

“I ask no mercy. I make no excuse . . . but since you are my guest I think well to make you some brief explanation. Sir, my desperate need was money, not a great sum but more than I could possibly raise at short notice, yet without this money my wife and new-born child must have been cast forth homeless and quite destitute. . . . Is it to wonder at if, distracted by this fear, I fell ill? So the time wasted until there was left me but eight days . . . eight days between my wife and beggary! So, maugre my weakness, I took this most desperate course! For sake of my wife who, God love her—knows nothing of this, and for the little, new life that has lately come to us like an answer to her prayers, I . . . have haunted the roads ’twixt here and London, these eight nights past, and to such purpose that scarce two hours ago I despatched this so needed sum of money by trusty messenger and my home is saved. . . . There is my tale, sir, this shameful story that I had hoped was to be secret ’twixt the Almighty, this omniscient, most merciful Judge, and myself. Well, sir, what have you to say?”

“Nothing!” answered Oliver. “Not a word, now or any other time—”

“But—I have!” answered another voice; the door opened, closed and Roland stood looking at them.

“And pray what is your judgment, Mr. Verinder?”

“I say,” replied Roland instantly, “that the man who will not stand up and risk himself body and soul for wife and child and so forth is a deuced, dam, miserable worm. Woman being the positive and absolute ne plus ultra of creation, sir! Yes, demme and a wife and mother most especially so! Hence, sir, since my dashed cousin old Sober Ironsides has pledged himself to keep your secret, I do the same—mum as a devilish oyster, sir!”

“Gentlemen,” murmured their host, looking from one to other, “you are merciful . . . more generous than I dared hope!” And, speaking, he drew his hand from the breast of his coat and in this hand that same long-barrelled pistol they had seen before.

“Jingo and Jupiter!” exclaimed Roland, his eyes widening. “Was this for us?”

“For myself, sir . . . should there be occasion. Far better a suicide’s unhallowed grave than a felon’s gibbet!”

“Well, you have our promise, sir,” retorted Roland. “I hope you esteem it the word of gentlemen, men of honour and so forth?”

“Mr. Verinder, I do, I do indeed! So is your honourable pledge, sir, life to me that am, in my own estimation, a man dishonoured! I, once so proud in

my rectitude, am a thief to be choked on a gallows! Here is thought shall be with me to the end of my days.”

“Sir,” said Oliver, “I would remind you of your wife and child.”

“Ah, Heaven bless you!” exclaimed their host, looking up with expression rather pitiful. “Yes, in their sweet innocence I may sometimes forget my guilt a while! These are yet to live for, come what may. And so,” said he, laying the pistol upon the table, “take this accursed thing, I pray you accept it in memory of a most unhappy—” He broke off on the word and stood mute and still as from somewhere above them came the thin wailing of an infant and thereafter a woman’s voice faintly calling:

“Henry! Oh, Henry!”

At this, with murmured apology, their strange host hurried from the room and they heard his light-treading feet go speeding up the stair.

“Well,” enquired Roland, gesturing towards the weapon on the table, “what of this thing, Noll?”

“Bring it along.”

“What the deuce for? Are you going to turn highwayman too, gentleman of the High Toby, egad?”

“Not so, Master Doddipoll! If you trouble to look you’ll see it is a handsome weapon with silver mountings and easily worth a guinea or so and in our present situation a guinea is—”

“A fortune!” nodded Roland, and taking up the pistol, balanced it in practised hand, then opened the priming pan and stared at it beneath wrinkled brows. “And now,” said he, “I propose that with no beat of drum or blare of clarion we cut our stick and decamp. For, ’twixt you and me, I’m itching to be out of this house and on our way.”

“Why?” demanded Oliver.

“Well, let’s say I can’t abide infants, the younger the more so, consequently puling brats and squirming atomies I abominate. Hence, Mr. Stolid Sobersides, let us depart.” So saying he turned,—to see the door wide open and their host motionless on the threshold, his wide gaze upon the pistol.

“Ah, no, sir!” said Roland, shapely lips curling in faint smile. “This weapon is unprimed and quite harmless, as I think you must be aware!” And

spinning the weapon upon dexterous finger he presented its ornate butt to their host who recoiled and shook his head.

“Nay, keep it, keep it,” said he softly, “I’m done with it, thank God! . . . But, sirs, I am here to say that, though I can offer you no beds, most of our furniture was sold during my illness, yet, if settee and chairs may serve, you are heartily welcome—”

“We’re grateful, sir,” said Roland, bowing, “but will trespass on you no longer, the storm has passed, it seems and the road calls us. And when we are gone, pray believe you need be under no least apprehension,—our word is given and such pledge is sacred.”

“Then, gentlemen,” said their host, “you must permit me to return such of your money as I possibly can,” and striding to the table he laid there three guineas which Oliver took up forthwith. “Now, sirs, since you’ll be gone I will light you to the stables.”

“Pray don’t trouble,” said Roland, “the moon shall be our lamp. Ha, and talking of lamps reminds me of an egregious fellow in whiskers; he was tied to a tree, he also bellowed and swore and told of a whipping. May I assume it was you who flogged him, sir?”

“I confess it, gentlemen. I . . . meant to kill him for he is the prime cause of my misfortunes, a pitiless enemy. Twice I made to shoot him, but lacked the resolution and so I . . . whipped him instead. And now, sirs, if you will go, I wish you a safe and prosperous journey.” He bowed to Roland in austere and stately manner, he looked on Oliver rather wistfully and made an instinctive gesture as if he would have offered his hand, yet did not; so Oliver, reaching out, grasped this shy hand, shaking it heartily as he said:

“Good-bye, sir! I’m hoping your troubles end to-night.”

“So do I!” quoth Roland as heartily. “And it warms my heart to remember how you thrashed that bewhiskered, two-legged unpleasantness.”

CHAPTER VIII

RELATES AN EXTREMELY FATEFUL CIRCUMSTANCE

“OH well,” said Roland, mounting to saddle after a somewhat heated argument, “if I must ride, ride I will. Though why you’re so doggedly, dashed devilish insistent on splashing afoot through muck and mire damme if I know!”

“Ploughman’s legs!” quoth Oliver.

“Ha, coals of fire, eh?”

“And your tight boots, no wonder you limp!”

“If I limp, b’Gad, I limp for better reason, but—no matter. And,” said Roland, glancing over his shoulder at the solitary house behind them, “of all the smooth files he’s of the smoothest—our nameless gentleman yonder, he’s deep and precious deep! I’ve an unpleasant suspicion that we’ve behaved like a brace of sentimental fools, Noll.”

“Perhaps. But what matter?”

“Matter enough, ass! We’ve made ourselves the dam fellow’s confederates, accomplices after the fact and so on—merely by reason of the tale he pitched.”

“It may be true, Roly, like his wife and baby.”

“Ay to be sure the infant sounded deuced convincing and genuine. And the infant presupposes the wife. And if wife and child be true, his tale may be equally so.”

“But you don’t believe in him?”

“Don’t I?”

“Well, do you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why did you leave so suddenly?”

“I detest infants.”

“Bosh and a fiddlestick!”

“Precisely!”

After this they went in silence some while, Oliver gazing before him along the muddy road and speculating upon the future, Roland staring up at

the moon, now high and very bright above them, and meditating upon the past, so much so that suddenly his thought found vent in speech:

“Besides—” said he musingly and was silent again.

“Besides—what?” demanded Oliver.

“As I sat drowsing beside the fire, something . . . or someone came creeping behind . . . watching me.”

“Who?”

“Well, it wasn’t our host, Noll, because he was out with you, and it couldn’t have been the infantile brat—”

“His wife of course, Roly.”

“No, not she.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certain, Noll! Because d’you see, this stealthy watcher was—black.”

“Eh,—black? D’you mean a negro?”

“Something of the sort. I only glimpsed rolling eyes in a black face before it vanished. . . . And,—yes, I noticed one other thing.”

“What, man,—what?”

“A black fist grasping the fellow to this pistol in my pocket.”

“You mean it was . . . threatening you?”

“That’s what I’m pondering, Noll,—was he? Who was he, what and why? Hallo! Did you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

“Rain!”

“Yes,—by Jove we’re in for it again!”

“Then dammit all! See, the moon’s going,—look at those infernal clouds! Ha, curse and confound everything, and nowhere to shelter!”

“The woods yonder.”

“Too dam, dismally damp! This is the devil!”

“But no tempest of wind,” said Oliver.

“It’ll come, oh it’ll come!” snarled Roland. “And with hail, sleet, lightning, sulphur and brimstone—”

“And there’s a light!” said Oliver. “A fire, I think, in the woods yonder.”

“A gipsy camp!” cried Roland. “En avant, mon enfant, as the Froggies say!”

So on they struggled, amid wet underbrush and beneath dripping trees, towards a glowing spark that flickered redly through and beyond a dim mystery of moist leaves and mazy thickets.

“Listen!” said Oliver, halting suddenly, “what ghastly sound is there?”

“A whimpering,” answered Roland, peering before them, “like, egad—like an animal in pain.”

“A human animal then! Come on—” but as Oliver spoke, this dismal sound rose to a thin wailing, a childish voice in piping babble of frantic supplication that ended in a shrill screaming.

Oliver began to run and in his ears now a man’s throaty curses and a woman’s drunken laughter.

Plunging headlong through wet leaves, stumbling, slipping, Oliver sped on until he broke from the woods at last and thus beheld that he was never to forget: A little bowery glade lit by a fire of crackling sticks, beside which a blousy woman crouched rocking herself in drunken laughter; a ramshackle cart; a dingy tent, and a man who grasped a small, frail shape by the hair in one hand and flourished a stick in the other.

The flailing stick whizzed and smote down to be fended by Oliver’s outflung arm—but in that moment Oliver’s powerful fist drove into the man’s hairy visage and as he reeled from the blow Oliver leapt and closed with him. Thus for a moment or so they strove in furious, speechless grapple; then the man was down upon rain-soaked grass, writhing beneath the heavy foot that pinned him to earth and howling to the vicious blows of the stick that was smiting him so painfully.

So Oliver belaboured this child-beater till into the firelight sprang Roland to grasp at him, crying:

“Hold hard, Noll! Don’t kill the beast.”

“Not? No . . . no!” panted Oliver. “Better not, I suppose. I ought to, but . . . best not. Besides the . . . stick’s broke. . . . Where’s the child?”

“Lord knows! Come on, let’s get out of this before the woman takes a hand and complicates matters . . . ha, by Heavens, she’s for us! Cave, Noll —” And indeed the woman had risen and was making towards them at a shambling run, screeching as she came, and in one wild-tossed hand the glitter of a knife.

“Damme!” gasped Roland, recoiling before this fearsome vision. “Let’s run!”

Forthwith, together and as one, the cousins turned to flee, but, slipping on the wet grass, Roland fell heavily and before he could rise, the woman leapt screeching to stab with murderous knife. But Oliver, leaping also, flinched to the searing bite of quick-driven steel, seized the knife, wrenched it away and staggered free from the frenzied hands that clutched and tore at him. And now it was Oliver who cried, panting:

“Up, Roly, up and . . . for God’s sake . . . run!”

And thus, side by side, they fled this maddened creature headlong through the dark until their strength failed and they halted to catch their breath and listen for sound of pursuit.

“Lord!” panted Roland. “What . . . a night! That . . . frightful hag would . . . have murdered me . . . stabbed me . . . but for you. . . .”

“But . . . where,” gasped Oliver, “where’s Dobbin?”

“Eh . . . by Heavens!” exclaimed Roland in tones of utter dismay. “We’ve . . . lost him!”

“Well, he must be somewhere hereabouts, let’s cast around and search.”

“Certainly, Noll, anywhere you will, except back towards that screaming horror, that frightful petticoated devil, she frightens me. By Gad I’d rather charge Boney’s Old Guard again than front that murderous harridan! So for Heaven’s sake don’t call out or whistle or she’ll be after us.”

To and fro they quested but, with no blink of moon or star to guide them, went haphazard, lost and utterly bewildered in this rustling wet darkness until at last Oliver began to falter, stumbling often.

“Come on, man, come—on!” cried Roland, pettishly. “Why so cursed slow?”

“Coming, Roly . . . fast as . . . I can—”

“Eh? What’s the matter now?”

“A bit . . . faintish . . .” gasped Oliver, and, staggering wearily, tripped and fell to his knees, sank to his face and so lay in dreamy content until came desperate hands that fumbled him, a voice whose insistence troubled him:

“Oliver . . . Oliver . . . Noll! What is it, man? What’s amiss, old fellow? Are you hurt?”

“Only . . . my arm . . .”

“Ha, that she fiend! She stabbed you! And I never guessed! Is this the arm? Eh . . . what’s here . . . rain or blood? Damme, it’s blood! No wonder you’re faint . . . bleeding like a cursed stuck pig, by Jove! And all for me! Oh curse this darkness! You took this to save me, eh, Noll?—damn you!”

“Saw . . . the knife . . . in time . . . lucky—” murmured Oliver and seemed to fall asleep. . . .

But a very harassed sleep this, full of vague trouble, of pain, of forced movement and ceaseless effort that became so unbearable he groaned and, striving to wake, found sudden and blessed surcease in a profound forgetfulness of all things.

CHAPTER IX

WHICH IS A CHAPTER OF A BREVITY

WARMTH, comfort and a leaping, rosy glow that showed massive beams and rough timbering backed by a mystery of dancing shadows; a sound remote that might be wind in trees; a sound nearby that could be only the snort of a horse, and troubling to look thitherward, Oliver beheld his horse, looming gigantic in the ruddy gloom, yet knew him for his own animal Dobbin munching hay contentedly from a broken manger; a light, quick step and Roland was bending down glad-eyed to see him awake.

“How now, Noll old buck?”

With an effort Oliver sat up amid the hay that was his couch and stared round about in somewhat dazed manner.

“Are you going to tell me I was actually so womanish as to . . . faint?”

“I am, Noll, I do, and you were. And small wonder, for you must have lost a bucketful of blood, you sorry ass! For there you were rambling around with a dashed hole in your arm spouting like an infernal fountain! Took my handkerchief and yours and the best part of my dam shirt to staunch it, confound you!”

“But you found Dobbin?”

“No, he found us. There lay you sweetly aswoon like any dainty miss, there was I, having bound up your wounds like any deuced Samaritan, watching over you like a confounded guardian angel, when along comes your old Dobbin, bless his hoofs and haunches! So I hove you across the saddle, more like a sack of potatoes than ever, gave Dobbin his head, he brought us to this tumbledown old barn and—there you are! And here I pause for perfervid expressions of your dam gratitude.”

“Thanks, Roly-poly!”

“Extremely characteristic! Terse and to the point! And now, Mr. Curst Intrusive Dale, why must you interfere between me and that screeching horror? I detest having my life saved by anyone, most of all by—you!”

“Let’s hope it won’t happen again,” answered Oliver, sinking back amid the hay to smile up into his cousin’s scowling visage.

“And don’t imagine I’m anyway grateful! I’m not—no! That cut in your arm should rightly be in mine—”

“ ’Twould have been in your back, Roly man.”

“No matter! It was meant for me and should be mine! So don’t come any heroical airs or martyr-like mummery—ha! did you hear anything . . . over by the doors yonder?”

“No!”

“It’s devilish odd but two or three times I could have sworn hands were fumbling . . . someone outside. The wind, perhaps. Great Jupiter, Noll, but this has certainly been a most eventful night so far. I wonder if there’s more yet to come?”

“What, for instance?”

“Well, as I say, I could take oath someone . . . or something was creeping about outside! Not a cosy feeling, Noll. Now if that . . . that she devil is after us still. I’ve this pistol, thank my stars and—”

“But unprimed, Roly!”

“Jove, so it is! Egad, I’d forgotten! However,—then I’ll brain her with it, for, Noll, I’ll frankly confess she horrifies, terrifies me! A perfectly frightful creature—unsexed, inhuman, a walking abomination—”

“Yet she must have been a shy, timid creature all sweet innocence once, Roly!”

“Goes to prove woman can sink far lower than a man, can become more terrible, more frightful and far more loathsome—”

“Or infinitely higher and nobler.”

“Tush for a sentimental jackass! Who wants a woman so high she’s out of reach, or so noble one’s afraid to kiss her and so on,—not I! But then I’m simply a mere human man and so hungry that, just at present, I’d rather have a slice of juicy beef than a kiss from the ruddiest lip . . . and ale! Frothing . . . Oh Jupiter . . . in a tankard—”

“Stop it!” said Oliver hoarsely.

“What, are you famished too?”

“No, we had supper—”

“You did, Noll, but I, fool that I was, scarce ate a crumb, not being hungry then, but now—ha, what are you after?”

“Water! I’m parched with thirst and . . . must drink!” So saying, Oliver sat up and began to scramble afoot till Roland’s hand checked him, a strong, very compelling hand yet strangely gentle.

“Lie you still, Mr. Tom Fool!” he commanded. “You’ll start your confounded bleeding again.”

“But I . . . must drink!”

“You shall. I’ve an old crock here full of water for you from the brook outside, how else d’you think I bathed your dam wound?”

“Bathed it . . . did you?”

“Of course! Now up with you, gently man, now—drink!” So Oliver, supported by Roland’s arm, drank deep, and sighing in ecstasy, sank back upon his fragrant couch.

“You’ve made a pretty good job of my arm, Roly.”

“Yes. I had some experience of wounds and so on in the Peninsula. The Froggies jagged a bayonet through my leg—”

“And I said it was tight boots when you limped!” sighed Oliver. “And you soldiered in Spain?”

“Certainly I did,—the whole campaign or nearly, and was with Moore when he was killed at Corunna. That was a masterly retreat, Noll, but then he was a grand soldier—Sir John!”

“You must have been very . . . young?”

“Not so very, besides there were many younger than I.”

“And I called you a peace-time soldier.”

“You did.”

“It seems I am to apologize.”

“You are!”

“Then I do.”

“You have, but don’t be too dam humble over it. Close your confounded old eyes and get to sleep. Slumber’s your medicine at present. So close your dashed blinkers and woo the downy, my tulip.”

CHAPTER X

DESCRIBES THE ADVENT OF A WAIF; ALSO OF JEREMY
JARVIS, A TINKER

OLIVER waked to a beam of sun that, finding its way through some crevice in the age-mouldered walls, shot athwart the fragrant dusk a shaft of glory showing to his slumberous eyes that which set them instantly wide and had him sitting up to stare broad awake in a moment. With his gaze yet fixed in the one direction Oliver reached forth, shook Roland to grumbling wakefulness and pointed speechlessly down to something that lay curled and cuddled between them; beholding which, Roland jibbed like a startled horse; he stared, he rubbed his eyes and stared again, he gaped down at the small shape couched between them all rags and hair and little bony limbs, he gaped at Oliver and finally spoke, albeit in hushed accents:

“Well . . . I’ll be everlastingly—”

“Hush!” murmured Oliver, “she’s waking!”

Two great, dark eyes opened and stared up at him, a wistful, half-eager, very fearful look and from quivering lips, pitifully adroop, a clear voice strangely sweet and softly modulated:

“Ess, I be’s awake zur, but all afrit t’move cos she were ’fraid as you’d clout ’er an’ drive ’er away.”

“No one is going to . . . er . . . clout you,” said Roland.

“Or drive you away,” murmured Oliver.

“Great Jove and Jupiter!” muttered Roland, aghast, whereat the great, dark eyes were turned on him with such pleading, searching gaze that he recoiled yet further from her ragged, dirty little person.

“Why d’you stare so, child?” he enquired.

“For to watch out if ye goo for to clout ’er.”

“But I . . . I never clout little girls.”

“ ’Ow do she know?”

“Because I tell her so.”

“Well, do t’other un,—this un?” she questioned, pointing small, tremulous finger at Oliver.

“No, of course not.”

“No,” mused the child, surveying Oliver with her wise child eyes, “’e don’t look like ’e do neether.”

“Where is your mother, child?”

“’Er do ’know. ’Er were took away from ’er.”

“Was that . . . that your mother in the wood?”

“No, ’er were Sal an’ t’other un were Mumper Joe as clouts ’er proper an’ kicks ’er too, lookee!” and she showed a small, thin leg woefully bruised. “So when you clouts Joe ’er runs off an’ when you goes I folleys, so if you don’t clout ’er nor kick, ’er stays ’long o’ you.”

“Lord love us!” sighed Roland. “Here’s a fine, confounded kettle of fish, Noll?”

“Undoubtedly!” nodded Oliver.

“An’ you got a pretty face, you ’ave!”

“Who? Me?” quoth Roland, blinking.

“Yes—you. A pretty face wi’ no fur onto it like Mumper Joe’s.”

“And there’s for you, my fine Gorgio gentleman,” chuckled Oliver, “no fur! Though already your pretty face would be prettier for a razor—and mine, too, for the matter of that.”

“But, Noll, what on earth are we to do with Madam Misery here?”

“Well, Roly, first of all I suggest you wash her—”

“Eh—wash—don’t be such a preposterous, confounded fool! Wash her? I? Great Jupiter Olympus!”

“Child,” said Oliver, venturing to touch her long, bright, touzled hair, “tell me, how old are you?”

“Her do ’know.”

“From her size and grinders,” said Roland, “I should say she’s rising five.”

“Nearer eight!” quoth Oliver.

“And what’s your name?” enquired Roland, flinching from contact with her little, thin and very grimy hand.

“They calls me Clia, zur.”

“A pretty name!” said Oliver.

“A gipsy name!” nodded Roland.

“Perhaps . . . and yet I don’t think she’s gipsy born.”

“Nonsense man! Look at these great, dark eyes!”

“But observe this splendid auburn hair!”

“A matted horror!” said Roland, shuddering.

“Needs a comb certainly.”

“Needs shaving and scraping, Noll. She’s gruesome with grime begad!”

“No ’er bean’t,” said the child in her strangely soft, sweet voice and shaking small head vehemently at them each in turn. “’Er be clean as a daisy flower cos ’er washed ’er i’ the rill day afore yistiddy ’er did—all over!”

“Indeed, Madam?” said Roland. “She’s pretty quick, eh, Noll, fairly precocious for five years of life?”

“I begin to think she’s nearer ten, Roly!”

“Ridiculous, Noll! She’s altogether too small, too dashed, infernal puny even for five.”

“Underfed, overworked, hardly used,” murmured Oliver. “She may be—eleven or twelve!”

“An’ oh, ’er do be main clemmed for summat t’eat!”

“What’s she saying, Noll?”

“It’s fairly easy to construe, she wants something to eat, poor little soul!”

“Eat?” exclaimed Roland, in a kind of still fury. “If we don’t eat soon I shall—” He checked suddenly and seemed not to breathe; he threw back his head and began to snuff and sniff the air, then his eyes half-closed as in an ecstasy and with voice awed and hushed, he spoke:

“Noll . . . oh, Noll . . . d’you smell it?”

“What?” enquired Oliver, glancing about.

“Frying . . . bacon! Ham . . . rashers!”

“Yes!” said Oliver, sniffing also, “yes—by George!”

“’S ’am!” piped little Clia. “’S ’am afrizzle!”

Now as they sat, entranced as it were by this savoury, mouth-watering fragrance, from somewhere nearby came a deep, sonorous voice upraised in song and the words these:

“A tinker I am . . . Oh, a tinker am I;
A tinker I’ll live . . . and a tinker I’ll die.
If the King in his crown would change places wi’ me,
I’d laugh, so I would, and I’d say unto he:
A tinker I am, oh, a tinker am I;
A tinker I’ll live . . . and a tinker I’ll die—”

The song ended, up rose Oliver and Roland, the child between them, and opening the wide doors, stepped from the dim old barn, out into a green, fragrant world glad with sunlight and the blended chorus of newly wakened birds.

Hard beside the barn stood a trim, four-wheeled cart all hung about with pots and pans and every sort of tin-ware, beyond this vehicle a plump pony cropped the grass noisily and, beyond this sleek animal, a man was perched upon a stool beside a brook that rippled sparkling to the sun, a small, trim man just at present very intent upon the large frying-pan that hissed and spluttered delectably above a crackling fire.

Now, beholding this man, the child uttered a cooing, bird-like cry and sped on twinkling bare feet to clasp and kiss him so eagerly that she kissed his hat off.

“Well, blow my dickey!” exclaimed the tinker, “what brings you hereaway, Clia, lass?”

“Them!” she answered, pointing to the cousins. “The gold un wi’ the curly ’air clouted Joe proper cos Joe clouted me, so ’er runned away to them, ’er did.”

“Well!” exclaimed the Tinker, glancing from the child to Oliver and Roland. “Twist my whiskers!”

“You ’aven’t got none!” sighed Clia.

“No more I ’ave, my duck, I shaves ’em off every mornin’ reg’lar.”

“Good morning!” said Oliver, stepping nearer; whereat the Tinker, his eyes very wide, rose in nimble haste the better to stare.

“Strike me perishing blue!” he exclaimed, “young sir, you looks like battle, murder an’ sudden death,—on two legs!”

Now glancing down at himself, Oliver saw his fine, frilled shirt and flowered satin waistcoat all bespattered in such dreadful manner that he stood aghast.

“Love us!” quoth the Tinker, his bright eyes eager and sparkling. “You ’aven’t been a-slaughterin’ your hated enemy and a-rollin’ yourself in his gore, I s’pose?”

“No,” answered Oliver, “I may look like it but,—no, this is my own blood—”

“Sal done it!” piped little Clia. “Flamin’ Sal done it cos ’e clouted ’er Joe.”

“Clouted—Joe?” repeated the Tinker, his small dark features lit by sudden, radiant smile. “Sir, this ’ere warms me very heart—”

“Hearkee, my man,” said Roland, stooped yearningly above the fragrant sputtering of the frying-pan, “will five shillings buy our breakfasts of you?”

“No, sir, it wunt!” answered the Tinker, shaking his bullet head with the utmost determination.

“Then we’ll make it ten. We’re famishing, my man, devilish sharp set, so ten shillings for ham, bread, coffee and an egg or so if possible.”

“No, sir!” repeated the Tinker, picking up his hat and clapping it on rather over one fierce, bright eye. “Not a scrench, nary bite nor sup can ye buy o’ Jeremy Jarvis. Jeremy only sells kettles and sich. But if ye wants to eat in good fellowship you’re right welcome.”

“Preposterous!” exclaimed Roland.

“And extremely generous of you, Mr. Jarvis!” said Oliver.

“Though we insist on paying!” added Roland haughtily.

“Which it ain’t generous,” retorted the Tinker, “and ye can’t pay because, though bang-up young bloods, ye be on the high-pad by your looks and so ’tis the hospitality o’ the road I offers ye. For there’s a brotherhood o’ the road, young sirs, for all them as tramps the road. So if ye be for feedin’ set ye down and feed—hearty and welcome.”

“And we accept your kind hospitality most gratefully!” said Oliver.

“But,” added Roland, “we shall certainly reimburse you—”

“Eh?” questioned the Tinker, pausing in the act of slicing a rasher from the smoked ham upon his knee. “You’ll—what, young sir?”

“Reimburse you.”

“Which,” quoth the Tinker, scratching his nose with the haft of his knife, “is one as be noo to me . . . re-im-burse! ’Tis a goodish word and rhymes wi’ ‘curse’. And wot might it mean, young sir?”

“That we shall repay you.”

“Ho!” said the Tinker; and having cut three goodly rashers, he set them to splutter merrily above the fire.

“The child knows you, it seems,” said Oliver.

“Ay, she do, sir, though I’ve seen her but twice, and the first time I gets me knocked down for taking her part, and the second time I gets me a black eye and all along o’ this pore, misused child.”

“You mean her brutal father?” enquired Roland.

“No, sir, I means Mumper Joe! I wonder he ain’t been the death of her afore now.”

“And that . . . that frightful female!” said Roland.

“Meaning, sir, his mort, Flaming Sal? Ah, she be a caution! They be strangers here in the South Country, gen’rally keeps north o’ London, but I travels all roads north an’ south.”

“Then she is not their own child?” Oliver enquired.

“Lord love ye—no! There’s good stuff went to Clia’s makin’, I reckon, blood and breedin’. How Joe come by ’er I dunno,—stole ’er, like as not, pore little lass, and treats her crool. First time as ever I see him he was layin’ into ’er with a stick, so I nat’rally takes ’er part.”

“And he knocked you down?”

“Ar! Flat as a flounder! Ye see me being no Goliath o’ Gath as could use a jaw bone so hearty, and not ’aving the fist o’ long John Bartry or legs o’ Natty Bell or legs an’ fists o’ my pal, Jessamy Todd, or even young Benno Warmestro, I ain’t no fighting man and so—”

“Hold hard!” cried Roland. “You speak of great pugilists, champions nearly all,—d’you mean that you know them?”

“Ar! ’Specially Jessamy Todd, Jessamy’s my pal.”

“Pal?” enquired Oliver.

“Gipsy for ‘brother,’ young sir.”

“No but—by Jingo!” exclaimed Roland in waxing excitement. “Do you mean to say that you actually know Jessamy Todd, the Neverbeaten, the Nonpareil,—do you indeed?”

“Ar, this ten year. But these yere rashers be done, you’ll find pewter plates i’ the box seat o’ my cart wi’ a fork or so and other clobber.” Forthwith Roland sought and found the plates, and “other clobber,” the smoking rashers were served out with fragrant coffee from a battered old pot and they proceeded to eat a while in a silent beatitude more eloquent than words.

“Tasty?” enquired the Tinker, suddenly, to be answered by a murmur of deep approbation and most profound sigh from Roland:

“By Jupiter!” he exclaimed, tin mug at lip, “it goes beyond speech, old fellow, it’s—by Heavens, it’s positive nectar and ambrosia!”

“It’s appetite and fresh air!” nodded the Tinker; and so was silence again. At last Oliver, chancing to catch Mr. Jarvis’s sharp, bright eye, instantly propounded the yet unanswered problem:

“What do you suppose is this child’s age?”

The Tinker ceased mastication to glance down at little Clia crouched beside him on the grass, and shook his head.

“There aren’t no telling,” he answered. “Ye see, children, like the rest on us, is aged not so much by years as wot’s crammed into said years,—experience, young sir, things as we do and suffer, ar—’specially wot we suffer, and by sich reckoning I reckon she’s, well—a sight older than she looks.”

“How old does she look to you?”

“Well now that’s all accordin’ to carcumstance. Now, f’rinstance, wi’ her small inside comfortably full and her small outside warm wi’ this yere kindly sun and none to harm or fright her, she looks to me purty nigh no older than ’er years, say seven, say nine. But starve her, scare an’ beat her and she’ll look a pore, little, old ooman! Which meks me for to wonder wot’s ’er fate . . . ’er future? So small, so weak, so innocent—now! Ah, but wot o’ the future? A li’l waif o’ the roads . . . to creep away into some corner an’ die uncared for mebbe, or—worse still p’raps—to live an’ grow up as best she may,—to what, ah . . . to what?”

“Rather dreadful to contemplate!” said Oliver, forgetting to eat. “Yes, for anyone blessed, or cursed, with imagination there must always be some

terror in the Future, the great Unknown . . . and for this little, desolate creature what can there be but misery?"

"Ah, an' worse! A li'l innocent lamb and the ways full o' ravensome wolves! Thank God I never married or begot a girl child to p'raps leave destitoot, like this here pore innocent, to be led astray . . . brutalized—in some black future!"

"A ghastly thought!" said Oliver, scowling up at the cloudless heaven. "Yes, the future can be a terror!"

"Then think of the present!" said Roland. "And at present her crying need is soap, water and a dashed currycomb."

"True enough!" sighed Oliver, viewing Clia's rags and long, matted tresses with troubled eyes. "I'm wondering, Mr. Jarvis . . ."

"Oh?" enquired the Tinker, as he paused. "Wot?"

"Do you suppose, being the sensible, kindly soul you are, do you think . . . you could . . . wash her?"

"Oo? Me?" demanded the Tinker stabbing himself with bony thumb.

"Yes," nodded Oliver. "It would be a . . . noble act and great kindness to her. Would you? Will you?"

"We-ll but," answered the Tinker, staring at the morsel of ham impaled on his knife-point rather as if it might attack him, "I . . . dunno! Y'see, seeing as how she be of sex femmy-nine 'twould be p'raps a bit ork'ard like."

"But," said Oliver persuasively, "she's really almost . . . only a baby."

Now here the small object of discussion, who had been eating with the dumb voracity of the little, half-starved animal she was, rose nimbly to her little, bony legs and fixing them in turn with her great, dark-eyed gaze, spoke for herself,—quite dispassionately but with the utmost finality:

"No! She aren't no baby, her'm bigger 'n her looks, an' growin' bigger, an' her knows what her knows, and her knows no man aren't a-goin' for to wash her—nohow!" Having said which, she crouched down again and went on eating ravenously as ever, leaving the three to gaze at her and upon each other quite mumchance.

"Blow—me—tight!" murmured the Tinker, at last.

"Odd!" said Roland. "She occasionally aspirates her aitches."

“Somebody must wash her!” sighed Oliver.

“Somebody shall!” quoth Mr. Jarvis, clapping hand to thigh. “Mother Warmestro! She be camped wi’ her old Tom, not a mile away.”

“Any relation to Benno, the milling cove?” enquired Roland, feeling his bruised eye, instinctively.

“Ar, grand-mother!” answered the Tinker. “And having took notice o’ your damaged ogle, young sir, I now makes bold to ax,—was it Benno put it into mourning?”

“Himself!” answered Roland, a little ruefully.

“Then you was the bang-up tippy, the dashing buck as kissed his lass?”

“No, I was the fool who meant to and—did not. But how did you guess?”

“I didn’t, sir, Zeena told me, ar—and Benno says as you’re pretty good, well plucked and game as they make ’em!”

“No, did he though?” said Roland, flushing. “Benno’s a true sportsman!”

“He surely is!” nodded the Tinker. “There’s none better save one, an’ that’s Jessamy Todd.”

“Aha, true enough, old fellow, Jessamy’s an out and outer, quick as lightning and a fist like the hammer of Thor. And never conquered! A dam pity he retired, a deuced, dashed waste of fine material!”

“No, sir, he’s doin’ a better work!”

“Impossible! How?”

“Jessamy’s fighting for the Lord, he’s a-tackling Old Nick where and whensoever found, he’s a-smiting sinful coves for the good o’ their souls, punching evil out o’ them and good into ’em, frequent and hearty.”

“By Jingo,” sighed Roland, “I should like to see him at it!” And he went on eating again ’til with sigh of happy repletion, he leaned back and enquired:

“Have you heard anything of a highwayman in these parts?”

“Ar!” nodded Mr. Jarvis. “I have so! And a reg’lar desprit vaggabone by accounts! Don’t stand no nonsense, it’s ‘hand over’ or—bang, wi’ him!”

“What? Has he shot anyone?”

“Ar! One hoss an’ a gen’leman’s dicer, or as you might say cady or ’at.”

“And,” Oliver put in, “have you chanced to see or hear anything of a horse, a prancing, dancing snort on four legs—”

“A splendid animal,” cried Roland, “all fire, mettle and blood from muzzle to tail, black as midnight and with a white blaze.”

“Well, my masters,” answered the Tinker, “I won’t say yes and I don’t say no,—but—as I druv by this here very morning I sees an animal mighty such-like, not a mile from old Tom Warmestro’s caravan.”

“Then,” sighed Roland, stretching luxuriously, “I’ll honour Mr. Warmestro with a call, presently.”

“No,” said Oliver, rising, “I’ll go, and I’ll go now. And I’ll take little Clia with me, if she’ll come.”

“Wait!” cried the Tinker, rising. “Afore you go gimme your coat an’ weskit, I’ll clean off some o’ that there gore!”

“You’re very kind!” said Oliver.

And when Mr. Jarvis had performed on these garments and removed most of their horrific stains, Oliver did them on again (with due care for his arm), and turned to little Clia:

“Child,” said he gently, “will you go with me?”

She looked at the hand he had reached out to her, she studied his comely, grey-eyed Saxon face and, rising without a word, smoothed her scanty rags, shook back the tangles of her golden hair and slipped her small, cool fingers into Oliver’s vital clasp.

“Her’ll goo along of ee—anywheers!” said Clia.

CHAPTER XI

TELLS HOW ONE SMOTE HARD YET PRAYED HARDER TO THE SALVATION OF SOULS

HAND-IN-HAND went they, tall young man and puny child, silent each and thoughtful, following this bowery, prattling stream until it brought them out upon a sunny upland that gradually became so steep Oliver paused at last to look down into the great, dark, black-lashed eyes that gazed up at him so very solemnly.

“Shall I carry you?” he enquired.

“Whyfore?” she demanded.

“Your small legs seem tired.”

“No they bean’t, tes only as her’ve ate such lots—an’—lots her’m swole.”

“Oh!” said Oliver.

“Ar!” quoth Clia, with nod and tone so very like the Tinker’s that Oliver laughed, and on they went until, having climbed this grassy slope, they halted to rest in the sun-dappled shade of a coppice; and as they sat side by side, Clia turned to survey him with such critical yet wistful scrutiny that Oliver instinctively (and despite her rags and grime) set his arm around her.

“Well?” he enquired, drawing her closer, “what do you think of me?”

“’Er likes ee!” she nodded. “You got nice, bright ’air an’ yourn big like Joe, an’ don’t clout ’er, only her likes bestest black ’air.”

“Do you, my dear?”

“Ar! An’ why jew call her ‘dear’? Nobody don’t never call her ‘dear’ no more . . . they useter once ‘dear’ yes an’ ‘darlingest’ but—never no more—”

“Who, child, who used to call you so?”

“Her don’t ’member. But her’ll sing for ee if ee ax her.”

“Then please sing.”

Throwing back her little head she began to sing forthwith in small, sweet voice, and pronouncing every word correctly as he was quick to notice.

“My love is like a red, red rose
That’s newly blown in June;
My love is like a melody
That’s sweetly played in tune,

an’ that’s all her ’members.”

“Clia, look at me! Now, try to remember when you last heard that sung, try to remember who taught it to you.”

“Ah, her have tried an’ her do’know.”

“Can’t you remember anything of your own mother, the mother who must have loved you and kissed you good night in bed, can’t you?”

“No, her can’t . . . only . . . sometimes when her’s asleep . . . someone comes an’ kisses her, someone—” The too-pale lips parted to sudden, shrill scream, the too-thin little body cowered against him in wild terror, the little, frail hand pointed where two men came running at them through the greeny twilight of the coppice and in the foremost of these twain Oliver recognized Mumper Joe.

“Gimme my brat, you—!” roared Joe, flourishing the formidable stick he clutched.

Oliver rose, swung his small companion up into a fork of the tree behind him and turned to front the oncoming menace.

“Come on, now!” growled the ruffian, halting to scowl and poise himself for action. “Gimme that li’l danged kid o’ mine or me an’ Dirk ’ere’ll kick yore insides out! Come on, d’year?”

“Don’t ee, oh—don’t ee!” wailed the child. “Don’t let ’em clout ’er no more.”

“They shan’t!” said Oliver, through shut teeth and, clenching his fists, stood to her defence.

Mumper Joe leapt—to be checked and shaken by a flush blow to bearded chin; then Oliver groaned with agony, and reeled to the stroke that smote his wounded arm and, ere he might recover, the man Dirk was upon him also; a brawny fist dropped him to his knees and, weak with loss of blood, he was down and at their mercy. . . . Instinctively he threw up his sound arm against the heavy boot that would have blinded him; he heard little Clia squeal . . . there came to him the thudding impact of mighty blows and he glanced up . . . to see Mumper Joe hurled backward and the man Dirk

go down headlong before the potent fists of one who, having rid himself thus of the two men, now turned to front the woman and the dread menace of her steel; she crept, she crouched, she sprang,—but lightly, nimbly, swifter even than she, this slim man swayed aside from her murderous knife-thrust, smiting downwards as he did so and the blade, struck from her grasp, flickered through the air and was gone.

“Stand off, my sister!” said the man in voice unexpectedly gentle and pleasing to hear, “you, as be very child o’ God though you’ve forgot it, I guess, remember your own womanhood and come help me cherish these other o’ God’s lost children as forced me to lay ’em out—”

The woman snarled and spat towards him. The man sighed, shook his comely head in gentle reproof and spoke her the more tenderly:

“Poor little woman! Poor lost child! An’ yet not so lost but the kind Lord may find ee again,—if only you’ll let Him. You’ve suffered, child, ’tis plain to see, and suffering hath made ee too grimly fierce for the sweet solace o’ tears . . . but weep, child, weep if ye can, ’twill let out all the gentle womanhood locked up so fast in your poor, wounded heart. And I struck ee, my sister, only for to save ee from sin o’ bloodshed. And because ee be truly a child o’ God, so do I love and respect your womanhood—”

“No. . .! No. . .!” The words were a strangled moan; the hands that would have wrought murder were twisted now as in agony, the face once so comely was convulsed. “You . . . fool!” she gasped, “I’m no . . . child o’ God . . . He’s forgot me long ago! I’m Sal, Flaming Sal . . . drink and the devil! I’m bad as bad. . . . So don’t . . . don’t talk to me o’ God. . . . He’s in His Heaven and I’m . . . in hell! Oh . . . Mother, I’m . . . lost!”

Uttering this cry of despair and desolation, she raised clenched hands to her contorted face and, swaying, sank to her knees. Then the man went and, kneeling beside her, set his arm about this shaken, desolate woman to draw her head upon his wide shoulder and pillow it there.

“Weep, my sister, weep!” said he, gently. “There’s salvation in such tears, and as for the Lord God He’s here beside us now. So let’s talk wi’ Him our merciful and almighty Father.” And in clear, sweet voice the man prayed:

“Father o’ mercy look down on this poor child o’ Thine so bruised o’ soul, so woeful and heavy-hearted. Reach forth thy cherishing hand in comfort and give her the blessing o’ tears. And through her tears o’ grievous repentance let her see again the glory o’ Thy loving face that, beholding

Thee and Thy abounding mercy, she may find her way back to Thee and, walking in Thy blessed light, may go astray no more. Hear us, Thy children, and bless us gentle Father—amen!”

The woman’s clenched hands were clasped like a child’s in prayer, her fierce eyes were bright with tears that softened and made them beautiful, from her quivering lips came broken, murmured supplication:

“God forgive . . . let me be . . . thy child again . . .”

“Sal!” groaned a voice nearby. “Oh, Sal, dang yer eyes—where are ye?”

Lightly, swiftly the man arose from his knees and coming where Mumper Joe sat blinking in fierce, dazed fashion, smiled and nodded down at him.

“How are ye now, pal?” he enquired.

Uttering a foul imprecation, Mumper Joe struck at him savagely, whereat the man Dirk cried on him in furious warning:

“Lorramighty, it be Jessamy, y’ fool! ’Tis Jessamy Todd!” Hearing which dread name, Mumper Joe instantly flattened out again and closed his eyes; hereupon Jessamy, stirring him gently with his toe, spake him as gently:

“Up to your knees, Joe,—ay, and you too, brother,—up t’ your knees! We’re a-going to give thanks to the Lord, all three on us. You because ye was prevented from staining your poor misused souls wi’ another sin, and me because, though I hits ye pretty fairish hard, the Good Lord didn’t suffer me to kill ye both stone dead. So kneel as I do, lest I be forced to hit ye again!”

The two men scrambled to their knees forthwith.

“Now,” said Jessamy, kneeling between them and folding those terrible hands very reverently, “now, brothers, let us pray! Are ye ready? Answer ay or no!”

“Ay!” they muttered.

“Then bow your heads an’ close your eyes.”

And when they had instantly obeyed him:

“Lord of forgiveness,” prayed Jessamy, “have mercy on us all three,—but first these two sinful sons o’ Thine so prone to prideful cruelty, but now so meek and mild as two lambs b’ reason o’ the fists o’ Thy servant. Let their bruises pain ’em, Lord, to mind ’em how they are but poor weak

children, let it make them a little kinder henceforth to all as be weaker than themselves. And when their bruises be gone alas! let the memory of them abide to mind 'em as cruelty and violence shall bring Thy judgment upon 'em again, soon or late. Now, Lord and Father, forgive me that in smiting Sin I loved the smiting for its own sake. Lastly I thank Thee as Thou didst not suffer me in my vain pride to slay 'em. Go with us now, Lord, and learn us to so live that when we die we may meet each other comrades all in Thy everlasting glory, amen!"

"And now," said Jessamy, rising, "off with ye. Peace be unto ye bretheren,—only—don't come any more o' your old games, don't lemme hear any bad reports o' your doin's or I'll surely come a-seeking and, when found, shall mebbe use ye a bit rougher like. So be kindly gentle as ye can."

Up from their knees, and rather painfully, rose the thoroughly cowed two and, uttering no word, turned and limped away after the woman who, far in the distance, was walking as if with new purpose, while Jessamy Todd looked after them, head bowed and powerful hands clasped as if in prayer. At last he turned to smile cheerily at Oliver who, now getting to his feet, looked back at Jessamy in silent wonderment.

"Why d'ye stare so, brother?" questioned Jessamy.

"Because I have seen a miracle."

"Those men? I hit 'em 'arder than I should ought, sir."

"I mean the woman. You made her human."

"Not I, sir, this was the Lord's doing,—and the mercy of her tears, poor soul!"

"Do you think such change may endure?"

"Only the good Lord knows this, comrade. But what o' yourself? Why is your hand all bloody?"

"They struck my wounded arm."

"Eh, wounded? Then off wi' your coat, sir, and lemme do what I may."

"You began," said Oliver, easing himself painfully out of his tight-fitting garment, "by calling me 'brother'."

"Did I, sir? The word comes nat'rally, but—seeing as you're one o' the quality—"

“And my name, to friends, is Oliver, though I’d prefer you to call me ‘brother’.”

“Well, you’ve a tidy arm, brother. And if you’re minded to tell how came this ugly hole in’t, I’m fain to hear.”

So, while Jessamy made shift (and very dexterously) to check the blood-flow, Oliver, trying not to wince overmuch, recounted the incident.

“So,” said Jessamy, when the tale was done, “there be the child, eh, brother?”

“Ar!” quoth Clia, nodding down at them from her leafy perch. “Here be she! An’ going’ to be washed, her be,—all over!”

“Eh? Washed?” repeated Jessamy staring up at this elfish vision amid the leafage.

“Ar—washed,—everywhere! He says her must!” And she pointed sharp finger at Oliver.

“And so,” he added, “I’m taking her to a Mrs. Warmestro.”

“And, brother, ye couldn’t do better! Gammer Ju be a motherly soul, a kindly gentle creeter, though a Roman.”

“Roman?” enquired Oliver.

“One o’ the Romany folk,—some calls ’em Gipsies. What’s more she’s a wise woman, herbs and simples, infoosions, drinks and poultices—do that arm o’ yourn a power o’ good.”

“It feels pretty well already, thanks to you, Jessamy.”

“However I’ll come along, if ye will, the Warmestros know me well.”

“I’d be grateful.”

“Then come ye, my pretty!” quoth Jessamy and lifting the child to his powerful shoulders away they went across sunny meadow, through shady coppice and darkling wood, following a wide, grassy track that brought them at last out upon a small heath or common where stood a large, weather-beaten caravan with two or three tents grouped about a fire above which dangled a large, black pot.

“Kooshti divvus, folks!” cried Jessamy, in his rich, tuneful voice. “Who’s at home? God love ye all, here I am again!” At which cheery summons out from the caravan stepped a tall, old woman, grasping a long

knife and half-peeled potato, a stately old woman who smiled, and forth of a tent peered a little old man, plaiting a whiplash, who scowled.

“Why ’tis Jessamy wi’ a gemman an’ li’l stranger,” cried the woman nodding handsome, white head. “Speak ’em welcome, Tom,—manners now—manners!” Obediently the aged man nodded also, muttered a greeting, and went on plaiting his whiplash, scowling black as ever.

“Gammer Ju,” said Jessamy, swinging his small burden lightly to earth, “my pal here needs his little gal washed complete and his arm doctored, so, minding you was good at sich, I’ve brought ’em along.”

“Bless ’er little ’eart!” said Mrs. Warmestro. “So I will so soon as these taties be in the pot. Benno an’ Zeena be to the fair. You ain’t see ’em, ’ave ye?”

“Why no, Gammer. And this gen’leman be my pal, Mr. Oliver.”

“You’ m welcome, sir,—ain’t ’e, Tom? Speak up now,—manners, Tom, manners!”

The little old man cocked fierce eye at Oliver and muttered,

“Ar!”

“Come, li’l lass an’ ’elp Gammer Ju pop these yere taties in pot, you ain’t ’feared o’ me, are ye?”

“No,” answered Clia in soft, sweetly-modulated voice, so at odds with her rags and grime, “you got sich pretty eyes, and her loves your white hair, sich lots-an’-lots, you got!”

“Why, Lord love ye, dearie,” chuckled Gammer Ju, “there was many a likely man says the same when these yere eyes was younger an’ brighter an’ this ’air so black an’ long I could set down on it, like a raven’s wing it were, ay me! Don’t ee mind, Tom, ’ow long an’ black it were, black as midnight—eh?”

Old Tom made sound like a snort.

“But,” said Clia, “her likes it white bestest.”

“I’m a-goin’ to downright love ee, my duck!” laughed Gammer Ju, kissing the thin, little cheek. “Now pop these taties into pot, chuck ’em in! Now—peep in! ’Tis a stoo, dearie, there be coney into it, wi’ plenty o’ pickled pork, an’ a best part o’ shin o’ beef, an’ dumplin’ an’ wegetables an’ a—no, never mind wot more,—cos Gaffer Tom do love a stoo, don’t ee, old ’un,—eh, Tom?”

The Old Un contrived something like a sniff, but condescended a nod.

“Now, my dearie duck, go along o’ me an’ I’ll make ee sweet as may-flower an’ likely find ee summat better than them rags. Come along o’ Ju.”

The child went dutifully, but paused at the door of the van to fix Oliver with her big, wistful eyes.

“Ye wunt . . . run off . . . an’ leave ’er?” she questioned, breathless with sudden fear.

“No no,” he answered. “I’ll be here.”

“Well then,” she demanded, “when her’s been washed all over, ee wunt be ’fraid for to kiss her, will ee?”

“My dear,” he answered, smiling up into this solemn little face, “I wasn’t afraid. I’ll kiss you now, if you will.” But, shaking her head, Clia followed Mrs. Warmestro into the van and closed the door.

“Now there,” said Jessamy, seating himself beside the fire, “there goes a little creetur as a man might grow oncommon fond on.”

“Yes!” nodded Oliver, musingly. “Tell me, Mr. Todd—”

“Jessamy to you, sir!”

“Then don’t ‘sir’ me.”

“Right y’are, brother, tit for tat. What was you asking me?”

“I was wondering if you could tell me how old . . . or how young that child truly is?”

“Precious hard to decide, pal!” answered Jessamy, rubbing shaven chin. “But judging by her eyes,—which ain’t child’s eyes,—by the unexpected things she says and the way she says ’em, I should guess she was anything from six to twelve year old—at least!”

“Yes,” mused Oliver. “I suppose such suffering and cruel treatment must age a child . . . for you are right, Jessamy,—sometimes she looks at me with the great, sad eyes of a grieving woman.”

CHAPTER XII

TELLS OF A SPEECHLESS FUGITIVE AND AN OFFICER OF THE LAW

“No, my gemman—no!” cried old Tom Warmestro, harshly. “I tells ye an’ I tells ye as there’s nobody nor none o’ we gentle Romans as has seed nor heard tell o’ no hoss nor gry-black nor white, piebald, sorrel, bay nor any other colour, never done whatever nowheeres, my fine gorgio rye—no, my gemman—no!”

“Yes, sir!” cried another voice, like an echo, and out from the adjacent thickets stepped young Benno. “Grandad—the old Un here forgets. The gry you seeks is over hid in the wesh yonder along of ourn—”

“Thatlldoo!” screeched Old Tom. “Shet yore perishin’ trap!” And leaping afoot with unexpected agility, he clenched frail old fists and began to belabour his grandson, who, holding him off with one large hand, patted his silvery head with the other, saying:

“Easy, Gaffer, easy now . . .” and so fell to the Gipsy or Romany dialect; then picking up his ferocious grandsire, Benno perched him back upon his stool and turned to smile and grasp Jessamy’s hand.

“How are ye, Jess pal?” said he. “I hears as you’ve been at it again though only two on ’em this time! And me not there to see—dannel it! I might ha’ learned a lot . . . that lead wi’ your left, shift wi’ your feet an’ cross-counter to the mark,—arm, shoulder an’ body aswing on your left stamper! Summat like this, be it, Jessamy?” And Benno smote the air—two desperate blows, long left followed by powerful right, pivoting on his toes to bring shoulder and body behind that flashing right. “Be that summat like it, Jess?”

“Ay!” nodded Jessamy, chin in hand, “you shape well, Ben, and mighty well! But mind now! Never let out wi’ your right till you be sure o’ getting home wi’ it, lad, for if you miss—ah, then you’re open for a counter as may drop ye clean out o’ time.”

“Drop me,—by goles this reminds me, Jess! We finds a cove as had been dropped, by his hoss I reckon, a bang-up genty cove! I leaves Zeena by him and comes for help. ’E’s a bit orkard for to manage alone, even for me, he’s ’urt purty bad—or drunk.”

“Show me!” said Jessamy, rising. So off they strode together, leaving Oliver beside the fire, weak and sick with the pain of his arm and revolving

in his troubled mind the dreadful question,—what must become of the child, this waif of the woods and lonely byeways? He was yet pondering this and no nearer any solution when back came Jessamy and Benno carrying between them the long, helpless body of a man who moaned and muttered incoherently.

“Where will ye have him, Ben lad?”

“In my tent yonder.”

What with pain of wound and worry of mind, Oliver sat, little heeding anything beside, until to him came Jessamy, a man also perplexed.

“Brother,” said he, “I know when a cove’s drunk and I’ve seen coves knocked unconscious frequent, but I never see a cove look like this cove. Come you and take a peep at him.”

Oliver rose and entering the tent, looked down at the form outstretched there upon Benno’s pallet.

A very jaded and wayworn traveller this, whose riding-garments, though dusty, were new and of expensive tailoring; a traveller this of odd contrasts, for though his hair was grey it fell in thick, glossy waves about leanly handsome features marred and aged not so much by years as by hardship bitterly endured and nameless evils; a face that seemed vaguely familiar though Oliver knew he had never seen it until this moment.

“He’ve been a-ridin’ crool ’ard!” growled Benno. “Look at them blooded spurs! An’ his pore hoss nigh founded and both knees broke!”

“Brother, what d’ye make of him?” questioned Jessamy.

“I hardly know,” answered Oliver, stooping to peer at the glassy eyes beneath their slumberous lids.

“He’s took a wallop on the nob, brother, as don’t show becos of his thick hair, but I never see a bang on the tuppenny make a cove look like yon, did you?”

“No, Jessamy. He shows to me almost as if he were drugged.”

“O-pium?” whispered Jessamy.

“Something of the sort, and there are various kinds—hash-eesh, for instance——”

“Right y’are, sir, opium it be, I reckon, though I ain’t never heered it called hash-eesh before,—sounds like a sneeze, don’t it?”

The person who had spoken thus unexpectedly was standing just outside the tent,—a shortish, squat, powerfully-built man in top-boots, cords, trim, blue coat with brass buttons, a hat remarkably low in crown and broad of brim and a stout, knotted stick tucked beneath one arm.

“It seems you know this gentleman?”

“Sir,” answered this personage, removing the hat to mop perspiring brow, while his mild gaze roved, taking in Oliver, earth, sky, the tent and all it contained (or so it seemed to Oliver) “Sir, I do, and then again, d’ye see, I—don’t! F’instance, I knows as he’s windictive—look at my dicer!” And he turned the hat to show a suggestive dent in its crown. “This here was his windictiveness in the form of a lump o’ rock,—but an ’ammer’ll put this right—”

“A hammer?” enquired Oliver.

“That i-dential, sir. This here castor is an invention o’ my own agin windictiveness, reinforced wi’ iron, sir,—comes a bit ’eavyish p’raps, but it’s saved my napper frequent. So first, I knows as he’s windictive. Second, I knows as ’e’s a felon back from trasportation. Third, I knows as ’e’s a menace as I’m in dooty bound to watch over. But his name or monnicker I don’t know—yet!”

“Well, oo be you, anyways?” demanded Benno truculently.

“A King’s Officer, my lad, a Limb o’ The Law, the nubbing-cheat, my ben cull, Tyburn,—that’s me!”

“But how,” enquired Oliver, “how do you know he was a transported felon?”

“Sir, ’tis wrote large all over ’im, ’specially his wrists,—them scars is shackle marks and proves as he was a wiolent prisoner, a dangerous customer—”

“Well, he be quiet enough now,” growled Benno, “and if the poor cove’s sarved his sentence, what I says is,—let him alone, give him a chance and don’t dog him till ye drive him desp’rate.”

“And wot I says to you, my Romany chal, is—check your chaffer, mind your eye, and don’t argle-bargle wi’ The Law,—and that’s me!”

“Oh?” said Benno, more truculently than ever.

“Ar!” quoth the Officer, mildly, and though his square, good-natured face beamed so amiably, his roving eyes were very keen and alert, “I tell ye

again I'm a nofficer and Limb o' The Law from Bow Street, Shrig's my name, baptismal Jarsper—"

"Then Lord love you!" said Jessamy, heartily. "You were mighty good friend to friend o' mine once and helped him—"

"I've helped a many," sighed Mr. Shrig, "and brought windictiveness on my own tibby in the doin' of it."

"Tibby?" enquired the pertinacious Oliver.

"My mazzard, sir, my nob or, as some might say, my H-E-A-D—'ead!"

"My name's Jessamy Todd and I should like to shake your hand—"

"Wot—the Jessamy?" enquired Mr. Shrig, his bright eyes brighter, his smile blander than ever. "Pal, I'm proud to take this here daddle as never fought a losing battle and allus fought clean and true."

"Ay but," persisted young Benno, "wot's this cove been up to? Why can't ye leave him alone?"

"Since you ax so p'inted, come yonder where I can set down and . . . mebbe I'll tell ye . . . mebbe."

Seated upon a stool surrounded by his audience of three, for old Tom and his whiplash had vanished at first glimpse of him, Mr. Shrig drew from certain capacious receptacles about him, a length of cord, a penknife, a pair of handcuffs, a short-barrelled brass-mounted pistol, and finally a small, bulging pocket-book; replacing the other articles, he now opened this book, and with musing gaze now on the open page before him, now on the leaves above him, began to speak more as if going over the case for his own instruction than to amuse his hearers.

"It is pre-cisely three twenty-two and the ninth o' this month and I'm a-settin' in my office puffing my steamer and goin' over this here little reader o' mine ven,—mentioning no names,—in to me comes a gen'leman, his coat is tore, he keeps 'is hankercher to bloody lip but, calm an' cool as any cowcumber, tells me as 'e suspects 'is master, a werry big nob and tremendous rich,—and therefore again mentionin' no names,—is to be—murdered. And, vot's more, the fatal act, this gory deed is to be done by the 'and or daddle of his own on-nat'ral son!"

Here Mr. Shrig paused to consult his little book ere he continued:

"Vereupon and thereupon I questions my informant werry close and hears a tale of a ninfant stole from vealthy father by said infant's mother's

suppo-sitious see-dooer—of this said child’s perwersion to a wicious youth and man-’ood vich ends by said infant, now a man, fallin’ foul o’ The Law and bein’ transported over-seas to Bot’ny Bay.”

“A . . . frightful story!” said Oliver.

“Ay, and more to come, I guess?” quoth Jessamy.

Mr. Shrig nodded, fixed his gaze on the leafage overhead and continued:

“To this great gen’leman, this lorn and vealthy father in his solitood, vord comes at last that his felon son ’as been shot and killed trying to escape. So, years pass till, a veek ago, my informant larns as this felon son ain’t dead but is back in London yearnin’ for his father’s blood and intent on murder of same. So my informant seeks out said on-nat’ral son, is assaulted by same and comes to me. . . .”

Mr. Shrig here closed that book he called his “little reader,” stowed it carefully away and added, rather as if it were an afterthought:

“And—this same felon son an’ vould-be father-killer is a-layin’ in that theer tent yonder at this i-dentical minute!”

“Love us all!” exclaimed Jessamy.

“So then,” said Benno, “you tracks him down?”

“As I gen’rally allus do!” nodded Mr. Shrig. “Tho’ ’e nigh dodges me on the road,—’e rides desprit ’ard, like Jee-hoo as vas a jockey in the Bible,—but I’m arter ’im like Jerry Boham as vas another on ’em. He comes into Petworth, so I comes into Petworth. He stops at the Angel to bait and rest ’is hoss and then goes a-valkin’ into the fields, werry innercent-like, so I goes a-valkin’ too,—but among some bushes and sich, ’e wanishes and I’m in the werry act o’ seekin’ same ’e’s on an’ at me like—vell, say a raveenious lion,—say, a wicious, man-slayin’ tiger—”

“Tooth an’ nail, like?” Benno suggested.

“Vorse, pal, vorse! He draws on me a line o’ wiciousness as comes nigh a-doin’ for me, a cheese-toaster, or, as ye might say, a sti-letta,—out o’ his cane . . . and ’ere it be!” And, from another capacious pocket, Mr. Shrig fumbled something swathed in a vivid bandanna handkerchief and, unwinding this, exposed a very murderous-looking three-cornered dagger, an evil thing beautifully wrought from needle-point to the gold knob that had once surmounted the malacca cane that had concealed it.

“Hows’ever, you downed him?” said Jessamy.

“Pal, I did. I con-trives to fetch him a rap wi’ the butt o’ my barker—”

“Ay, we finds the bump!” nodded Benno.

“Why not handcuff him?” Oliver enquired.

“I does, sir, but, bless your ’eart, ’e slips ’em wi’ ease an’ dexterity, being an old ’and,—and is off and away like any flittin’ bird.”

“And wot,” questioned Benno, “wot are ye going to do now with this desprit villin?”

“Gaol ’im for attempted murder of a nofficer o’ Po-lice,—vich is me. Clap ’im in prison an’ keep him there—that is, I ’opes so, for ’e’s a slippery customer, a werry shy bird indeed!” Here, Mr. Shrig rose so very suddenly that the three started and, rising also, followed whither he led; so came they to the tent to stand staring mumchance from empty pallet to the long slit agape in canvas wall.

Mr. Shrig gazed mournfully here and there, shook his head sadly and sighed woefully:

“So, my bird has flew! Dog bite me, I might ha’ knowed it!” Slowly and carefully he wrapped up the stiletto, thrust it into pocket, glanced at the three and shook his head again.

“Friends all,” said he, “a experienced Limb o’ The Law, as should ha’ knowed better, stands afore ye diddled and con-flummerated and admits same, frank an’ free. Someveres a wicious felon and vould-be sire-slayer is a-laughin’ at same werry like, but—them laughs best as laughs last! Good-bye t’ye and good fortun’!”

Having said which, Mr. Jasper Shrig, thief-taker, philosopher and Bow Street officer, turned and trudged heavily away.

CHAPTER XIII

CHIEFLY CONCERNING THE WAIF-CHILD, CLIA

MRS. WARMESTRO chuckled, while Oliver gazed speechlessly upon her handiwork,—the motherly care that had transformed miserable, ragged waif into the small, lovely, elf-like creature now looking up at him with such wistful anxiety; then these too-sensitive, childish lips curved, parting to shy smile, perhaps because of her new finery or the wonder of his look.

“A bit changed like, eh, sir?” said Gammer Ju, surveying her achievement with smiling complacency. “’Tis wonnerful wot a bit o’ love an’ care’ll do, eh, my gemman!”

“Marvellous!” exclaimed Oliver. “But she’s . . . she’s quite . . . pretty!”

“She be, sir! And comin’ prettier! A booty someday she’ll be! Look at them shinin’ tresses!”

“And the ribbons!” said Oliver. “This little dress!”

“Things as I buys for my last babby years an’ years ago,—soots an’ fits ’er prime, don’t em?”

“Wonderfully!”

“Now, duckie, make your rev’rence to the gemman, like I shows ye ’ow.”

Poising her slim feet, hidden now in shoes and stockings, Clia picked up two corners of her gown and sank before him in slow (and very wobbly) curtsy; then straightening up nimbly, glanced anxiously at Mrs. Warmestro, asking tremulously:

“Oh . . . did her do it . . . right?”

“Purty nigh, my dearie.”

“Well,” said Oliver, rising to take out one of his four precious guineas, “please tell me how much I owe for the . . . the things and all your great kindness—”

“Say—fifteen shillin’!” cried Old Tom reappearing abruptly at this moment, “Say twelve! Say ten—”

“Say nothin’!” said his large wife, smiling down into his fierce old face. “Shet your trap, Tom, and hish! Them babby clo’es is no good t’us any more, so close that trap o’ yourn, like a lamb.” Old Tom scowled, muttered, and vanished into the boskage again.

“But,” said Oliver, still proffering the coin, “I . . . indeed I cannot let you —”

“You must, sir! You bein’ pal o’ my pal, Jessamy, wot I gives, I gives willin’ an’ free,—an’ for the child’s sake, bless ’er little ’eart! . . . Eh, be that arm a-troublin’ ye?”

“Only a . . . twinge now and then.”

“Then come ’long o’ me,—ay an’ you too, duck, an’ I’ll larn ee ’ow to comfort pain.”

Thus presently Oliver found himself in the weather-beaten caravan, this home on wheels, and was surprised at its unexpected roominess and comfort; it was indeed a place of extreme cleanliness and order, with arm-chairs of wicker, small stove, collapsible tables and neat, white bunks at one end.

“Cosy, eh, sir?”

“Very!” answered Oliver, easing himself painfully out of his coat.

“Ay, so it be,” nodded Gammer Ju, beginning to loose off the rough, blood-sodden bandage from his swollen and inflamed forearm, “though it took me a lot o’ gettin’ used to, ye see I ain’t a true Roman—no! But I weds me a Roman rye and a precious good ’usband my Tom’s been, ’spite ’is f’rocious looks an’ ways—’e’s that tender-’earted reely, tho’ needs managin’, like all men do. . . . Lor! No wonder your por arm’s painful,—so swole an’ angry as it be! Come, my dearie duck, come an’ bathe it, very tender like I do, while I gets the doin’s, come, my dearie, if y’ain’t afeard o’ blood.”

“No,” said Clia, “her bean’t ’fraid cos her ’s made blood too when Joe clouted her bad.”

“My poor child,” said Oliver, looking down at the intent, little face and thin, frail hands busied now so tenderly to his comfort. “No one shall ever so ill-use you again.” The large eyes flashed a look up at him, then became intent on her ministrations again.

“Her likes ee lots-an’-lots,” she murmured. “Only . . . you ’aven’t!”

“Haven’t what, my dear?”

“Kissed her now she be all washed, like ee promised.”

“Shall I? Now? Do you want me to?”

“Her’s a-waitin’!”

So Oliver kissed her, felt her little, thin arms twine about his neck,—and in this moment his vexatious problem was answered.

Now when his throbbing wound had been tended, soothed, deftly bound up and comforted, Gammer Ju took from some corner an extremely thick, highly ornate china mug, measured into it something from a small, black bottle, mixed it with water and bade Oliver drink.

“There!” said she, when the dose had been swallowed, “that’ll do ye a power o’ good, ’twill mak’ ye sleep. Now, go along wi’ us!” They brought him, she and the child, to a tent hard beside the van; they loosed his cravat, unbuttoned his waistcoat, pulled off his spurred boots, they set a pillow beneath his head, covered him with a blanket and bade him shut his eyes. And, with a delicious drowsiness stealing upon his senses, Oliver smiled on them, murmured his gratitude, and closed his eyes in the glory of early sunset. . . .

When next his slumberous eyes opened, it was to the calm, pale refulgence of a full-orbed moon that sent a beam of silvery splendour to show him the small, dim shape that nestled so warmly within the shelter of his sound arm.

“Clia?” he murmured, drowsily.

“Ay, ’tis only me . . . her be come to take care of ee in the dark, so—don’t ee drive her away.”

“No!” he answered, sleepily. “Never!” And, drawing her yet nearer, he fell asleep again.

CHAPTER XIV

WHICH INCLINES TO BE LITERARY

“PREPOSTEROUS, dam ridiculous, absurd—and you’re a fool!” snarled Roland.

“And you,” growled Oliver, “you are the innately selfish animal I always deemed you!”

They were sitting side by side in the early morning sunshine, watching where Gammer Ju and the handsome Zeena, with the child’s eager assistance, were preparing breakfast.

“To take her with us! To London! You’re mad!”

“However, she goes! And that’s final!” said Oliver.

“Then I don’t, confound me if I do! And that’s final too, Mr. Tom Fool!”

“Good!” quoth Oliver, thrusting hand into pocket. “Then here are your two guineas.”

“Eh? What two guineas?”

“Our highwayman refunded us four,—these two are yours.” And, frowning, Oliver tossed the coins to Roland, who scowled and tossed them back.

“And why,” he demanded fiercely, “why must you take her with us, drag her along, ay, by Heavens, actually kidnap the poor little wretch? Why?”

“Because I . . . dare not leave her behind.”

“Eh? Dare not? Now what the devil d’you mean, Ass—what?”

“That I cannot, will not,—dare not leave her helpless, perhaps to fall again in the clutches of Mumper Joe, to be brutalized, starved, half-killed and . . . later on . . . her innocence shamed . . . her young womanhood blasted . . . herself to be cast away . . . to sink at last despairing and . . . utterly lost! No, by God, no!”

Roland, aware of his cousin’s deep and unwonted agitation, became troubled also, he stared at the grass beneath his restless feet, at Oliver’s grimly troubled visage, at the pink clouds above, and at Oliver again; he rose, took a hasty stride away, a slow stride back and sat down again; finally he took himself by the chin and started:

“Great Jupiter!” he exclaimed. “Chin’s like a confounded hedgehog! Oh for a dam razor!”

“You’ll find a pair in my valise yonder.”

“Thankee, Noll! . . . But as regards your confounded waif, you might leave her with these gipsies, they seem decent, kindly folk and the old woman is deuced fond of her, loves the little thing, so does Zeena. What d’you say, happy suggestion, eh?”

“No!” answered Oliver. “Any other suggestions?”

“Certainly! Your proper, commonsense course is to . . . ah . . . place her with the proper authorities.”

“Who and what?”

“Well, there are such things as . . . well, homes, hospitals, orphan asylums, refuges, parish beadles and . . . so on.”

“No!” said Oliver, again. “Tell me, Roland—look at me, man! Now, tell me—would you . . . could you doom this child, this little innocent to such fate?”

“Why ‘doom’, damme? Other children are,—hundreds of ’em and . . . well . . . why not this one?”

“Roland, I ask you again, could you make this particular child a poor charity waif, could you?”

Once again Roland eyed his cousin’s grim, sorely troubled face askance, rubbed his chin, smoothed his brow, ruffled his lustrous, black locks, scowled and answered pettishly:

“Ha, damme if I know!”

“Well, I do!” quoth Oliver, “I am sure now that, having troubled to think, you could not. And neither can I.”

“But reflect, my poor, addlepat, dashed Don Quixote—what shall you do with the confounded brat when we—you get her to London . . . and no money?”

“God knows!” answered Oliver, miserably.

“Well, why the dashed, infernal hurry? Why go to London—yet? What about your arm and my dam eye?”

“My arm will serve, and your eye is hardly noticeable.”

“However,” said Roland, folding his arms, “my mind is made up, I’m confoundedly determined.”

“So am I.”

“I shall remain here.”

“Very well!” sighed Oliver, wearily. “Though if you are remaining on account of this girl Zeena, I warn you—”

“Don’t trouble! I’m not! I’m remaining until I’ve learned and quite perfected that marvellous cross-swing and counter and some of Jessamy’s wonderful footwork—say, a week.”

“Say a year!” Oliver retorted. “Or a lifetime! Phenomenal champions like Jessamy Todd who can punch his own weight, are born, not made.”

“Right, Noll! By Jove and Jupiter, you’re right! There probably never was or will be a fighting cove like Jessamy. But I can learn, indeed I have,” said Roland almost humbly, forgetting all his affectations in discussing this his most revered sport and secretly cherished ambition. “Of course I’m only an amateur, but pretty good, so Jessamy says, and coming better every time. He’s taught me a lot already, though I’ve only sparred with him three times—so far.”

“I’m surprised,” said Oliver, “to me he affected to despise the Game.”

“So he does, and Jessamy’s no hypocrite I can assure you. But you see my case is exceptional. Jessamy’s had an adventurous career, for, as mere lad, he joined the Navy and saw action at sea, but later on, being older and wiser, he became a Light Dragoon, a trooper not only in my regiment but in my own squadron, though just before my time,—fought in the Peninsula,—and naturally this is a bond between us.”

“And here he comes!” said Oliver, as, up from the brook towards them strode Jessamy himself, stripped to the waist, his smooth, clear skin rosy with cold water and vigorous towelling.

“Good morning, sir!” said he, saluting Roland as only a dashing Light Dragoon might; then, turning to smile on Oliver:

“Brother,” he enquired, “how’s that arm o’ yours this morning?”

“Better, thanks, Jessamy.”

“But,” said Roland, viewing this shapely, athletic body with the eye of expert appraisal,—broad slope of shoulder, smooth-flowing line of muscle and sinew, “but you’re not a brawny fellow by any means, Jessamy! I can

see you're fast as lightning, of course, but, for my life, I can't understand how or why you can hit with such tremendous power."

"Which is what I can't tell ee, Mr. Roland, sir. It just comes nat'ral, like blinking your eye or droring your breath. 'Tis just knowing as—you can! Knowing just when to strike, and where,—and—how! Brother," said he, glancing at Oliver almost apologetically, "though 'tis all vanity and vexation, as I tells you and others, yet your cousin, Mr. Roland, having been officer and comrade o' mine, has per-suaded me to show him a thing or two. . . . So now, Mr. Roland, if you're ready, sir, I've the muffles and a clean towel or so a-waiting down by the brook yonder."

So off they went together, shoulder to shoulder, chins well up and both now striding with the cavalryman's swing, so much so that Oliver smiled,—which smile became one of welcome to the quick, light patter of small feet where Clia came running to halt before him, scanning his face with that eager wistfulness which still had in it something of fear,—of watching for the expected blow or harsh word; but reading Oliver's look aright, she uttered a soft, glad cry and leapt to clasp thin arms about his neck, nestling close against him.

"S morning her . . . kissed ee!" she whispered, "while you was asleep."

"Oh?" said Oliver, folding her a little closer, "Why?"

"'Cos her was so glad as you 'adn't run an' left her in the night."

"I never shall!" said Oliver, laying his cheek to her soft, bright hair.

"An' her washed 'erself again for ee 's morning—all over, in the brook. . . . S' shiversome! so you could kiss her again if ee wished."

"You should say 'kiss me'," he corrected; she did so, instantly. "No no," he laughed, stroking her long hair. "I mean, instead of saying 'me' you must say 'I'."

"Oh!" murmured Clia.

"Yes!" said Oliver. "I want you to speak prettily again, as I'm sure you did before your poor mother lost you. . . . But, dear me! where are your nice shoes and stockings? And remember to say 'I' not 'me'!"

"I hides 'em!"

"Indeed, madam? Where,—and why?"

"Ye bean't cross wi' I, be ye?" Oliver smiled.

“Lord, no!” he answered. “And that time it should have been ‘me’. But why did you hide them, my dear?”

‘ ’Cos her—I—likes ’em off bestest.”

“They don’t hurt you, do they?”

“No, only me likes the cool grass to kiss her feet.”

“That’s a fair thought oddly expressed, my dear. Come now,” said he, rising, “let’s go and find your shoes and stockings.” Hand-in-hand they went, talking together in ever-growing familiarity and better understanding, he instant to check and correct her lapses of speech, she, eager to please him, as quick to respond. Thus came they to the sparkling brook, and just in time to see Jessamy in the act of lifting his floored pupil to his legs with a master’s gracious patience for the tyro tempered with diffidence for the officer.

“I ’ates t’see folkses fight!” said Clia, shivering. “Joe an’ Sal used t’fight, then her’d scream an’ he’d shout—” The child covered her face and cowered to the protection of Oliver’s arm.

“I want you to forget all about them,” said he, “tell me instead all you remember of your dear mother.”

“Her—I—she—don’t!”

“But you dream of her sometimes, what is she like in your dreams?”

“Kind, an’—soft, an’ sings, an’ calls her—I—‘dear’ like you do, only she says ‘darlingest’ too!”

“Well, so will I, when you’re very good and—yes, when you find your shoes and stockings.”

She led him on beside the brook, pausing now and then to peep down into some still pool or to hear the rippling murmur where the sparkling water shallowed to pebbly bed; on they went together until they reached a certain tree from some cavity in which she drew her shoes and stockings, holding them up for his inspection.

“Good!” he nodded. “Now put them on.” So down she sat obediently and on they went.

“Though me—I—doesn’t like ’em on her!” she sighed.

“You’ll soon get used to them,” said he, “my darlingest.” He heard her gasp, saw her great eyes fill with tears, then she was up, her arms about him

again, her face hidden against him.

“Why, Clia, my child, what is it?”

“‘Dar—lingest!’” she murmured. “You says it so—kind, like in her dreams! Say it again.”

And when he had repeated the word and stooped to dry her eyes, they went on once more but in closer companionship than ever, she, forgetting now all fear and shyness, chattering to him, and he laughing unwontedly or gravely correcting her errors of speech again, until they heard the ring and thump of a hammer and, thus guided, came where in leafy bower beside the stream, Jeremy Jarvis, the Tinker, was busied at a small anvil.

“What ho, friend and little pal!” cried he cheerily. “Come ye an’ watch a Tinker tinker till the kittle biles and then—why, Lor’ bless me, how fine you look, my dearie, like a little fairy elf or flower o’ the wood!”

“’Twas Gammer Ju, she gives ’em to I . . . me! An’ her learns I to do like this,—look ee!” So saying, Clia picked up her little petticoats daintily, poised herself carefully, curtsied, swayed perilously, and was caught and kissed right heartily:

“Fine, my pretty one, fine!” quoth the Tinker, caressing her shining hair with his worn hammer-shaft. “Friend Oliver, I’m main glad to see ye.”

“I wondered what had become of you, Mr. Jarvis.”

“Well,” replied the Tinker, “though a sociable cove by principle,—and Jeremy, to you, pal,—I’m a lonesome cove by natur’ and one as likes to enj’y the sylvan solitoods alone,—except now an’ then. To-day I’m busy hand an’ head, for, whiles I ’ammers my tin, I’m ’ammering out a poem too, leastway verses. I’ve also wrote ’em down . . . though not so good as they might and should be. Ye see, though a tinker, I’m a bit of a literary cove too, now an’ then,—here and there.”

“And write verses?” said Oliver.

“Ay, I do, ’tis a trick as comes easy—sometimes.”

“Would you read me some?”

“Should you like to hear one, the noo un, should ye now, honest and true?”

“Yes!” said Oliver, in his downright way.

“Then set ye on the stool, friend, and—hark!”

Hereupon, Jerry Jarvis took off his weather-beaten hat and from its dingy interior selected a crumpled paper from many others, unfolded it, smoothed it out, frowned at it and read in his deep, sonorous voice:

“ ‘Gimme the Road, the Highroad,
The wet road, or the dry road,
Yea, shady lane or bye-road
These be the ways for me.
Let the Road go up or down
By sleepy village, noisy town,
Through leafy glade, by rolling Down,
'Tis there as I would be.

The Road that was, the Road is still,
By quiet vale, o'er wind-blown hill,
I'll foller to the end, until
My long, long journey's trod.
'Tis Road shall lead me on, and on
Till friends I've loved, the friends who've gone
I'll meet again, yea—everyone
On the Road that leads—to God.

So, gimme the Road, the Highroad,
No matter where it be;
The wet road or the dry road,
Green, shady lane or bye-road,—
These be the ways for me.'

“Well,—how's that, friend?” he questioned, anxiously. “D'ye like it,—here an' theer, say?”

“Yes I do!” answered Oliver.

“Still, it aren't nowhere near what I meant it to be!” sighed Jeremy. “My writin's, when wrote, never do come out all as I wants 'em to, never! I'm never near satisfied with 'em.”

“Good!” nodded Oliver. “You never will be in this life. No true artist can ever be content with his own achievement.”

“Lord!” exclaimed Jeremy, blinking. “But then nobody can't 'ardly call me an—artist.”

“I do, Mr. Jarvis! Because anyone who can frame even a fragment of truth in words adequate, words to remember, is an artist.”

“Kittle’s a-b’iling!” said little Clia.

“But what,” enquired the Tinker, “just what might you mean by this here word—‘artist’?”

“Well,” answered Oliver, rubbing bristly chin as somewhat at a loss, “I have thought sometimes this might be another word for—‘soul’ . . . I mean that better part of us which, feeling—and knowing intuitively, translates these sensations into the coherent thought that is the direct inspiration to action. But action, being concrete and material, can only find expression through the material body and generally so imperfectly that the soul which conceived the thought or dream, is therefore disappointed with what material body makes of it . . . I’ve put it rather badly, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, kittle’s a-b’iling!” cried Clia.

“It needs,” said Jeremy, rubbing nose with hammer-shaft, “ay, it needs a bit o’ thinkin’ out, but I like to think,—an’ what I makes of it is—that the soul being unearthly an’ body earthly, body can’t write down an unearthly thought or idea without gettin’ some earth into it somewheer or other.”

“Oh—ho!” cried Clia, “Kittle . . . be . . . a-b’ilin’!”

“Exactly!” said Oliver, “you have my thought precisely!”

“But, friend Oliver, you talk like you were a occasional literary cove too.”

“Why yes,” Oliver confessed, a little ruefully. “I have tried to write. . . . A book about simple things and ordinary people. A tale of hard work, the heroism of ceaseless effort despite disappointment,—the romance of labour. . . . What do you think of such a book, Mr. Jarvis?”

“Friend Oliver,—and please don’t go ‘mistering’ me, my name’s Jerry to you,—I’m bound for to say as I think bad o’ such a book and, what’s worse, I don’t think anything o’ such a book, and, what’s worse still, nobody else would neether!”

“No!” sighed Oliver, easily daunted. “No, I was afraid not.”

“Mind ye,” said Jeremy, consolingly, “I’m pretty sure it would be a good book so far as language an’ writin’ go but they wouldn’t go fur enough, nobody would spend their good money on sich a book,—and I’ll tell ye why,—ye see I used for to sell books once and I know! What folk wants in a

book is Ro-mance! Nobody wants to read about ordinary things an' people becoss they're mostly ordinary themselves."

"And yet,—they might," Oliver ventured to suggest, "especially if an ordinary tale could be told romantically."

"Ah! but how much o' Ro-mance is true?"

"Heaven knows!" sighed Oliver. "Perhaps romance is in the eye of the beholder,—a magic gift, a sense possessed by very few,—a vision to see beneath the commonplace and glimpse the hidden glory—"

"Call it 'magic'!" nodded the Tinker. "Magic's what folks like, summat as they can 'ardly understand, summat as is noo an' strange,—give 'em magic, in a book or out, an' you can't go fur wrong."

"Yes," nodded Oliver, "the magic to show them the heroism of effort, the fine dignity of labour, the romance of—"

"'Old 'ard, pal! Effort an' labour's no good, leastways—not in a book, they ain't o-riginal enough, for most folks has to work an' all work's effort, an' I never heered of anybody as thought labour ro-mantic nor yet hee-roic, no!"

"Oh, dearie me!" wailed Clia, "The kittle be a-b'ilin' an' b'ilin' away, an' her . . . I . . . be so 'ungry . . . h-ungry, her be!"

"Then, Lord love ee, my pretty, let's eat! Come an' help me, my beauty bright."

Thus in surprisingly short time this deft-handed Jeremy, with the child's hardly less dexterous aid, had brewed the coffee and set it to draw while pink hamrashes and golden-yolked eggs sang a duet, or rather trio, with the crackling fire.

And presently, all being ready, they breakfasted together; they talked and they ate, a leisurely meal, consumed with due deliberation and therefore with relish until, at last, Clia sighed, Jeremy wiped and closed his knife and Oliver, glancing at the sun now well up, got to his feet.

"Nay, bide a bit," said the Tinker.

"But, Jeremy, you've work to do and—"

"Ay, but work aren't my master, so bide a while."

"An' her . . . I . . . be a-goin' to wash up!" Clia announced. And down to the brook she went accordingly.

“Quick an’ clever like, ain’t she?” said Jeremy, watching the small, busy figure. “And, though she shows prettier an’ more like a child should be, she acts more like a small mother creatur’, don’t she?”

“Yes.”

“And what be you a-goin’ to do with her, friend Oliver pal, not—the work’us, not the—parish—?”

“No, Jeremy!”

“Nor yet any ass—I—lum, nor—”

“She goes with me . . . to London.”

“Good! And when there, how then?”

“I . . . haven’t yet decided. . . . The fact is, Jeremy, I’m rather worried . . . she’s so delicate . . . oversensitive and needs a woman’s care.”

“A fee-male’s tender solicoood. She do, pal!”

“And there’s my worry.”

“Oh? Ye don’t ’appen to possess a aunt, eh?”

“An aunt? No.”

“A pity! An aunt would ha’ come in useful. But,—no aunt, says you?”

“No aunt, Jeremy.”

“Any other female relations?”

“Not one, unfortunately.

“No—lady friends then,—old or young?”

“Neither.”

“Lord! You sound oncommon, not to say onnat’rally lonesome, friend Oliver. Aren’t there ever a feemale well beknown to ye,—one as you can trust?”

“Yes—by George—yes!” exclaimed Oliver, his gloom vanishing. “To be sure, of course, fool that I am,—there are two!”

“She . . . I’ve washed all the things!” cried Clia, at this moment, “So what now?”

“Now is—Good-bye!” said Oliver, rising.

“Oh?” said the Tinker.

“Yes,” sighed Oliver. “I so love country ways and things and—people that the longer I delay the harder it is to go.”

“Then you’ll be comin’ back p’raps,—someday?”

“Surely!”

“I’ll be . . . main glad . . . for to meet ye again, friend.”

“I, too, Jeremy.”

“You can always ha’ word o’ me at ‘The King’s Head,’ in Horsham, or ‘The Angel,’ in Petworth, or ‘The Cross,’ in Alfriston, I’ll be travellin’ the road, if I aren’t dead, me an’ Diogenes.”

“Diogenes?” enquired Oliver.

“My pony, yonder—and I calls him Diogenes because Diogenes lived in a tub an’ my Diogenes don’t. ‘The King’s Head,’ in ‘Orsham, ‘The Angel,’ in Petworth, or ‘The Cross,’ in Alfriston.”

“I shan’t forget, Jeremy.”

“Then . . . good-bye!” said he, grasping the hand Oliver had reached out to him. “’Tis a good thing ye do, friend Oliver, to save one o’ God’s lambs from the wolves, and I say the Lord bless ye,—and I says it with all my ’eart. . . . And good-bye to you, my pretty! Kiss old Jerry, and mind now, sweetheart, when you says your prayers don’t ye forget to pray God bless your Oliver,—Good-bye!”

Hand-in-hand back went they beside the stream; and after some while came the clink and clash of Jeremy’s hammer yet somehow it sounded less jubilant now than before. At last Clia spoke, a little breathlessly:

“Jerry says as you’re . . . my Oliver. Are ye?”

“Yes, my dear. So you’d better call me Oliver.”

“But if I do, will you say ‘darlingest’ now’n’ then?”

“Yes, darlingest,” he answered, and kissed her.

CHAPTER XV

WHICH RECOUNTS ONE GOOD-BYE

ASTRIDE his tall horse, placid Dobbin, with Clia perched before him, Oliver looked down upon these Romany folk, these shy children of the leafy byeways and silent places, and because he felt the sincerity of their good wishes and had known their hospitality, his heart warmed to them each one, the saturnine Benno, handsome Zeena, kindly Mrs. Warmestro, and even her small, sinister-looking spouse; so he bared his head to them, spoke something of his gratitude and, smiling on them all, a little sadly, rode slowly upon his way.

It was afternoon, very hot and still, and they rode through a drowsy stillness broken only by the slow, plodding hoofs of Dobbin and the soft chirp of sleepy bird. But suddenly this restful quietude was troubled by a shout and glancing back they saw Roland striding after them, yet when he came up, flushed with speed and a little breathless, it was to scowl and snarl:

“So you’re off, are you, Mr. Smug, Dashed Complacency?”

“Yes, good Master Ego, we are indeed. And I left your two guineas with Mrs. Warmestro—”

“Well, I’ve brought ’em back, confound you!”

“And you’re frightening the child.”

“Child be—”

“Hush, noble gentleman! Remember she is a child.”

“Well, take your . . . your—” Roland choked back the epithet. “Oh, take your money!” And he thrust the coins into Oliver’s nearest coat-pocket.

“But what of yourself, Roly man?”

“I shall contrive well enough, and far better than you.”

“Which sublime assurance should be a great comfort to yourself, Roly-poly. Are we likely to meet in London?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“Then good-bye and—good luck!” Here, Oliver would have ridden on but, catching the bridle, Roland stayed him to demand:

“Have you decided what to do with your madam Whipper-snapper?”

“Two alternatives, the first is Miss Saphronia Bagg, my one-time and last governess,—you may remember her?”

“Distinctly,—a grisly gorgon!”

“Ah, you don’t remember her! Should we not find Saphronia, back we shall go to my farm and Mary,—and stay there.”

“Stay there? Great Jupiter! Then what of our Sir Arrogance the Nunks? What of this ordeal he’s set us, which is preposterous folly of course,—what of his money, which isn’t?”

“Well,” answered Oliver, gathering up the reins, “with a clear field you should win it yourself, and welcome. However, should it be necessary, back I go to my plough and furrow.”

“Spoken like a . . . a deuced—a confounded—”

“Ploughman!” nodded Oliver, “I’m like Jerry Jarvis, with a difference:

“ ‘A ploughman I am, Oh, a ploughman am I,
A ploughman I’ll live and a ploughman I’ll die—’

for,—on my soul, I’d rather drive my own furrow than inherit money I’ve never earned. ‘Smug’ and ‘prig’ says you. So be it, says I. And so good luck and good-bye.”

“One moment!” said Roland, still grasping the bridle. “You are a fool, of course, you always were and will be, but—don’t be The Absolute Fool! Don’t antagonize the Nunks beyond forgiveness so early in the game, don’t ruin your chances irredeemably,—for your own sake—and mine.”

“How yours, Roly-poly?”

“Well,” answered Roland, staring very hard at nothing in particular, “though we are naturally bitterly antagonistic, being enemies born, and though I have the profoundest contempt for your ideas and sentiments, I should feel myself even more contemptible if I . . . used your dashed folly to my own advantage. So,—if you throw up the game, toss up the sponge, cry off and refuse to go through with this year of dashed ridiculous probation, defying Sir Arrogant Nunks, confound him,—so shall I! And what d’you say to this, my poor Ass?” But Oliver was silent so long that at last Roland frowned up at him.

“Well?” he snarled.

“Well,” repeated Oliver, “having regard to our hostility and my scorn for your apparent egoistic cynicism, I was never so perilously near—admiring you.”

“Eh? Admiring . . .?”

“That was the word.”

“Then confound you! If your infernal arm was only sound I’d try on you that famous right swing of Jessamy’s.”

“And I’d counter it with a stiff left of my own.”

“Well, we may yet, Noll,—later on.”

“In London, Roly?”

“Ay, or—before.”

“And it’s a straight road and a long road, Roly.”

“Oh? . . . Well, if you will go—go! And if your confounded wound mortifies, gangrene and so on,—don’t blame me, Mr. Dashed Tom Fool!”

“So, for the present, Good-bye!” said Oliver.

“’Bye!” muttered Roland and, turning abruptly, strode away almost as fast as he had come.

Now hardly was he out of earshot than Clia spoke:

“Do he, that Other One, love you or don’t he?”

Oliver glanced from Roland’s distant figure to the wistful face of his small questioner and, instead of answering, kissed her.

CHAPTER XVI

WHICH RECOUNTS ANOTHER GOOD-BYE AND MUCH BESIDE

THEY were following a bowery lane dappled with sunshine when they heard a clear, mellow voice hailing them, and saw running towards them a man who cleared hedge and ditch at a single bound, and stood smiling up at them, hat in hand.

“Jerry tells me as I might meet ye hereabouts, brother, but I began to fear as I’d missed ye.”

“And you neither sweat nor blow!” quoth Oliver.

“Why, ye see, brother, I don’t eat over much and drink less,” answered Jessamy. “And I’m here to wish ye God-speed an’ God keep ye,—you and the child both and to give you . . . this here!” And from the breast of his trim, brass-buttoned coat Jessamy drew a letter profusely and heavily sealed. “ ’Tis a few words o’ God-bye, brother,” he explained a little diffidently, “as I’ll ask ye to take a look at—later on, say to-night afore ye go to bed.”

“Thanks, Jessamy, I will!” Oliver answered, placing the letter carefully in pocket, “I’m hoping we may meet again, someday.”

“Me, too, brother, with all my heart. And I’m easy found, being pretty well-known on all the roads hereabout, like my pal, Jerry Jarvis,—find Jerry and you’re fair certain to find me and versey-vicey, brother.”

“How does my Cousin Roland shape?”

“Noble, brother, noble! Quick, acc’rate, plenty o’ power, feet like thistledown, fists like thunderbolts and equally quick wi’ both and all,—which is rare, brother, and mighty rare!”

“Yes,” nodded Oliver, “he was always good at it even as a schoolboy.”

“But as a man,” nodded Jessamy, “he could be one o’ the best, ah—the best . . . though ’tis all vanity as I tell him—”

“An’ now you can kiss her . . . me good-bye,” sighed Clia, “if you wishes.”

“Lord love you, sweetheart, that I do,—there! And there! And don’t forget Jessamy ’twixt now and our next meeting. . . .”

So Jessamy bade them farewell, and on they rode through this warm and slumberous afternoon, Oliver busied with his thoughts and the child so still

and silent that he glanced down at her, at last.

“Sleepy, my dear?”

“Oh—no! No, her—I—couldn’t sleep.”

“Why?”

“ ’Cos ’tis all too gladsome for sleepin’,—the sun an’ the trees an’ this hoss so big an’ fine. I never rides like this afore, her don’t, so I couldn’t sleep. An’ what’s his name, your big ’oss?”

“Dobbin. And you must say ‘horse’ not ‘ ’oss’.”

“Do your big Dobbin eat grass, like Mumper Joe’s donkey, an’ prickly thistles?”

“No. Dobbin prefers oats. Tell me, Clia, do you remember ever living in a house?”

“No, only a white bed. An’ are us a-goin’ fur?”

“Yes, all the way to London,—and perhaps all the way back again.”

“I’s glad, she is!”

So they traversed these leafy ways, and very slowly, because Dobbin never galloped if he might trot, and never trotted if he might walk, especially on such hot, drowsy afternoon; while his master, having no need to haste, great love for country and small liking for town, was content to reach there when he must.

Thus shadows were lengthening about them when, from the top of a hill, Oliver saw below a wayside inn standing remote and solitary, as quiet-seeming and drowsy as the peaceful landscape; a cosy inn, set well back from dusty road, with shady trees before it, a roomy stableyard behind it and a garden beside it abloom with flowers.

“How do you think of that, Clia?” he enquired.

“Nice!” she murmured, drowsily. “I likes them flowers, her do.”

“Those flowers, my dear!”

“Yes, I does.”

“Then there you shall sleep to-night.”

“With you?”

“Well, yes,—near me.”

“Into a . . . reel bed all soft an’ white.”

“A real bed, Darlingest!”

“Oh!” she whispered, nestling to him, “Her’s so—glad!”

Ambling down the hill Dobbin of his own accord halted before this inn which, thus near, seemed more cosily inviting than ever. An aged, gabled structure, steep of roof and with a sign-board above the door, dim with time and weather, whereon at some remote period had been painted something that might have been a gnarled tree trunk very much out of the perpendicular or a foaming waterspout. Yet called itself “The Wheatsheaf.” Beneath this, in extremely thin, white lettering was inscribed the name:

SAMUEL HOBBS

LICENSED TO SELL ALE, BEER, TOBACCO AND SPIRITS

GOOD ACCOMODATION FOR MAN AND BEAST

Oliver was yet gazing up at this when from the cool dimness of this sleepy little inn there issued a man remarkably stiff as to hair and round as to eye beneath brows that seemed raised in constant question never answered.

“I want,” said Oliver, “a room for the night with two beds.”

“A room, zur? Meanin’—one room, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Ay, zur, but,” said the man, his shock hair seeming slightly stiffer, “you says two beds, so ’tis loikely, Oi takes it, as you’ m meanin’ two rooms, zur.”

“No, only one room.”

“Ay, but,” said the man, his round eyes beginning to goggle, “ye do say, plain as plain, two beds, says you! So ’ow can Oi give ee one room?”

“Well, why *not*?”

“For that—two beds, says you!”

“Yes,” answered Oliver, patiently. “I want one room with two beds, one for my child here and one for me.”

“One, says you, an’ one,” quoth the man, his lofty eyebrows soaring towards his hair, “ay, zur, and one and one be two, surely. But, says you,—one room, you says, doan’t ee, zur?”

“One room, yes.”

“Which, zur, can’t nowise be—no’ow!”

“Why?”

“Becos it—ain’t, zur. No, nor they neether. For, doan’t ee see, two beds can’t nowise be one room nohow, an’ t’other way round,—none whatever, zur, an’ never neether!”

“Are you the landlord?”

“Ay, zur, Oi be reckoned so, though—”

“Have you a wife?”

“Ay, zur, Oi b’leeve so, but—”

“Ask her to speak with me.” The landlord rolled his eyes, rubbed his shock head, put it in at the open casement and roared:

“Soo, lass,—Soo, come ee yere!” In answer to which summons appeared a comely, motherly woman who, smiling on little Clia, bobbed to Oliver and asked his pleasure.

“Gemmon wants wot we ’aven’t got, Soosan, though willin’ to sarve—”

“A room with two beds,” Oliver explained.

“No, sir,” she answered, “seein’ as our rooms be all singles. But I can set up a crib for your little lady if that’ll soot?”

“Admirably!” answered Oliver, returning her smile. “And we shall need supper—”

“B’iled beef cold, sir, if that’ll—”

“It will!” said Oliver, heartily.

Having seen Dobbin comfortably stabled, they went in to supper, and a glad meal they made of it, the child now so jubilant that once or twice she laughed, a soft trill quickly checked, like a bird whose song was uncertain and yet to learn. Supper done, out they went to walk amid the flowers and breathe their evening sweetness till came the smiling hostess to say “the little lady’s crib be ready,” and lead them upstairs to show the bedchamber; and little Clia, overawed by such unwonted luxury, especially as to pillows and snowy sheets, scarce daring to touch anything.

“Do you,—did you ever say prayers, my dear?”

“Yes, a bit, but not no more. And is her—I—to sleep in this dear, little bed?”

“Yes. But do you remember any of your prayers?”

“No, only summat ’bout gennelgeezus. An’ must I get me all undressed?”

“Of course. But first I’d like you to kneel down and say your prayers, the one to ‘Gentle Jesus’.”

“Will you help her then?”

Sinking down with bright head reverently bowed and little, thin hands folded, she repeated after him the words of this child’s prayer; but scarcely had she ended than she started up in sudden terror, crying:

“Ah, but ye bean’t agoin’ to leave her?”

“No, no, my dear! I’ll come back when you’re in bed. So get undressed, take off your things and—”

“Wot, all of them?”

“Well, perhaps you’d better keep something on. We must buy you a nightdress soon as possible.”

“But . . . oh you will, you will come back to her?”

“Yes.”

“An’ go to bed too,—in that big ’un?”

“In the large bed, yes. You aren’t afraid of anything, are you?” he questioned, looking into her troubled little face. “See how light it is,—it won’t be dark for a long time—”

“Oh, her bean’t ’feared o’ the dark,—’tis only if ye don’t come back—”

“But I shall, I promise! And when I do come back, let me find you in bed,—Darlingest!”

At this, she clasped him in her small, eager arms, murmuring brokenly:

“Oh, her—she—do so love ee, Oliver!”

“That . . . that’s splendid!” said Oliver, stroking her bright hair rather awkwardly. “Now go to bed and try to go to sleep, my dear. I’ll be back very soon!” Then he kissed her and crossing softly to the door, opened it and was confronted by a person in frogged, high-collared surtout, a tall man whose face, shaded by wide-eaved hat, was so plentifully adorned with luxuriant

hair and whisker as to leave his features scarcely visible; a gentlemanly person, apparently, for he bowed very graciously with murmured apology ere he vanished behind the door of adjoining room, leaving Oliver to wonder, among other things, why he must wear hat and overcoat within doors and the weather so very hot. Pondering this, he descended the stair, stepped into the fragrant garden and there came upon the shock-headed landlord tending his flowers.

“You have another guest, it seems,” said Oliver.

“Ay, zur,—been stayin’ ’ere,—leastways they was two, only one rid away, leavin’ one behind an’ ’im a furrin gemman.”

“I was wondering,” Oliver began.

“Ah,—an’ no wonder, sir,—them whiskers!” said the landlord, lowering his voice. “I never, nor nobody else never see a finer pair!”

“And his overcoat and hat! To wear them indoors on such warm evening,—very odd!”

“Why, zur, y’see ’e be a furrineer an’ if so be—no wonder. For furrineers, bein’ furrin, ain’t like we, and so therefore not nowise to be blamed for it, pore creeters!”

“How do you know he is foreign?”

“Becos I got y-ears, zur,—two on ’em!”

“So I see.”

“And wi’ my y-ears, zur, I hears this here furrin gemman talkin’ furrin to ’is friend t’other gemman wot ain’t furrin but wot rid away like I tells ee, but as this here furrin gemman be a-waitin’ an’ expectin’ to ride back ’ere like as ’e so promised afore ’e rid away. But, zur, I’ll tell ee summat as sets me all of a wonder an’ thinkin’ very ’ard. The day as ’e rides off I’m pickin’ peas ’ere in my garden and long ’e comes wi’ is friend the furrin gemman and not seein’ me, me bein’ ’idden in the peas, ’e does summat as sets me all of a wonder.”

“What?” enquired Oliver, for the landlord had paused to smooth his shock hair that seemed to rise only the stiffer.

“Why, zur, ’e pulls out a long, sharp knife wi’ a gold knob atop an’—akisses it!”

“Kissed the knife?”

“Ay, ’e did, sir, kissed it very loving! Then ’e says summat, an’ laughs an’ tosses the knife into the air and ketches it again by the ’andle, very clever, and puts it away, and so off ’e goes.”

“And you didn’t hear what he said?”

“No, zur,—an’ wot I did ’ear was furrin.”

“And he’s coming back here?”

“I b’leeve zo, zur, leastways this yere furrin gemman’s a-waitin’ for ’im—” Here landlord and Oliver both started and turned at sound of a voice close beside them:

“I never see a finer lot o’ peas, no never!” And forth from shadowy leafage beside them came a head, a square face that beamed on them beneath a hat remarkably low of crown and broad of brim, a pair of mild yet roving eyes, that, meeting Oliver’s, blinked such signal that he checked his words of surprised recognition and stared dumbly instead as, stepping from the leaves, Mr. Shrig continued:

“There ain’t a vegetable more toothsome than a pea, or say a couple,—say a peck.”

“Oh?” murmured the landlord, his round eyes beginning to goggle, “But zur, them’s beans.”

“And I’m a-saying, friend, as peas can’t be beat took ’ow you vill,—in a stoo or with a nice bit o’ salmon, wi’ meat or bird, b’iled, roast or—t’other vay, peas can’t be beat.”

“Ay, zur, peas is good, I b’leeve, and my peas—over yonder be adoin’ prime, spite they slugs, dannel ’em!”

“Ha!” sighed Mr. Shrig. “Slugs is a wicious men-ace as should be took an’ topped.”

“I gen’rally uses salt an’ sut, zur.”

“And werry proper too!” nodded Mr. Shrig. “And yet there’s folks, huming beeing, as—eats ’em,—slugs, snails, ah—and frogs! Swallers ’em wi’ j’y an’ gus-to, they do.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the landlord, clapping hand to thigh, resoundingly, “Furrineers!”

“Friend,” quoth Mr. Shrig, impressively, “you ’ave—said it! Furri-neers is the vord! I knows a gen’leman, English, mark ye,—but goes wi’ furriners

and comes over furrin hisself so werry strong that 'e talks, drinks an' eats furrin,—frogs, snails—'e dewours 'em constant, ah—an' I do 'ear as how he partakes now an' then of a occasional spider!"

"Love us!" exclaimed the landlord, and, having opened his eyes their widest, he now opened mouth also. "Spiders?" he gasped.

"Ar!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "And vot's the consequence?"

"Wot, zur,—wot?" enquired the landlord, apprehensively.

"The pore gen'leman—bloats!"

"Did 'e—die?"

"No, but purty nigh,—werry near! He breaks out into a sort o' toomious rash, spots an' swellin's as takes him,—where d'ye suppose?"

"Lord, zur—wheer?"

"In 'is wrists, both on 'em!"

"Eh? Wrists?"

"Ah! They leaves this pore gen'leman's wrists all marked an' scarred, plain for to see. Vich is a warning agin eatin' furrin food."

"Why then dang me but—that's 'im!"

"And oo," enquired Mr. Shrig, his mild gaze roving, "oo's 'im?"

"Why this yere English gemman as you tells me goes furrin,—'im as kisses 'is knife so loving,—'im as rid away an' as my furrin gemman upstairs be a-waitin' for,—that's 'im, zur!"

"And how can ye be so sure as 'im's 'im?"

But before the landlord might answer, his wife was heard calling:

"Sam—oh Sam-uel!"

"Comin', Soo, comin'—"

"Tell me 'ow," demanded Mr. Shrig, "pre-cisely 'ow you know as this gen'leman's 'im!"

"'Is wrist-es, zur,—'is wrist-es be all marked an' scarred like you says."

"Sam-u-el!"

"Comin', lass!" cried the landlord, and departed hastily forthwith.

“Domino!” exclaimed Mr. Shrig, rapping himself smartly though solemnly on the crown of his hat, “Domino me!”

“But what,” enquired Oliver, “pray what does it all mean?” Mr. Shrig took out his pistol, examined the priming, set the weapon handily in the bosom of his waistcoat, beamed on Oliver and answered:

“Sir, it means as a narrer drawed at a wenture hits the mark, or purty nigh.”

“Yes, but how did you find your way to this lonely inn and why?”

“First, sir, because it was so werry nice an’ lonely. And second, because from questions axed, dooly answered and deductions therefrom drawed, I was con-winned as my bird has a roost somewheres along this here road. I acts accordng and—here I am. But how should you come here likewise, Mr.—vot was your monnicker?”

“Dale, Oliver Dale, and I’m here by merest chance.”

“Long, sir?”

“About two hours.”

“Stayin’ long, sir?”

“To-night only. Are you?”

“Vich, sir, I—dunno. But if, when you’re snug abed, you should chance to ’ear—say a shot, say a groan or mebbe cry, never ’eed, sir,—ram your tibby into your piller and thank your stars as you ain’t a Limb o’ The Law as must fold itself about all manner o’ willainy and take windictiveness in all shapes an’ sizes onflinching as in dooty bound. . . . And so, good night, sir!”

“But, Mr. Shrig, could I . . . can’t I be of any help?”

“Wi’ that theer arm? No, sir, not a bit. But to offer is the act of a friend, ah, an’ a pal and, sir,—there’s my daddle!” And smiling very benignly Mr. Shrig extended his square, powerful hand.

“Then good night—and good fortune!” said Oliver, grasping this hand; but scarcely had he relinquished it than, without further word or look, Mr. Shrig turned away and vanished in the gathering dusk.

CHAPTER XVII

RECOUNTS DIVERS STRANGE HAPPENINGS AT “THE WHEATSHEAF INN”

“YOUR boots, zur,” said the landlord, “if you’re a-goin’ to bed, lemme ease ’em off for ye.”

Oliver thanked him; and thus in his stockinged feet crept silently upstairs to the bedroom. There, as silently he undressed, got into bed and blew out the candle. But scarcely had his head touched the pillow than a small voice questioned him:

“Will her . . . me . . . ever get great, big, long legs like yourn?”

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Oliver, sitting bolt upright, “No,—no, of course not.”

“But your legs is nice an’ white, not like Mumper Joe’s legs all brown an’ nobbly—”

“Hush!” said Oliver. “Be quiet! Go to sleep—do!”

“Be you so angry as you sounds?”

“No—yes! You ought to have been asleep long ago.”

“But her was only—”

“Say ‘I’.”

“I was waitin’ for ee to—”

“Say ‘you’.”

“For you to kiss I good night like you promised.”

“Then I will, of course. Lie still—” But even as he spoke she was out of bed, across the room and bending to him in the dusk.

“I never wanted nobody to kiss her afore,—only in her dreams,” she murmured.

“Well,” said he, kissing her, “now hop back into your nest, little bird. Into bed with you, child.” For a moment she hesitated then, sighing, crept away.

“Are you going to be good now and go to sleep, Clia?”

“No, I aren’t.”

“Why not, miss?”

“ ’Cos I be waitin’ for you to say it.”

“What, my dear?”

“The word.”

“Which word?”

“Oh, you know,—the word she ’m waiting for.”

“Ah yes,” said Oliver, sinking back on his pillow, “Good night, Darlingest.”

“Good night!” she whispered. “Oh, good night, my . . . dearie! She ’ll go asleep now.”

And presently, judging by her regular breathing that asleep she was at last, Oliver closed his own eyes and almost immediately sank to slumber deep and dreamless.

Therefore, to find himself suddenly broad awake again and for no apparent reason, greatly surprised and troubled him strangely.

The moon had risen, and through the open lattice was shining down from a serene and cloudless heaven, a floating glory by whose radiance he saw little Clia fast asleep; he saw her small shoes and stockings neatly disposed, her garments all folded with a painful care that touched him oddly.

Now, though so vividly awake, Oliver lay utterly still, glancing keenly about him, noting every object from a cracked china dog on the mantel (whose round, surprised eyes reminded him of Sam, the landlord), to a battered old walking-stick in adjacent corner; for, while his eyes were thus busy, his ears were straining desperately to catch some repetition of the sound that he felt sure had awakened him thus suddenly. Motionless then he lay to listen and all about him a silence so profound, a stillness so deep and awesome as bred in him a vague yet ever-growing unease, a sense of impending evil, of stealthy, oncoming menace. He thought of the Bow Street Officer’s ominous words . . . “if, snug abed, you chance to hear—say a shot, say a groan, or, mebbe, a cry, ram your tibby into your pillow. . . .” But now, instead of so doing, Oliver raised his head the better to listen, and yearned for something, anything to break this ghastly stillness, this brooding unearthly quietude. . . . And suddenly it came:

Softly sweet, melodious as pipe of thrush or blackbird, upon this tremendous silence stole a whistle. . . . Answering movements in the

adjoining chamber; faint creak of lattice stealthily opening. Then, silently, swiftly Oliver was out of bed and, crouching back from his own open window, peered out and down . . . saw a shadow that moved in the shadow of stilly trees . . . heard a sibilant whisper:

“All’s fast below here! Open the door!”

Scarce were these words uttered than amid the leafy gloom another shadow moved and instantly rose sounds dreadful to hear,—a desperate, dumb struggling, breaths that panted, muffled stamp and shuffle of feet, thud of vicious blows, a hoarse cry. . . . Out into the moonlight rolled two men locked in fierce strife that ended suddenly for one of these men rose unsteadily and Oliver (at the casement now) saw this was Shrig, the Bow Street Officer; then into his vision, from the adjoining window, stole a lean, pale hand grasping a pistol. Instinctively Oliver turned, snatched up the battered walking-stick and leaning from the lattice smote this menacing hand; he saw the weapon fall, glimpsed a contorted, hairy visage, heard the swift tread of stealthy feet then, hurrying on a few clothes, sped from the room, down the stair and out into the moonlight to behold Mr. Shrig standing above a huddled shape, glancing from the pistol he held, to the window above that now gaped upon empty darkness.

“Viskers!” quoth Mr. Shrig, smearing a trickle of blood from his cheek, but keeping his wide gaze upon that dark casement above, “you saw ’em too, friend?”

“Yes, of course—”

“Then my peepers didn’t deceive me, though sich viskers is ’ard to believe. And they’ve took French leave and stole theirselves off, eh pal?”

“Yes, but you’re hurt,” said Oliver.

“Only windictiveness in the shape of a signet ring, friend. But these viskers now,—they ain’t too fur off, I reckon. So the vord is—caution! Vich so being, I’ll ax you to—” Mr. Shrig paused to cock the weapon he held as out from that window above came the yawning bell-mouth of a blunderbuss followed by the shock head and staring eyes of Sam, the landlord.

“Oo’s there?” he demanded, levelling the heavy weapon, “Wot’s to do?”

“Willainy!” answered Mr. Shrig. “Also a Bow Street Officer—and that’s me. So easy wi’ that there blunderbush and come you here, in the King’s Name.”

Thus presently out into the bright moonlight stepped Landlord Sam, half clad but still clutching his blunderbuss, to goggle at Mr. Shrig, to peer down at his sprawling captive and start back, exclaiming:

“Gorramitey,—’tis ’im!”

“Ay!” nodded Mr. Shrig.

“Dead—is ’e, zur?”

“No, vorse luck!”

“Then you . . . you ’aven’t shot ’im?”

“Not yet. Now ’and your blunderbush to Mr. O. and help me get Willainy into your kitchen.”

“Ay but—why theer, zur—if you please?”

“Becos I orders you—in the King’s Name!”

Murmurous but obedient. Landlord Sam bent to the task and the helpless prisoner was hauled indoors and deposited full length upon the oaken settle.

“Now,” quoth Mr. Shrig mopping bloodstained visage, “I demands a po’ chaise.”

“Oh?” exclaimed Sam, goggling. “A chay, zur,—but—”

“And sharp’s the vord, me lad!”

“But we ’aven’t got no chay, nor yet ever a—”

“Then per-jooce vun, me buck,—in the King’s Name,—an’ look slippy!”

“But zur, ’ow can I, if I ’aven’t got no chay—”

“Find them as has and find ’em immediate or I’ll in-dite ye for not aidin’ an’ comfortin’ a nofficer in the execution of his dooty,—and that’ll mean jail, me lad, a cell, the jug!”

“Tom Barnes ’as a chay, Sam!” said his wife, night-capped head a-peep at the door.

“But Tom Barnes be five moile away. Soosan, so ’ow can I—”

“If ’twere fifty mile ’tis no matter, me lad!” quoth Mr. Shrig, scowling. “So off wi’ ye,—take my nag, you’ll find ’im tied in the trees agin your gardin gate,—trip, me tulip!”

Sighful, staring and shock hair a-bristle, Sam departed.

“As for you, Mrs. Soosan, mam,” said Mr. Shrig, saluting her gallantly, “get your pretty ’ead back onto its peaceful piller, with my gratitood, and good night, mam.”

“And good night to ee, I’m sure,” answered Susan smiling and curtseying, “thope I’d fain do summat for your pore face first, sir.”

“Nary thing, Mrs. Soosan, a scrat or so don’t matter to this here chivy o’ mine. So good night an’ my gratitood again, mam. . . .”

Meanwhile, Oliver had stood looking down upon the captive, this man he had never yet seen erect upon his legs, who lay outstretched exactly as he had first beheld him, though now these slim shapely, aristocratic hands were confined by gleaming handcuffs: this desperate felon whose aspect, now as before, troubled him vaguely and for no perceptible reason; this face that should have been handsome yet was not, this thick-curling hair that, glossy with youth, should not have been grey and yet was. . . .

“Sir,” quoth Mr. Shrig, coming beside him, “you seems oncommon interested in this here wicious malefactor.”

“Yes,” nodded Oliver, his gaze still intent, “yes, I am . . . and don’t know why! He was a gentleman once . . . well-born, I’m sure.”

“Born, ah—born to be ’anged.—Topped, tarred, ironed and gibbeted!” quoth Mr. Shrig, seating himself within reach of his inanimate prisoner, “I never see a truer Capital Cove in all my puff! Vich re-minds me as ’ow I shouldn’t be a-puffin’ this wital air at this i-identical minute but for you, Mr. O.—I should be a bleed’n’ wictim to windictiveness, as vitness—this here!” And from capacious pocket Mr. Shrig drew a splendid pistol, its silver mountings agleam in light of the lamp upon the table. “A fine piece, Mr. Oliver, as cost a mort o’ money—like this here still-etta.” And out came the silver-hilted dagger. “Makes an ’andsome pair, eh? And both on ’em werry near vas the death o’ me—”

The figure on the settle writhed feebly and from quivering lips came a husky whisper:

“Water . . . for . . . God’s sake—”

Instinctively they turned towards this pitiful suppliant; but even then Oliver, nearest the window, glimpsed something long and slender that darted in at them through the open lattice; glass splintered and out went the lamp. And now in this sudden, blinding darkness was swift movement; and then a muffled voice spoke:

“Officer, give me your pistols, both—or die! Now the stiletto!”

“Where . . . where is he, damn him?” cried another voice, “I’ll brain him with these cursed darbies—”

“Out!” said the first voice, hushed yet imperious, “Out of the window, quick! Quick, I say!”

“No, by God I’ll splotch him first!”

“Fool!” cried the first voice, bitterly scornful, “Will you risk the greater game for this poor trash? Out, I say—this instant!”

A vicious, muttered oath, a hurry of movement, and silence.

So swift, so sudden and utterly unexpected had it all been that for a long moment Oliver sat crouched motionless in his chair, dazed and confounded, staring upon a glimmering square that slowly brightened upon his vision until he could see beyond this wide, open lattice, the vast looming shapes of motionless trees black against the hidden moon. . . . At last came the voice of Mr. Shrig hushed and suggestive of philosophically placid woe:

“Vich, all as I says is, blow . . . my . . . dickey!”

“Are you hurt?” enquired Oliver, starting to his feet.

“No,—but I’m shook, pal, shook! Ah, I’m shook to the very marrer! For here was me sitting, as you’ll mind, pistol in my daddle—and then, afore I can even cock it, I’m ’anding said pistol to Willainy,—meek as a suckin’ dove,—ditto the sti-lletta, mild as a bleatin’ lamb! And—if you’d know the verefore and the v’y, get a glim and take a peep at Jarsper. There’s candle and tinderbox on the table at your elber.”

Fumbling hastily in the gloom Oliver presently found and lit the candle to behold Mr. Shrig still seated, but hatless, and pointing square thumb at an angry, scarlet ring that marked his otherwise placid brow.

“Pistol-muzzle?” questioned Oliver, recoiling.

“That i-dentical!”

“Frightful!” said Oliver.

“Ah but,” sighed Mr. Shrig, “‘poor trash!’ Mr. O., sir, Wiolence I’m used to. I’ve met Windictiveness in every shape, brickends, bludgeons, steel, ball, and a occasional chimbley-pot. I’ve been cursed and I’ve been swore at ’earty an’ free, and I’ve took it all as a matter o’ dooty, but—nobody never

come it over me so low as 'poor trash' afore. 'Tis this as has shook me, ay Viskers has shook and diddled me into the bargain!"

"By means of this!" said Oliver, and took from the floor a long, hazel-stick newly cut and trimmed, with a wide prong at one end, which Mr. Shrig now handled and examined with lively interest and profound approbation.

"Bee-ootiful!" he murmured. "Here's Artfulness with a capital A! Viskers cuts this pre-cisely the proper length to reach and out the light. Dog bit me if this a'nt clever! Viskers has brains. Ordinary criminals is a poor, dull lot and to meet them as ain't, makes dooty a J-O-Y—j'y! And Viskers is extrordinary!" So saying, Mr. Shrig rose lightly, crossed the room nimbly, retrieved his hat from the corner where it had rolled, nodded at it cheerily, clapped it on jauntily and nodded at Oliver.

"Sir," said he, buttoning up his neat coat, "I'm a cove as never forgets faces good or bad, and yourn is the face of a friend as mebbe saved my life to-night, therefore, sir and pal, accept the obleeged daddle of a grateful man . . . and good-bye to ye."

"But," said Oliver, as he rose and grasped this extended hand, "you're never for the road—at this time of night?"

"'Ark!" said Mr. Shrig, glancing towards the window as upon the deep night stillness stole a sound faint and far with distance.

"Wheels!" said Oliver.

"The po' shay, I guess,—my nag I 'opes. But hows'ever an' vichever, I foller the road o' dooty, sir."

"But—where to?"

"London! There's no place like old London for scenery, smells or sin. All the best and all the vorst finds its way to London, soon or late, pal. And 'tis there I'll find my two birds—a nawk and a neagle, and in old London I'll cage 'em safe or die in me boots. And, Mr. O., friend, you tells me as my bird Number Vun is a gen'leman born and if so, then Viskers—Number Two is a bang-up, 'eavy-toddlin' cove, or as you might say, a bloo-bleedin' aristo-crat. And I know by his voice, his manners, and his tattler,—this!" Now as he spoke, and very suddenly, upon the open palm of his powerful hand Mr. Shrig showed a splendid bunch of seals attached to an even more splendid gold watch.

"Lord!" exclaimed Oliver, staring.

“This I takes, pal, or as you might say—prigs from the person of Number Two—Viskers, ’olding it in evidence agin same. A fine gold tattler with monnygram in di’monds, letters—G. de S. and corrynet above. See for yourself, Mr. O., pal!”

“It’s a magnificent thing!” said Oliver. “But how on earth did you contrive to . . . get it?”

“Werry easy, friend. Here’s Viskers, ’aving knocked off my dicer, with his barker agin my tibby and his mind on other things, so how should he know as I’m famming his tattler . . . more especially considering as in my on-regenerate days I was a champion buzzman and prig. . . . And yonder comes Samivel and shay. Let’s go meet same.”

So out they stepped into the radiant moonlight to behold a somewhat dilapidated vehicle with Landlord Sam goggling at them from the saddle-horse.

“So,” quoth Mr. Shrig, “you brought the shay?”

“Ay, zur, I b’leeve so, but I couldn’t get no postboy.”

“Good, I don’t need none! You have my nag there, I see!”

“Ay, I ’ave, zur, though—”

“And that’s better still!” said Mr. Shrig, swinging himself very nimbly astride his animal.

“But zur, wot o’ this yere shay? Wot’ll I do wi’ un?”

“Drive it back again, me lad.”

“But you axed me to fetch it—in the King’s Name, sez you—”

“And now, in the King’s Name, I’m tellin’ you to take it out o’ my road.” Sam opened his mouth, shut it, goggled at Shrig, the moon, the adjacent scenery, shook his head and, turning the chaise, trundled away again.

“Mr. Oliver,” said Jasper Shrig, settling feet in stirrups and gathering up the reins, “seeing as how I looks on you ’enceforth in the light of a pal,—should you chance to be in London at any time, if you’ll look in at ‘The Gun,’ Gray’s Inn Lane, me and my comrade, Corporal Richard Roe’ll, be mighty proud and glad to welcome you, and do it right hearty. So, Mr. O., pal, here’s vishing you better fortun’ than Jarsper’s!” Having said which, Mr. Shrig touched his hat, beamed, chirrupped to his horse and trotted away Londonwards.

CHAPTER XVIII

DESCRIBES A COMBAT, FEROCITY VERSUS SCIENCE

HENS were clucking busily; from pond remote a duck, or probably a drake, quacked imperiously; from stableyard a horse whinneyed, pails clanked; while from regions immediately below rose a sound of women's voices with the pleasantly suggestive clatter of crockery, when Oliver, awaiting shaving-water, thrust touzled, golden head out into this fragrant, golden morning to behold his immediate world, glad-eyed.

The great trees that last night had loomed so hugely sombre and menacing were now transformed by this joyous sunlight into things of vivid beauty and, rustling their myriad leaves in the gentle air, seemed greeting him like so many old friends. Beyond these, to right and left, ran the broad, white road dappled with the shadow of blooming hedges, and whispering leafage, while, beyond these again, the landscape rolled away and away, field and meadow and wooded upland, to a vague line of purple hills that was the fair Downland country.

And now, gazing on the peaceful beauty of this varied countryside, it was hard to believe that the sinister events of last night were no more than evil dream. But,—before his mind's eye rose the vision of a face, lean, clean-cut, high-bred, framed in grey hair that curled so youthfully . . . these features that haunted him with their vague familiarity like a face oft-visited in a dream or rising wraith-like through the mists of a dimly remembered past. Had he truly dreamed such face, or could these indeed be the features of one familiar in childhood but now, so direly transfigured by Time as to be scarce recognizable? "No!" said Oliver in his thought; and then:

"No!" said he with his lips, and so loudly that a small, startled voice behind him spoke forthwith in anxious question:

"Is it your poor arm—do it hurt ee, Oli-ver?"

And, turning, he beheld his sudden questioner sitting up in bed, her small, peaked chin above the bedclothes, her great, sombre eyes wide and anxious as her voice.

"My arm?" he repeated, moving the bandaged limb in question, tentatively, "I've hardly thought of it lately, so it must be nearly well. And how are you this fine morning, sweetheart?"

"Bonzo!" she answered.

"Oh?" enquired Oliver, blinking. "And what may that mean?"

“All kippo! That’s wot Mumper Joe use to say when he were nice an’ drunk,—that’s when her liked he—almost.”

Oliver sighed, rather hopelessly, and turned back to the window.

“Oh—please,” she cried, quick to read his look, “are you growed angry at her—me?”

“No,—yes, yes I am!” he answered. “I’ve told you to forget Mumper Joe. I want you to speak prettily and try to be a . . . a little lady. But you don’t seem to try—”

She was out of bed, across the room and kneeling at his feet, her arms about his knees, her face upraised appealingly.

“Don’t, oh don’t be angry wiv her,” she pleaded, “cos it . . . hurts her so . . . inside.”

Now looking down on her, he felt a great tenderness and pity to see her little body so frail and woefully thin.

“No, no I won’t be angry, child,” he answered, touching her bright hair; then lifting her in his one arm, and all too easily, he bore her back to bed and setting her there very gently, kissed the troubled pucker from her slim, dark brows and bade her get dressed.

Now, leaning again from the window, he beheld Landlord Sam, bearing two pails of water on a yoke, and who, touching finger to wiry hair, bade him good-day.

“And a glorious morning it is!” said Oliver.

“Ay, zur, though I dunno as I ’aven’t seen better. Goin’ to be plaguey ’ot later on.”

“No sign of your queer guests this morning, I suppose.”

“Well—yes, zur. In the furrin gemman’s room I finds a fi’-pun note,—which is more than I should ha’ charged, an’ which is pretty ’andsome, an’ ’im a furriner an’ all!” Here, Oliver’s shaving-water making its appearance, he began to shave, while Clia, seated nearby, small, stockinged legs demurely crossed, watched with a fearful interest.

And presently downstairs they went to breakfast with hearty appetite; and then out into the sunny garden to ramble, hand-in-hand, among the flowers, for the morning was so glorious and the countryside hereabouts so alluring that Oliver had no mind to be gone yet awhile. Now in a shady corner of this pleasant garden where hollyhocks and lupins grew in

splendour, was a small, rustic arbour and seated here with Clia beside him, Oliver began to teach her the alphabet. And, after the lesson had endured some time:

“Now tell me, Darlingest,” he questioned, rather sleepily for the morning was very warm and slumberous, “what comes after C?”

“X,” she answered, instantly.

“I’m afraid you aren’t attending, my dear.”

“No, I aren’t, me’s wondering who rides so fast, listen too!” Thus Oliver became aware of distant horsehoofs coming at a gallop, four speeding hoofs beating a tattoo that seemed familiar. Oliver sat up; the quick-pounding, mettlesome hoofs drew rapidly nearer, were up with the inn, were past; then the tattoo changed suddenly to an impatient trampling on the road nearby, subsided to an occasional, nervous stamping, and then upon the drowsy air rose a clear, extremely imperious baritone voice.

“Hi there!” A moment’s pause, then: “Hallo there! Yes,—you with the gooseberry ogles and wideawake hair, I mean you, Bob,—you!”

“Wot—me, zur?” answered Sam’s somewhat mournful voice. “Me, zur?”

“You heard me. Is your name Bob?”

“Well—no, zur, not prezackly, it aren’t.”

“Then it ought to be.”

“But, zur, I were christened Sam-u-el—”

“Then, Bob, tell me—has a gentleman passed this way lately,—tall, light hair, on a grey horse with a little girl, have you seen them pass, I say?”

“No, zur. I ’ave not and they ha’n’t,—leastways not wot you might say ‘passed’ they ha’n’t.”

“What the dooce are you trying to tell me?”

“The gorspel truth, zur, amen! And me name’s Sam-u-el!”

“That’s why I call you Bob. Now hearkee again, Bob, and think devilish hard! A tall gentleman with light, curly hair, on a large, grey horse,—the light, curly hair is not on the horse but the gentleman,—he is on the horse, and with this gentleman on the horse is a little girl also on the horse. Are you with me so far, Bob, you twig?”

“Ay, zur . . . I . . . dunno but I . . . b’leeve so, but—”

“Good! Now think a little harder! Did you happen to see this gentleman, this horse, and this little girl pass here any time yesterday or this morning?”

“No, zur, I did not,—neether yesterday nor this morning none whotever because it can’t nowise be,—seeing as how.”

“As how—what, Bob, what?”

“They ha’n’t never passed yere.”

“Then curse and confound it, I’ve missed ’em! Bring me a pint of ale, and draw it strong, damme, strong!”

“Ay, zur. But seein’ as ’ow they ain’t passed by, wot I meantersay is as ’ow p’raps they—”

“Ale, Bob, ale!”

“Ay, zur!” Here, save for stamp of impatient hoofs ensued a silence wherein Clia now questioned whispering:

“Yon be T’other Un, ain’t—aren’t it?”

“That, my child, is indeed your Uncle Roland.”

“Uncle?” she enquired.

“Uncle!” he nodded. “Your dear Uncle Roly-poly.”

“Are you my uncle too?”

“No, no, I’m much more than any uncle, Darlingest. I’m more like a—yes, a father to you.”

“Then,” sighed she, nestling to him, “should I ought to call you ‘daddy’?”

“Well—no, just ‘Oliver’ will do. Hush!” For now again came the two voices, so very near them, in question and answer, thus:

LANDLORD: Your ale, zur, an’ whiles you drinks, I’ll mak’ bold to ax ee a question or so, if I may?

ROLAND: Say on, Bob, our ears attend you.

LANDLORD: Be you a . . . a friend to this yere gemman—fair ’air an’ tall, grey ’oss?

ROLAND:

His friend? Hum! Well—yes. You can take it I am, at least—for the present, why d’you ask, eh?

LANDLORD: And do this yere gemman ’ave a bad arm, zur—’is left ’un?

ROLAND: Yes. Yes he has—ha, you’ve seen him then! Now damme, what d’ye mean by saying you hadn’t?

LANDLORD: Which, zur, I never nowise says no sich thing! All as I says was as ’ow—

ROLAND: You told me you hadn’t seen him.

LANDLORD: No, zur. I tells you as ’ow I ’adn’t see ’im pass by, as no more I ’ave, for see ’im I likewise ’ave—frequent! : ROLANDWhen? Where? What the devil d’you mean?

LANDLORD: Not ’bove ten minutes ago, zur, in my back garden. Will I fetch ’im to ee, zur?

ROLAND: No! No, certainly not! I’m in no particular hurry to see him. Here, take my horse, and be careful, he’s a trifle skittish this morning. I’ll sit out here and finish my ale.

But very soon into the garden strolled Roland, a graceful figure and extremely spick and span, from crown of hat to gleaming riding-boots; for a moment he stood tapping these shining boots with his gold mounted riding-whip in apparent dreamy contemplation of a row of beans nearby, then, as if becoming suddenly aware of Oliver and the child, he lifted his eyebrows in languid surprise and sauntered up to the arbour.

“Hallo!” said he, ungraciously.

“Hallo again!” quoth Oliver.

“So here you are, eh? Why the dooce must you go hiding away in a confounded hole like this?”

“Why not, Roly? Have you been looking for us?”

“Oh dear no! Not particularly—certainly not! I naturally kept an eye open for you on the road . . . just in case . . . your dashed arm, and so on.”

“Kind of you, Roly.”

“No, mere common humanity. I see you couldn’t lose her, then?”

“Who, pray?”

“Mistress Spindleshanks. She adheres. And she will! And it serves you right. . . . B’gad, the little baggage eyes me with a positive, dashed

malevolence!”

“No wonder!” retorted Oliver. “So do I.”

“You would naturally, Noll, hate and malevolence were predestined for you and me! But the small female there,—why must she view me so infernally sour and sullen?”

“She reflects your mood, Roland, for by heaven, you come on us like some blight!”

“Then the blight shall instantly remove!” But even as Roland turned to begone, the child spoke softly in her strangely sweet voice:

“Oliver, why don’t he like me? I ’aven’t done anything for to make him hate me so,—has her?”

“No, Darlingest, your dear Uncle Roly-poly is only teasing—”

“Eh? What?” exclaimed Roland, wincing. “What’s this? Uncle, is it?”

“Uncle it is, Roly. If you ask her properly, your little niece may kiss you.” Here, for a moment, Roland’s surprised indignation seemed beyond speech, then he stuttered:

“Ab-surd! Ridiculous!”

“Why?” Oliver demanded.

“A thousand reasons! And besides the . . . the little vixen detests me,—cowers if I look at her,—cringed away to you the moment she saw me . . . I’ll go!”

“Child,” said Oliver, “will you try a kiss on him?”

“No—no!” she answered, with a sob in her voice, “he don’t like I . . . so me don’t like him—much.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Roland, glancing round at the little speaker. “Then perhaps you like me—a little?”

“Yes, her do—I does, when you—smiles?”

Here Roland pursed his shapely lips as if to whistle, stared up at the sky instead, then at the long bean-rows, glanced at Clia’s wistful little face and—smiled.

“Now she’ll kiss ee. . . Will I, Oliver?”

“Never mind him,” said Roland, beckoning, “have at me!” So to him she went and Roland stooped to her proffered kiss; then lifting her in his arms,

scowled at Oliver and demanded:

“Do you ever trouble to feed the child? She’s much under weight and frightfully thin!”

“She is, Roly. But time and care will alter that.”

“And,” said Roland, touching her red-gold, glossy tresses, “it’s a confounded,—by Jupiter—it’s an infernal shame!”

“What now, Roly?”

“No hat, b’gad! I say it’s a dashed scandal you don’t buy her a hat!”

“Lord!” exclaimed Oliver, instantly contrite. “I never thought of it!”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Talking of hats, yours is new, I perceive.”

“It is, and a confoundedly poor affair . . . do till I reach London. But as regards this neglected child, she ought to be properly dressed, a regular outfit . . . little cloak . . . pelisse and . . . so on. We must buy ’em at once.”

“We?” enquired Oliver.

“Of course! We agreed to share all expenses, money and so forth—or didn’t we?”

“We did.”

“Very well, then! And b’George,—this reminds me, I’ve another five guineas to share.”

“But how,—where in the world—?”

“Borrowed, of course, from Jessamy Todd. Jessamy’s pretty warm, y’know, quite a wealthy cove—considering. . . . Not at the fighting game, of course, left to him by some wealthy sportsman. Eh,—what’s that?” he enquired, for, uttering an exclamation, Oliver had taken from pocket and was staring at Jessamy’s forgotten letter. And now, breaking the many seals, he opened and read it, first to himself and then aloud:

“‘MR. OLIVER, SIR AND DEAR BROTHER,—Jerry tells me as you mean to cherish, back up and stand by a little helpless child, and I’m saying as she couldn’t have a better second in her corner to hearten and counsel her in Life’s battle. Mr. Roland informs me as you was robbed penniless. I therefore, having plenty and being a lonesome cove, beg you to accept enclosed sum as a loan for the

child's sake, good fellowship's sake and the sake of your true brother and very respectful

JESSAMY TODD'."

"Ten pounds!" sighed Oliver, shaking his head at the banknotes this letter had enclosed.

"Ten?" exclaimed Roland. "Ten,—and by Jingo, I only asked five for myself."

"The trouble is," said Oliver, refolding the letter, "how are we to get this money back to him."

"Eh—back?" repeated Roland, indignantly. "No such thing, Mr. Smug! We need the money! The money is freely offered, Jessamy has plenty and to spare, and not to accept the dashed money would be the act of confounded prigs."

"And how do you propose to pay it back with no resources, Master Unscrupulous, Random Numps?"

"Why trouble about this now, Mr. Tom Fool? We shan't always be in this state of ridiculous penury, and be hanged to it!"

"How can you be sure of this, Roland?"

"Because I, at least, have faith in my destiny and sublime belief in myself, by Heavens!"

"Good!" nodded Oliver.

"Well now do we keep this money or not?"

"No!"

"So be it and—Good-bye!" said Roland and settling his jaunty hat with a fierce rap on the crown,—away he strode. Now when his haughty back had vanished indoors, into Oliver's strong clasp crept Clia's little fingers and in his ears her awed question:

"An' please, is Uncle Roland only teasing you now, my Oliver?"

"Yes, dear, he . . . seems rather playful this morning. Now run and tell Mrs. Susan I want pens, ink and paper—out here, sweetheart."

"But you didn't say 'please'! Uncle Roland says we must always say 'please'—"

“And Uncle Roland is quite right. So pens and ink and paper, Darlingest—please!”

Thus presently, seated in this pleasant arbour, Oliver re-pointed and trimmed the rather weary quill pen and began to indite his letter to Jessamy Todd, but found it more difficult than he had imagined; he dipped pen, tested it, stooped to begin, stared at the blank paper, twiddled the pen, gazed across the wide, sunny garden where Clia was busied with their buxom landlady, picking beans,—finally he dipped pen once more, bowed his head resolutely and began to write, thus:

“MY DEAR JESSAMY,—Your generosity and kindly thought touch me deeply. Your letter I shall keep, therefore, but your money I am venturing to return for these several reasons: first because I do not know when I should be able to repay your loan. Secondly because I am not entirely destitute and thirdly because —”

Oliver was pondering his “thirdly” when he started violently and chilled to a wild, shrill screaming. . . .

He was afoot and out of the arbour, but, as he ran, saw Roland come vaulting through the inn’s wide casement, flourishing his whip in airy salutation to Mumper Joe who scowled back, one great hand twisted in Clia’s shining hair, a formidable bludgeon in the other.

“Yoicks!” cried Roland, gaily. “Hard forrard, tally ho, and so forth! There you are again, eh, Jumping Joe,—and welcome as a sweet may-flower. Now loose my little niece, Joseph, and attend to her uncle who is about to attend to you—with both his dooks, my tulip, or shall we say ‘mauleys’? Come, loose the child and—put ’em up!”

“Stand off!” growled Mumper Joe fiercely. “Come anigh me and I’ll brain ye! The Kinchin-cove’s mine, ’tis my kid, my brat,—ah, an’ nobody ain’t agoin’ for to tak’ ’er from me.”

“Oh, yes, I am!” said Roland, nodding pleasantly but with lips that curled grimly and blue eyes wide and bright. “Yes, I shall take her from you, Joseph. Also I’m going to use your hulking, brutish carcass to show yon gent with the game flipper what he’s in for at our next, and I hope not distant, set-to. So drop your cudgel, Joe, and put up your fists like a sportsman and Briton.”

Uttering a foul imprecation Mumper Joe thrust the child into his friend Dirk's ready clutch, bowed massive shoulders, raised bludgeon and advanced to combat,—but Roland's whiplash cracked beneath his bearded chin and he recoiled, snarling savagely.

“So!” nodded Roland, white teeth agleam. “Now drop that cudgel and fight like a man or I'll cut you about those things you call ears and flick out an eye or so! Come—fight!”

Cursing deeply, Joe let fall his bludgeon; laughing gaily, Roland tossed aside his whip and, smiling, he advanced, to check suddenly before the swiftly-drawn pistol that menaced him.

And now Mumper Joe laughed in fierce derision, nodding his shaggy head in evil triumph.

“Stand still—you—!” he jeered. “Ah, and stand all on ye! Never no one move or 'ere's bloody end to some on ye! Dirk laddo, tak my brat out to my cart!” A moment of breathless stillness,—then uttering choked scream, Susan launched her basket and with aim so true that, for a moment Mumper Joe was staggered and blinded by cascading beans,—in which moment Roland was upon him, had seized, wrenched, twisted and flung the deadly weapon far across the garden and was safe out of Joe's vicious reach almost in the same instant.

“God bless you!” said Roland, smiling at Susan as he slid nimbly out of his close-fitting coat. “Presently I mean to kiss you heartily for such rare wit and admirable precision of aim.”

Susan being about to sob, laughed instead, then screamed as out from window above them came the yawning muzzle of Sam's blunderbuss backed by Sam's visage fiercely round of eye and stiffer of hair even than usual.

“Off, ye willins!” he cried hoarsely. “Git off afore I fills ye full o' nails an' shot, likewise broken glass. Off, ye rapscaylions—”

“No, no!” cried Roland, cheerily. “All's well. Bob, and going to be better ___”

“Sam-u-el!” cried his wife, fearfully. “You pud-down that narsty thing this moment.”

“Rascal,” said Oliver, scowling into the face of Dirk, “loose this child!” And Dirk, feeling how potent was the hand that gripped his neckcloth, obeyed instantly and Clia was sobbing in Oliver's embrace.

“Now, my jumping ruffian,” said Roland, baring two unexpectedly muscular arms, “fists it is, Joe, now—kill me if you can! Have at me now and try your best!”

And Joe tried.

For hereupon began a combat never to be forgotten by goggling Sam, and often to be described thereafter by an aged, tottery person, in smock-frock and beaver hat, who doddered upon a stick, a very ancient man thither come as was his immemorial wont, at this hour, to assuage a noble thirst but who now stood as it were transfixed, enthralled and spellbound, but later became a highly agitated and admiring spectator; for here was skill and a calmly joyous dexterity matched against brutal strength and ferocity.

The Mumper’s furious onset was terrible to see and apparently overwhelming,—but—his Herculean blows were deftly avoided by reason of Roland’s nimble feet, elusive body and battering fists; time and again he was smitten without a return, lightning blows that checked his fierce rushes, blows that stung and maddened him, well-timed blows that shook and jarred his heavy body until, blood-spattered, half-blind and breathless, he tried to close, gouging claws, knees and elbows ready and eager for their ghastly work and, baffled in this, he essayed a vicious kick easily evaded and instantly countered by Roland’s hard-driving right that, thudding heavily beneath Joe’s ear, dropped him to hands and knees.

“Ooh my soul!” piped the Ancient, hopping in an ecstasy. “Ooh my dear soul—sich legs! sich feet! Sich bootiful feet an’ legs. Ooh my dear, blessed soul!”

“Up . . .” panted Roland, “Up with you . . . or lie there and . . . be kicked! Stand up . . .!”

Mumper Joe gasped, shook his head to clear it and rose slowly; but scarce was he afoot than he crouched, powerful body quivering with hate and murderous purpose; and now as he gathered himself thus, big fists a-swing, Roland cried:

“Watch, Noll . . . the shift,—watch now!”

Mumper Joe rushed, intent to maim, to rend, to gore and slay, but, as he came Roland advanced to meet him and, pivoting on his left foot, forward swung his right with fist, arm, shoulder and body behind the blow and, smitten thus obliquely on hairy chin, Mumper Joe pitched sideways, to crash headlong amid the bean-rows and lie there kicking in feeble helplessness.

“Lummie!” gasped the man Dirk; and for a long, breathless moment all stood dumbly staring at these twitching legs.

Here, and all at once, the Tottering Ancient seemed to forget his aches and pains, the heavy burden of his many years, for he flourished his crutch-stick gaily, he croaked hilariously, he even essayed a tottery sort of jig.

“Eighty an’ one years,” he piped, “for one an’ eighty year I’ve drawed breath, suffered an’ sorrered in this yere Vale o’ Tears,—but not for nothin’—no, not in vain arter wot I just see this blessed day, oh my dear, blessed, precious soul!”

“And—that,” quoth Roland motioning towards his prostrate antagonist with gesture superbly disdainful, “that, I grieve to say, is polished off quite, quite—too soon!” Having said which, he instantly kissed Mrs. Susan who, as instantly blushing, helped him back into his coat.

“And now,” said he, drawing the Tottering Ancient’s bony arm through his own, “I suggest that something in glass or tankard will not come amiss. We will drink to—Woman, man’s stay, solace, comfort and inspiration, her beauty and wit coupled with the name of . . . our fair Hostess, God bless her!”

CHAPTER XIX

INTRODUCES THE FEMININE ELEMENT

ROUSED by a bucket of water poured over him with a certain joyful deliberation, Mumping Joe gasped a blistering curse or so, blinked and opened his eyes very wide to see Landlord Sam standing over him, the empty bucket in one hand, a foaming tankard in the other and, beyond, the lounging form of his conqueror perched gracefully in the open casement, wine-glass at lip but who, in the act of drinking, paused to enquire:

“Are you a better rascal, now, my rogue?” Mumping Joe, glancing from the speaker to his own moist person, and cursed again whole-heartedly.

“Evidently!” nodded Roland. “I suppose,” he enquired wistfully, “you don’t feel inclined for a little more, my pippin?”

Joe’s answer was instant and decidedly negative.

“No!” sighed Roland. “Such joys are all too brief! Well now, having stimulated your villain’s carcass with aqua pura, we now cherish it with ale. Drink, Joe, and be off, that bristly jowl of yours is a temptation I’m yearning to hit again, so drink and away.”

Joe clutched the tankard ravenously, drank thirstily and sighed rapturously; then, getting to his legs, he scowled at Roland, the Landlord, the glad-eyed Totty Ancient, the world about him and, beckoning fiercely to his companion Dirk, took himself away.

“Zur,” quoth Sam, “I ain’t never and no when see nothin’ like o’ the way as you set about yon murderin’ villin . . . and I wur to say as my Soosan be aroastin a fowl, zur, a chicken, stuffed, for your honour, as she an’ me be hopin’, zur, as you’ll stay and thereof partake.”

“Willingly, Bob, and with hearty appetite,” answered Roland, graciously.

“Eighty an’ one years!” piped the Ancient.

“And time your tankard was empty, old friend! Is it? It is,—fill it again, Bob, and your own.”

So saying, Roland nodded and sauntered towards the arbour, where his cousin was teaching Clia to spell and print her own name; perceiving which, and having nothing better to do until dinner-time, Roland proceeded to distract her attention and then to lure her away altogether, leaving Oliver to stare rather blankly at his still unfinished letter.

But . . . as he sat thus solitary, his musing gaze bent earthward, there dawned upon his sight a vision the most unexpected . . . a pair of riding-boots beneath the lifted folds of a dark-green, rather dusty habit. Oliver held his breath staring in amazed disbelief fraught with joyous wonder, for these were such dainty, coquettish boots,—small, shapely and moved with such delicate precision and assurance until they halted suddenly that one of these lovely things might stamp and tap the happy earth with a pretty petulance; his rapt gaze wandered upwards glimpsing other beauties until he saw a face, black-browed, brown-eyed, vivid, framed in chestnut, wind-blown hair; and these slim brows were knit in angry frown, between scarlet lips was gleam of set teeth, she struck at the nearest leafage with her whip. She spoke:

“Oh, plague and malediction and curses!”

Then she saw Oliver and dropped her whip and before she might stoop for it he was out of the arbour and had given it back to her. Meeting his look she flushed, but set round, dimpled chin at him quite truculently.

“You heard me swear!” she demanded.

“Did I?”

“Of course you did, and think me awful! But . . . I’m so tired and hatefully hot and hungry and thirsty. I’ve lost my horse and left my Aunt and feel quite lost and a blowsy fright, so—can you blame me, Mr. Oliver Dale, for cursing, do you?”

“No, Miss Deborah. And you . . . remembered my name!”

“Of course, and you mine. . . . And I’m in such trouble, such pestilent evil.” Then somehow her hands were in his, whip and all.

“Tell me,” said he, looking down at these small, very vital hands that clasped his so confidingly. “Tell me your trouble.”

“First and foremost it is my odious Aunt, my great-Aunt whom you met, Aunt Letitia, she can and has been so extreme odious . . . and the day so insufferably hot for walking and in these hateful boots—”

“Lovely things!” he murmured and brought her into the shady arbour; here leaning back on the rustic seat she sighed gratefully, tossed away her heavy gauntlets, took off her jaunty, three-cornered hat and fanning herself therewith, beckoned Oliver to sit beside her.

“Shall I fetch you something to drink?” he enquired anxiously.

“Not yet, first I must talk, tell you my tale, plead your advice and probably not take it. . . . But oh what a day! Well . . . oh, do sit down,—now! My Aunt Letitia, as I say, can be so extreme odious and has been so lately, so very much so (oh what a many so’s!) that this morning, very early, I fled from her, ran away—for good!”

“Oh?” said Oliver, blankly.

“Then my beast of a horse ran away from me hours ago, the hateful wretch,—with my valise and all my possessions, things most necessary and—intimate! They’ll be back at Mereworth by now, and I’ve been walking ever since and—destitute. And now you see me horridly hot, flushed, dusty, footsore and, as I say—blowsy!”

“No!” said Oliver, fervently. “You can never be anything but lovely!” Now at this, she glanced at him keenly, saw he was sincere, and drooping dark lashes at him demurely, smiled on him, then sighing plaintively, leaned a little nearer.

“You will perhaps judge me over rash and foolish—”

“Yes!” said downright Oliver, whereat she started.

“Oh! Indeed, sir!” she demanded, frowning. “Then listen and correct your misjudgment of me! For to-day, oh to-day a miserable serf freed herself from detested bondage! This morning I positively defied my Gorgon, my Medusa, Aunt Letitia! Yes, to her very nose and eyebrows and almost expected to be blasted or turned to stone,—but no, instead I am free . . . free! I live at last, I breathe! My soul is my own! I have vindicated my pride, my womanhood! I am an entity at last,—an individual, Mistress of my Fate to choose my own road, and . . . Oh Mr. Oliver—!”

“What then?” he questioned more anxiously, for she had bowed her head upon her hands.

“Now,” she answered, woefully, “now that it is done, over, accomplished for ever and ever I begin to regret ever doing it at all! For though Aunt is so Gorgonish I love her yet . . . and very truly! My hand is on the plough but I am looking back,—staring, glaring back and almost—through tears. Being a man you’ll deem this extreme weak and very cowardly-craven in me, and indeed so it is—”

“No!” said Oliver. “It’s not, and I don’t!”

“But you must.”

“I do not!”

“Then pray what,” she enquired, glancing up at him sideways, “just exactly what do you think of poor me? And please call me ‘Deborah’ but not ‘Debby’.”

“All that is best . . . Deborah! And since you are so wise to regret your impetuous action, you shall be escorted back to—”

“Oh no—never!” she cried. “I could not! I would not! I will not—no! My pride absolutely forbids! Besides, it would be perfectly vain, Aunt is always so horridly determined and terribly—final! And most dreadfully so, this morning! ‘If you go,’ said she to me, and wagging her great, ferocious eyebrows,—‘If you dare to leave me, you,’—she named me minx and baggage and vixen—and other things! ‘You go,’ said she, ‘for good, you leave my roof my hearth and my heart—for ever!’ said Aunt, and stamped at me and scowled and yes, Oliver, I blush to say she swore, far better, I mean worse of course, than ever I could, and rapped her snuff-box at me—passionately! Oh yes, she snuffs tremendously at home—like a—an old, swaggering, daredevil beau! So I cannot go back! I will not—except she plead, and this she will never do, never.”

“But,” said Oliver, “suppose—”

“There can be no idle supposing, sir—all are accomplished facts! Instead of being there I am here. I have cast luxurious bondage behind me, a penurious freedom is before me, to be faced boldly, resolutely and as—grimly as I may.”

“But,” began Oliver again, eyeing this lovely, vivid young face a little doubtfully, for these full, scarlet lips drooped forlornly, beneath these long lashes he fancied was glint of tears. “But,” he repeated.

“There can be no ‘but,’” she sighed. “I must be courageous, calmly valiant and make the best of things,—though I’m never calm and not very valiant and hate making anything do if it won’t, but now I . . . I must suit myself to my so altered fortune and lowly condition—”

“Pray how?” he enquired gently.

“Work!” she answered, with little gasping shudder. “I must work to live, which means, perhaps, that I shall merely live to work. Which is rather direly dreadful thought and apt to fright one who is not so courageous as she hoped, thought and should be, and shivers already at such bleak and dreary prospect,—this most unheroical, fool and random person that is—me!”

“Have you any plans?”

“Of course! Yes, I am on my way to my old schoolmistress, Miss Blenkinsop, who keeps an academy for young ladies on Blackheath, extreme select,—to be a teacher. I was her favourite pupil not so long ago.”

“Is she . . . expecting you, Deborah?”

“Oh no! How could she, when it is all so dreadfully sudden and unexpected that I am still perfectly dazed and amazed at the sudden unexpectedness of it all.”

“Are you sure that Miss Blenkinsop will . . . accept your services?”

“Yes. Oh yes of course, I . . . I think so. I . . . oh I hope so!”

“But—if not?” he enquired apprehensively.

“Oh Goodness!” she exclaimed. “Such frightful possibility never occurred to me. She will, she would, she—must! If not, then—Great Goodness Gracious me! Don’t, oh do not suggest such dread calamity.”

“But surely you have friends in London who would help—care for you?”

“Acquaintances, yes—oh, hundreds!” she sighed. “But real friends—not one! Which is Aunt’s fault, of course. You see she so doats on the country,—prize bulls and pigs and cows and things,—that our visits to London were always too brief for me to make real friends. And one cannot go to mere acquaintances and say: ‘Take me in, feed, clothe, shelter me until I can do it all for myself,’ can one? No,—one certainly can not! There’s my godmother, of course, but she is quite utterly impossible!”

“Yet,” Oliver demurred, “if she is your godmother, then surely—”

“Oh, but,” sighed Deborah, “she is also the Duchess of Camberhurst, a dreadful old thing, as Gorgonish as Aunt—almost! They’re old friends, and she wears a wig. She also rouges—heavily! And—a tongue! Oh, a viperish tongue, Oliver, like an asp or wasp or whichever it is that is odious and stings. So, you see, my godmother is quite impossible and if Miss Blenkinsop should fail me,—my Goodness Gracious, whatever must I do?”

“The sensible thing,” he answered, looking deep into these beautiful eyes that stirred him mightily because of their wide and lovely innocence.

“Ah,—you mean—I must go—back?”

“At once!” he nodded. And now her eyes narrowed on him, her black brows frowned, while slim, booted foot stamped at him; the girl was suddenly all determined woman, and the woman spoke:

“Never! Ah—never!” Ruddy lips closed themselves firmly, round chin set itself with a resolution almost ferocious. “No—never!” she repeated. “I will not! I cannot! I could not! And even if I did, I should run away again— instantly! Go back, sir? Not I,—to be browbeat, jeered, mocked, railed upon —”

“And—kissed!” said Oliver. “Having scolded she would kiss and welcome you back heartily—”

“And what of my natural pride, pray? My pride, what o’ that, if you please?”

“Humility may be more lovely sometimes, and now most especially, Deborah.”

“Why now?”

“Because, as you know in your heart, your Aunt truly loves you,—she must, of course,—and she will be grieving for you now! And she is old and solitary and needs you, Deborah, your love and . . . and lovely companionship. And, my dear, her pathetic need of you is your duty. So— forget your pride this once—”

“Now I believe you are . . . trying to make me weep.”

“I’m trying to save you from trouble, possible disappointment, and your old Aunt from grief and anxiety.” Here one white hand (watched by Oliver) transformed itself to dimpled fist and began to thump the table (though softly, to be sure), as if to lend emphasis to her words:

“Go back? Never! (Thump!) And if I could so far forget my proper pride, for Aunt’s sake, I will not, for my own—no! (Thump!) Even though she indeed be lonely, as I’m sure she is, and grieving for me, as she must be, poor dear soul. Yet—no! (Thump!) I could not, it is too late! So, even if I wished and could, oh—how can I, Oliver?”

“Easily,” he answered, and, taking possession of that small fist, he opened the clenched fingers very tenderly, one by one.

“How?” she enquired, watching this operation as though this same fist had been no least concern of hers, “How, pray?”

“I’ll . . . hire a chaise,” murmured Oliver, looking at and holding this now open hand as though it had been something very rarely precious and extremely fragile.

“But,” sighed Deborah, “to go back—now, would be such frightful confession of . . . of weakness!”

“No, of strength!” said he. “A strength that, for love’s sake can overcome anger and cold pride.”

“Would . . . you . . . go with me?”

“I will!” said he, and, bowing golden head, kissed this unresisting hand, slim fingers and pink palm, as he were registering oath on something sacred.

“Why . . . then—” murmured Deborah. “My Gracious!” she exclaimed, snatching hand away and sitting up to stare as a gate creaked and towards them through the sunny garden came Roland with Clia, hand in hand. He had been telling her a tale of fairies, and her eyes were big with interest; but now, suddenly beholding the vision of beauty in the arbour, he broke off abruptly, in the very middle of a sentence, dropped the little hand to lift his hat with graceful flourish and, quite forgetting the wistful child, hastened forward eager to greet alluring womanhood. And Deborah, meeting the tense ardour of his gaze, blushed hotly, the bright eyes, that had met Oliver’s every look with such sweet frankness, took on a bewitching, coquettish shyness for masterful, glamorous Roland; she acknowledged his bow with gracious curtsy, she gave him her hand, he took both.

“Miss Standish . . . Deborah—!” he murmured in tones of ecstasy and quite oblivious now of wistful child, gloomy Oliver or anything in heaven and earth except Deborah, and she also, or so it seemed, for now they were walking together, while Oliver watched them go and with such look that the forgotten child crept beside the unregarded man to touch him timidly and murmur softly:

“Ah, my dearie, don’t ee cry now!”

“Eh—cry?” he repeated, starting. “Did you think I should, my child?”

“Yes, ’cause the bootiful lady’s gone an’ left ee—only me. . . . But me—I do love ee, Oliver, so don’t ee cry.” Now sensing the deep sympathy so sweetly offered, he clasped, kissed and perched her on his knee.

“No, no, not I, Darlingest!” he answered, laughing a little uncertainly, and bowed his cheek to the silky splendour of her hair; then he laughed again more naturally:

“Now, Sweetheart,” said he cheerily, “let’s get on with our lessons,—what letter comes after D?”

CHAPTER XX

WHICH TELLS OF A DEPARTURE

THE chicken (stuffed) had made a truly noble end, to the comfort and enjoyment of four people and to Mrs. Susan's beaming gratification; a meal this to be remembered—by Roland who had no eyes save for his plate and Deborah; by Deborah because she was quite aware of this, of course, and hungry beside; by little Clia because she had never tasted such fare; and by Oliver for quite other reasons.

This memorable repast ended, forth went Deborah into the garden hand-in-hand with Clia, leaving Roland to smile dreamily on everything in sight, though sighing profoundly, and Oliver to stare glumly at the tablecloth, each busied with his thoughts. At last, having finished his wine, Roland sighed again heavily and spoke:

“Noll, old fellow, I'm floored! I'm down,—b'gad knocked completely and forever out of time, and shall never be the same man again! Lord,—what a dashed, purblind, utterly confounded fool I've been!”

“Of course!” nodded Oliver. “But how, lately?”

“Old fellow, when I think back, when I recall how often I've imagined myself in love, I can only marvel at and deplore my astounding fatuity!”

“Meaning?” questioned Oliver.

“That I never knew, never had the least, faintest, vaguest inkling as to what Love really is.”

“But you—do, now?”

“Now—” sighed Roland in a muted rapture, “now, Noll, oh—I'm positively flattened out,—bowled over,—I'm in deep, up to my dam' ears! I'm smitten to the confounded core of my very soul! Dan Cupid's got me at last,—a bull's-eye, Noll! I'm in chancery and no chance of a breakaway, in fact, old fellow, I'm trying to tell you how truly, deeply, sincerely and irretrievably at last I'm—in love.”

“So I gather. But for how long this time, Roly?”

“For ever! All my confounded life! To the last gasp of my dying day,—and beyond!”

Here Oliver, fiddling with the salt-cellar, spilled it and scowled.

“Yes, it’s true, Noll! It’s frightfully serious! The genuine thing at last, I tell you!”

“How are you so—sure?”

“Because,—and this perfectly astounds me,—I’m actually and positively—shy! Afraid of her almost! Can you believe such amazing thing?”

“Easily!” answered Oliver, heavily, and still frowning at the spilled salt.

“Noll, I . . . I’ve been yearning—merely to touch her hand,—yearning, longing and—dare not! I’m mad to kiss her, but . . . ha, damme I tremble at the very thought! She’s got me—heart, soul and body,—I’m hers entirely forever, and afraid to so much as hint at it!”

“You will!” quoth Oliver, his gloom deepening.

“Given time, old fellow, I—yes, I might attempt it,—a week say, or a month—”

“A day!” said Oliver.

“No, no,—by Heavens—no! I’m telling you this is the—the absolute thing—turns me into a dashed, tongue-tied fool! Noll, I . . . I positively yearn to kneel . . . worship humbly and afar like the veriest ass,—which is not like me, by Jupiter, not a bit! But when she looks at me I feel the most unworthy wretch alive. . . . And, oh Noll, the splendid spirit of her, the great soul! The glory of her eyes! The dimple in her sweetly determined little chin, man! The curl and witchery of her lashes! Her dear, little, adorable nose! Her gracious dignity and—”

“Did she tell you she’d fled from—”

“She did! A magnificent, a stupendous act of—”

“Though very unwise—”

“Eh—unwise? Damme it’s courageous, it’s dashed heroic, it’s sublime—”

“But foolish and rather unkind, considering her Aunt’s age and loneliness—”

“Confound her Aunt! A plaguey old harridan with shrewish tongue—”

“But, as I say, old and solitary. Remembering which, Deborah has agreed to return, we are taking her back to Mereworth whenever she is ready—”

“Back, d’you say? No such thing! Deborah has cast off the fetters of servitude for ever and with sublime faith in herself and the future, intends to adventure life on her own account. It’s noble! It’s grand—”

“It’s folly!” said Oliver.

“And who—who,” stuttered Roland in sudden fury, “who the devil are you to so pronounce? How dare you pass judgment on such as she? This noble, peerless creature! Folly, d’ye say? Now I say—curse your insolent presumption! I say,—I demand how dare you so presume—”

“Come and see!” retorted Oliver, and rising he kicked back his chair and strode out with Roland on his heels. Side by side they went until they had reached the arbour where Deborah sat listening wide-eyed to the child’s tale of herself, Mumper Joe and—“her” Oliver.

“Miss Deborah,” began Roland, lightly.

“My dear,” said Oliver, gravely. “I think we should start for Mereworth —”

“My very dear . . . Miss Deborah,” continued Roland, “since you refuse a chaise, I have despatched Landlord Bob to hire for you the best post-horse possible.”

Deborah merely glanced towards them, sighed, shook her head and kissed Clia, saying:

“Tell them to go away, Sweetheart. Tell your uncles we desire to be alone, then go on with your wonderful story.”

“It is rather far to Mereworth!” Oliver persisted.

“But further to London, thank Fortune!” said Roland.

And now Deborah looked at them; setting elbow on knee and chin on hand, she surveyed them turn about, glancing from Roland’s gallant figure and handsome face so quick and dark and masterful, to the grey-eyed, golden might of comely Oliver calm and grave and, just now, a little gloomy.

“I’ve been intending,” said she, at last, “to ask how you hurt your arm, Oliver.”

“I’ll tell you this on our way to Mereworth,” he answered, frowning at Roland.

“And I,” said Roland, scowling on Oliver, “will tell you far better and more fully on our journey to London.”

Once again Deborah looked from one to other, a rather troubled, greatly wondering look, with no least hint of coquetry; and when she spoke there was vague trouble in her soft voice.

“You are so . . . different!” said she, shaking her head at them, “so exactly and strangely each other’s opposite! Sometimes I think you love each other greatly, and sometimes I feel you hate and despise each other most bitterly! But of one thing I am quite sure,—and this is strangest of all,—for, though we have met only twice, though I know so little of you both, yet I am certain each of you is my friend, strong and truly honourable,—two such friends as a poor, solitary woman-creature may trust.”

“Always!” said Oliver, gently.

“Oh, pray never doubt it!” cried Roland, fervently. “Indeed Friendship like . . . like the . . . deeper sentiment, may take one unsuspecting, all in a moment and for no reason, but, once there, well,—there it is, by George, for ever and ever!”

“Still, it is strange,” said Deborah, “and a great, oh a vastly great comfort to me, especially just now! And so, because I do so trust you both, I’m going to ask each of you to—”

But at this moment Landlord Sam appeared, and actually smiling, to touch his hat to Roland saying, almost joyfully:

“Zur, I got a mount for your honour’s lady, the very bestest ’oss in Tom Barns’s stables, ay that I ’ave, zur—sure-ly!”

“Good fellow, Bob!” nodded Roland, flipping him a coin, while Deborah, rising, put on her hat.

“What,” said Oliver, rather breathlessly, “pray, what were you about to say?”

“’Twas of no consequence,” she answered, looking away from his anxious face.

“Are you . . . do I take you back to . . . your Aunt who waits for you . . . at Mereworth?”

“Well . . . no!” she answered, fitting on her gauntlets with elaborate nicety. “’Tis a woman’s privilege to change her mind . . . isn’t it, Oliver? And on second thoughts I . . . cannot go back so soon, it would be such

triumph for Aunt Letitia . . . I should be more her slave than ever. And I . . . I think . . . no, I'm sure now that I must make some use of my freedom, make some least attempt to . . . to prove to . . . to myself what manner of creature I am, . . . my courage and capabilities. You see this, don't you, Oliver? And your Cousin Roland has vowed his determination to escort me all the way . . . to the very gate of Miss Blenkinsop's establishment."

"And who," demanded Roland fervently of the Universe, "who shall take more anxious care of such precious charge—?"

"Her aunt!" said Oliver and, turning away, would have left them, but Deborah's hand on his arm checked him.

"My only trouble now, Oliver, dear good friend, is that you may perhaps be a little hurt or angry because I . . . changed my mind. Oh please forgive me if you are! Are you?"

"I?" answered Oliver, shaking his head, "I only fear lest you be going from comfort and safety into trouble, disappointment,—hardship perhaps. . . ."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Roland, "who thinks failure, failure is,—who dreams greatly may achieve somewhat! Bite on that, Mr. Killjoy and choke! Besides, should anything untoward chance, there's always the Countess and—myself."

"If ye please, zur," said Sam, "ax pardin but the osses be awaitin', an' a bit—fresh like, zur!"

"Right, Bob, right you are! Good-bye, Noll! Come, Miss Deborah." But, gathering up the long skirts of her habit, she paused to give Oliver her hand.

"Don't be angry!" she pleaded.

"I'm not," he answered.

"Nor—hurt?"

"No!" said he, looking down at the hand that clung to his as if unwilling to be loosed; but loose it he did, nor ventured to kiss it this time. And so, with lingering, backward gaze, Deborah turned and went away beside smiling, jubilant Roland.

Now into Oliver's lax grasp stole Clia's little fingers, and glancing down into the great eyes that looked up at him so anxiously, he smiled.

"Well, Darlingest," said he, stifling a sigh, "here we are alone again, just you and me, but—" Even as he spoke, back strode Roland, hat acock and

spurs jingling.

“By the way, Noll,” quoth he, lightly, “under the circumstances I’d better have five or so of your ten pounds.”

“Were they mine, Roland, you should, but—”

“Ha,—you won’t! Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“Right!” quoth Roland, grimly contemptuous, “I merely asked for—her sake,—in case of emergency, ill-luck on the road and so on, but—no matter, Mr. Self-righteous Smugman—”

“Yes!” said Oliver. “Yes, you’re right. Will five be enough?”

“Ample, old fellow, ample and to spare! Thanks,—now come and see us off. Give me your arm!”

Thus with the child’s hand fast in his, Oliver stood beneath one of the great trees to watch the travellers’ departure; Roland who laughed gaily and flourished his whip, Deborah, grave and wistful, who waved gloved hand and wafted a kiss.

And so these two rode away together through the glad sunshine, leaving Oliver and his small companion standing in the shadow.

CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH MISS MEEKINS DIRECTS

IT was next day in the full blaze of afternoon upon Shooter's Hill and in the scant shade of that gnarled and ancient tree called "The Highwayman's Oak" that Oliver reined up placid Dobbin to show Clia, from this eminence, her first glimpse of the marvellous city.

Vague with distance, awesome in its immensity, it lay beneath a pink haze that told of life, of the labour, turmoil and ceaseless bustle of busy multitudes; this ageless, undying, everchanging metropolis of wealth, luxury and sordid misery,—palace and mansion, hovel and crowded, noisome rookery, steeple, tower and chimney,—there lay this mightiest of cities, a vast, nebulous blur.

"Well, there it is, Darlingest!" sighed Oliver, glancing from this farflung, man-made wilderness of brick and mortar back to God's handiwork,—the fair, green prospect of open country behind them, "There is the greatest city in all this great world,—there is Old London Town! What do you think of it?"

Instead of answering she turned and clung to him, hiding her face in his breast.

"What, dear—are you afraid?"

"No, not—quite," she murmured, "only I wishes as—wish we was—were going back . . . fields an trees an' running waters, I like them mostest!"

"So do I!" said Oliver, fervently. "So back we'll go some day soon or late, my dear. But now we must go forward."

So on they rode down the hill, following this age-old road built by the iron men of Rome, until they came out upon Blackheath, this wide, fair commonland that has seen so much of good and ill, the pageantry of life and death.

And now as they went, Oliver must needs look wistfully at the stately houses that showed here and there, wondering if any of these now sheltered Deborah and, if so, which was so blessed.

Mid afternoon brought them to Greenwich Village, where in certain tree-bordered road that looked upon the Thames, hereabouts flowing wide between green banks, Oliver drew up before a fair sized, well-kept house and dismounting, hitched Dobbin to the gatepost; then with Clia's hand fast

in his, crossed a trim garden and knocked at a neat door which was presently opened by an equally neat maid.

“Oh but no, sir,” she said in answer to his enquiry, “Miss Saphronia don’t live here now this long time. But my mistress, Miss Meekins, do. So, if you’ll be pleased to walk in, sir. Miss Meekins’ll tell where Miss Saphronia be to now.” They were shown into a somewhat mournful, too-best room heavily furnished, over-curtained, under-aired and too ornately brave with bead and patch-work, its walls adorned by water-colours faintly limned and of colours ineffectual.

Then appeared the genius of the place, herself rather like the room, for Miss Meekins was faintly mournful and pallidly ineffectual; she sighed often, she drooped and languished, her mittened hands fluttered aimlessly. She curtsayed feebly, murmuring faintly:

“To what, pray . . . this honour . . .?” Learning Oliver’s identity, she subsided upon a chair, evinced a faint interest and murmured:

“Oh dear me! Her favourite pupil!” Miss Meekins glanced vaguely from Oliver to Clia, round the room and back again, sighing: “Oh dear me!”

“I understood,” said Oliver, “that Miss Saphronia lived here.”

“She did, sir—oh dear me, yes! But to-day I reside alone, my poor dear Saphronia smit by cruel Fortune’s harsh buffet is alas, departed hence!”

“She . . . she is not—dead?” enquired Oliver, in shocked tone.

“Oh no no! Dearie me—no! I sometimes think my dear Saphronia never can die, she is so—so intensely vital, so hale,—so different to poor me! For I, sir, I am, and ever have been, such delicate creature, a—a reed, sir, more or less broken by Adversity’s bitter blast that would have swept me utterly away but that a kind Providence, as school-girl, sent me Saphronia Bagg, a pupil-teacher she in those days, to be the oak to my clinging need, a prop, a stay, a shelter. Without dear Saphronia I had long since perished like storm-lashed flower. Shall I bare to you my—oh dear me—my soul, sir, and tell of Saphronia and myself, her boundless generosity, my woes, her sorrows and wondrous good fortune,—shall I?”

“Pray do,” said Oliver, taking Clia’s hand.

“Would the child meantime suck a comfit, consume a bun, a cake or apple? Would’st thou, little one?” Clia stared, clutched Oliver’s hand tighter, shook her head and muttered:

“No!” Then added: “Thank you, m’am!”

“Well,” continued Miss Meekins, “she inherited a noble fortune,—Saphronia, I mean,—thousands on thousands, from an avuncular relative in the Antipodes. So Saphronia is wealthy—enormously,—it is thus and by her munificence that I, her childhood’s pet and play mate, am enabled to live here in a chaste seclusion and moderate luxury.”

“But, pray, why did she leave and where is she now?”

“Ah, Mr. Dale, a sad, sad—oh a piteous story! Saphronia became the affianced bride of a—a tar, sir, a Son of Neptune, R.N.—who, oh dear me—perished, alas—mid’ smoke and flame and raving billow on the main, sir, an engagement at sea,—the French, Mr. Dale! Oh, Napoleon! Oh, Buonaparte! Alas for my Saphronia,—ah the woe! The grief! The heartbreak! I should ha’ perished in that same hour, being but a frail creature, but Saphronia, strong like the oak, hid her grief, bestowed on poor me this bijou villa and wherewithal to keep it up, paid quarterly, and herself departed to a new life,—into an atmosphere of beer, brutality and barges” (Here Miss Meekins shuddered feebly) “down by the river. An inn, Mr. Dale, a tavern, nay—indeed a most sordid pothouse! And there she wages ceaseless war against vice, drunkenness and depravity in hideous shapes, with a courage and fortitude wholly her own.”

“A tavern?” repeated Oliver, stifling his surprise. “Pray where? What is it called?”

“This dreadful place, Mr. Dale, is named—oh dear me!” (Here another faint shudder) “‘The Jolly Young Waterman,’ and is situate in Lamb’s Court, where no lamb is ever seen,—turning out of Cherry Orchard Alley where cherries have long, long ceased to burgeon. . . . You intent to visit Saphronia?”

“At once!” said Oliver, rising.

“Then pray be so good to convey my love and duty and tell her Josiah, my parrot, sir, is now almost proficient in Dr. Watts’ charming poem: ‘Let dogs delight to bark and bite’, though alas—he occasionally backslides and, oh dear me—swears! Now, ere you depart,” sighed Miss Meekins, fluttering her mittens with a vague wildness, “will you be pleased to partake of some refreshment,—tea? A glass of sherry—?”

“Nothing, thank you, madam.”

“Then, good-bye, Mr. Dale! Oh dear me—Farewell!”

CHAPTER XXII

TELLS HOW “THE JOLLY YOUNG WATERMAN” FOUND A VOICE TO WELCOME THEM

THIS tavern of “The Jolly Young Waterman” was neither young nor jolly, being indeed a hoary ancient of remarkably sinister aspect. Nor did its forbidding appearance belie it, for from that far day of its youth when the first Tudor had snatched the crown, this hostel, hard beside Thames flood, had known much of evil and been familiar with roguery of every sort.

A strange, rambling, grim-looking structure all unexpected jogs and angles, huge of beam, small of window, deep and narrow of door, with steep-pitched roof and great, toppling gables.

Grim without and gloomy within, its little dim chambers had, ere now, been the darker for stealthy, creeping Murder, had lightened to the instant flicker of quick-driven steel; its massive walls had echoed sounds of woe, had rung to the screams, the clash and tumult of many a bloody fray.

Thus despite bravery of new paint, newly glazed lattices and well scrubbed and sanded floors, it showed yet like thing of ancient evil scowling upon court and alley, leering down upon the immemorial river (this ever-flowing mystery whose dark waters and merciful deeps have hidden so much of tragedy, of sin and misery), as much as to say:

“We know, Old One,—we know!”

At least so thought Oliver leaning back in saddle to survey this ancient tavern from time-worn step before the door to scowling gable and crooked chimneys, while Clia, perched before him, gazed wide-eyed, as well she might, at the vivid sign-board whereon was painted a lively representation of the Jolly Young Waterman himself in cap, coat, badge and uncomfortably tight nether garments, a black-whiskered, round-eyed young waterman who leaned upon an oar with offensive abandon.

Oliver’s gaze, descending from aloft, had just been arrested by this Jolly Young Waterman, when from quite unexpected window in more unexpected corner, a small, neat cap projected itself with extreme suddenness, a beribboned cap adorning a face that seemed all eyes, chin and mouth whence issued a sound that was neither scream, shout, sob or laugh yet something of each, and thereafter words:

“Oh! It’s you! At last! That dear golden head—so curly! That nose! Those eyes—so grey, so honest! It’s Oliver! It’s . . . Oh ’tis my little Olly

grown to manhood! Alight, alight my dear, my Oliver! Come in . . . I'll come down . . .! Tom! Tom—where are you, Tom? Tom take my gentleman's horse. . . . Oh my dear soul! God bless everybody!" Cap and face vanished; a square-visaged, immensely broad-shouldered man appeared, with sea-dog in every line of him, who now rolled forward, with a heave to port and lurch to starboard, to grin at Clia, knuckle eyebrow at Oliver, grasp bridle and pat Dobbin with hand wise in horses.

Then Oliver swung from saddle to be instantly rushed at, kissed, embraced, patted and looked at by one who, despite lack of inches and plain attire, contrived to seem the well-bred, dignified personage she was.

"Well, well!" she exclaimed, for perhaps the hundredth time, patting Oliver's hand, while she gazed up into his face with the old, lovely, tender possessiveness that had touched him even when a boy. "Oliver! Oh my dear—how you've grown!"

"And you," said he, kissing her rosy, smiling cheek. "You Saphronia whom I used to regard as such a tremendous person, and so you were, how very pick-upable you are really and—younger looking, I vow!"

"Fiddlesticks, my dear, silly boy! A flapdragon, Noll—and Oh—tea! Kettle is boiling, or shall be. Come in to tea, you and—the child. The child?" quoth Miss Saphronia, glancing from smiling Oliver to timid Clia and back again with sudden dubiety. "However!" said she, possessing herself of Oliver's arm and Clia's hand, "Tea!"

So, through frowning, narrow doorway they entered this Place of Ancient Evils now magically transformed by her mere vital, bustling, womanly presence into a cosy, well-ordered, homey place where the light feet of her four trim maids scurried to and fro, crockery rattled pleasantly, distant voices laughed and chattered and where, within a small, odd-shaped room and cosiest of coseys despite the businesslike desk in one corner, a dainty table was laid for tea. And Oliver, extremely aware of it all, thought that such sweet, domestic sights and sounds might banish forever the grisly phantoms of a wicked past.

And now throned at this table, Miss Saphronia dispensed tea (which she called "tay"—"at twelve shillings a pound, my dear!") talking fast as was her wont, and mostly to the shy and timid child, but with such gentle efficiency that Clia, forgetting her painful shyness, began to talk also, doing her small best to profit by Oliver's patient lessons and speak correctly as she might.

Tea ending, up started Miss Saphronia, she tugged bellrope, she rang a handbell, she called:

“Jemima! Anne! Tom—oh Tom!” And was answered almost immediately:

“Mem?” enquired the two neat maids.

“Marm?” questioned Tom, looming vastly in the doorway. “Commodore, what’s your orders?”

“Girls, take this little lady, brush her, wash her and amuse her till I ring. Go! Tom, take the bar to-night, tell George and William to bear a hand. And Tom, is James Threep’s ‘Nancy’ barge in yet?”

“She be makin’ fast now, Marm.”

“Then if that nasty, great, wife-beating James-brute puts his wicked nose inside my doors, push it out again—with your great fist—hard, Tom!”

“Ay, ay, Miss Saffy, I will so, Commodore, marm—right ‘earty—”

“Hearty, Tom—with an aitch! How does Timothy Piper’s little Jenny? The poor child, Oliver, tumbled into the river and would have drowned but for Tom here. Tom fetched her out, Tom is always fetching them out,—how is she to-day, Tom?”

“Purty feversome, Marm, so I ‘ears—”

“Hears, Tom—with another aitch! Send Betty to me—no, tell her to run over to the Pipers with the jelly,—she’ll know. That’s all, Tom—for the present.”

“Right you be, Commodore!” answered Tom and, knuckling eyebrow, closed himself softly out of—The Presence.

“What with suicides, Oliver my dear, found-drowneds, drink, sickness and the devil we’re kept fairly busy. Now pray tell me of yourself and all—all the news. Your handsome, arrogant uncle, your vain, quarrelsome Cousin Roland,—no, first—the child! And, my dear boy,” she said, slim, admonishing finger upraised and viewing Oliver much as if he had been her small pupil again, “be frank as you ever were! Tell me,—is he yours,—an evidence of wedded bliss or wicked oat?”

Then Oliver laughed suddenly, very joyously, and rising, kissed his one-time governess right heartily and, chuckling, sat down again. And now he unfolded his story very fully while her bright, quick eyes dimmed or grew brighter; and when at last the relation was over, she sat quite still and utterly

silent for perhaps half a minute, which was sufficiently remarkable: then sighing, she nodded at him and spoke soft-voiced but direct and to the point as usual:

“I always loved you, Oliver. I do still and now rather more than ever. The precious child stays here with me—and you, of course. As for your uncle, Sir Everard, I implore benedictions on his handsome, superbly arrogant head since through him ‘The Waterman’ is your home so long as you will and—”

“But,” said Oliver, “I have very little money—”

“And I have more than I can ever spend, boy.”

“But my dear Saphronia I cannot—”

“Live on my charity,—fiddlesticks and folly! I felt like your mother years ago, I do now! But if you must work, for your pride’s sake, you shall. Money means influence, my dear, and I have plenty of both. . . . Now off with your coat and let me see that arm.”

So his hurt was skilfully examined, tenderly bathed, expertly bandaged and pronounced doing well.

“And now—bedrooms, Noll! I’m in the ‘Admiral’,—which leaves the ‘Captain’, the ‘Luff’, the ‘Middy’, and the ‘Bosun’—come and choose!” Up forthwith, she led him by dark, narrow and tortuous stair very apt (thought Oliver) for sudden, stealthy knife-work,—and so to a broad landing thickly carpeted, rich with the dark sheen and shimmer of old oak furniture, the beamed and plastered walls garnished with valuable prints and one or two ancient swords, splendid examples, burnished with loving care to a glittering brightness.

“Well?” she demanded, for Oliver had paused to look about him with kindling eyes, “Well, Noll dear, well?”

“It’s better than well!” he answered. “Everything is exactly—right! It would be, of course.”

“It is!” she nodded. “This furniture is pure Elizabethan, like the swords and things above it. You see, my dear, having so much money and a love for the beautiful craftsmanship of our ancestors and Inigo Drake, I have furnished this dreadful, old den of iniquity—that I’m sure was once a noble house,—as I think it should be furnished and has been. So I have a Tudor room, a Jacobean, Carolean and early Georgian,—all perfect from floors to rafters,—so my own knowledge and Inigo Drake assure me. . . . These are

my best bedchambers,” and she stabbed pointed finger at five immensely stout and rather grim-looking doors.

“Here is the ‘Admiral’—mine, beyond is the ‘Captain,’ yonder the ‘Luff’ and over there the ‘Bosun’ and ‘Middy,’ and all vacant—except mine, of course. So now you shall choose one for you and another for our poor, pretty child. . . . And, O Lord bless you, dear Noll! What a joy she will be to lonely me,—what new interest in life,—to plump and pinken her poor, little body,—to teach and educate her, my true work and joy! ’Twill be like the old days again, bless God!”

“And God . . . bless you!” said Oliver, rather huskily. “I . . . would thank you for such welcome . . . if I could. . . .”

“You can, Noll! You do! You are—with every look! Though no need, silly boy, the boot’s on the other limb! For I’ve been such solitary soul, my dear, and tried to fill my loneliness with work, the harder and rougher the better. But now—here are you come back to me like a—a lost son, and bringing me a little body to care for, a soul to shape and train and love! So how—how can I help but be humbly grateful to you and the gentle Almighty Father of us all? . . . Ah, but the rooms,—come and choose!”

So between them the selection was made,—the “Middy” for Clia, the “Bosun,” next door, for Oliver, smallish chambers exquisitely, though cosily, furnished.

And now, leaning beside Oliver from one of the larger windows that looked down upon the busy river, Miss Saphronia demanded what he thought of her “Waterman.” And Oliver, voicing his first conception of it, answered:

“A place of ancient evil that you are redeeming in spite of itself.”

“Right, Noll, right!” said she with her quick, decided nod. “It is! And I am,—and the old reprobate detests being reformed. A bad, bad old place steeped in sin and gloats in its wicked past and tries hard to look wicked still. Even in the bright sunshine it shows grimly glum, but when it rains and the old river a wet misty, pale mystery,—when yellow fog swirls outside the window-panes and tries to be ghosts and goblins, oh then ’tis horribly cut-throaty! And late at night, the way its great, old beams and panelling creak and crack at me, Noll,—ancient oathings and cursings, my dear! But I don’t mind one jot or tittle,—not I!”

“Are there any particular stories of the old place, Saphronia?”

“Hundreds, oh—hundreds and all gruesome! You see ’tis reputed haunted,—an old time sea captain extreme bloody that jibbers and moans o’ windy nights, and a pale lady that hovers and wrings her hands—not that any poor ghost has ever troubled me. Such stuff and nonsense! But ’twas a most murderous den in the sixteenth century, a sink of iniquity in the seventeenth, and shameful menace in the eighteenth. . . . And I know some of the dreadful happenings here.”

“Tell me,” said Oliver.

“Well,” answered Miss Saphronia, drawing a deep breath, “an ensanguined pirate having slain a man in the kitchen, was dragged to Execution Dock and there suspended in irons. A Captain Barlow, of a noble East Indiaman, who should have known better, got drunk and was murdered there in an angle of the stair for his money,—he’s one of the ghosts. In King James’s days one of the Gunpowder plotters was arrested here and dragged to the Tower and tortured, miserable wretch! A poor lady was carried here one dreadful night and so maltreated that she threw herself into the river, by this very window! She is another ghost. Ah indeed this poor, old place, built to be a happy home, has been so prostituted and brutalized by Iniquity that it lost all shame and revelled in sin at last. ’Twas so I found it and bought it, and am now striving to make it clean and good again,—a haven for poor distressed souls, a beacon in the dark, a—What is it, Jemima?” she demanded suddenly, as her quick eye caught sight of a trim mob-cap rising into view behind the stout carved banisters.

“Mr. Drake, mem, if you please.”

“Say I’ll descend, shortly, Jemima,—oh, Jemima, see his glass is filled, shrub, child, shrub!

“And there,” quoth Miss Saphronia, dramatic finger stabbing downward as the mob-cap bobbed and vanished, “there, dear Noll, below us in Unicorn is your future probable employer, if you will.”

“Unicorn?” Oliver questioned.

“My little sitting-room, Noll. The others are Gorgon, Griffin, Dragon and Salamander,—why so named I don’t know, but so named they are. And he’s truly fearsome and frightfully snuffy,—sneezingly so, so be prepared! Inigo Drake, I mean,—but good as a man, sage and profound as a scholar, honourable as can be, and knows more about old books, furniture, swords and things than anyone alive, I do believe. And—he is a gentleman, Noll! Come and meet him.”

Mr. Inigo Drake was a man of contrasts at odds with himself for, despite scholar's stoop and shabby clothes, he was tall and bore himself with an easeful dignity, though his nose and brows showed ferocious, his eyes and mouth seemed almost too gentle for a man; again, though his jaw was grimly square and chin had a fierce jut, his voice was soft and mild to meekness; he appeared also to suffer from an occasional lowness of spirits until heartened and stimulated by copious pinches of snuff, at which times Miss Saphronia would clap handkerchief to shapely nose, shut her fine eyes very tight and sneeze with resounding reproach.

"Miss Saphronia, ma'm," said he, bowing with a formal and unexpected grace, "Good evening! God bless you!"

"And you, sir!" she answered, curtsying as formally. "And oh, Inigo, this—oh this is my Oliver!"

"Sir," quoth Mr. Drake, bowing again, "have heard of you often,—your humble servant!" Having achieved thus much, he now appeared to wilt, to droop and languish, he sighed deeply, shook his head, drew from his fob a very splendid gold and enamel snuff-box at sight of which, Miss Saphronia instantly winced and out came her dainty handkerchief.

"Inigo—must you?" she enquired, plaintively.

"By your kind leave!" he murmured sadly and opening the box, extracted a pinch of snuff some of which he inhaled delicately, the rest he scattered broadcast upon himself and neighbourhood, whereupon Miss Saphronia immediately vanished behind her handkerchief whence she sneezed violently.

Mr. Drake, murmuringly apologetic, handed and bowed her into a chair and down they sat all three.

"Well," she demanded, "well, Inigo, is it furniture or a case?"

"Both ma'm, both! I have recently acquired an extremely fine rapier by Tomasso Ayala of Toledo, with dagger, slings and furniture complete,—the original scabbard intact, Miss Saphronia! For which I have been offered the sum of Fifty Pounds and which sum I have refused, remembering the space on the panelling in your Dragon, ma'am."

"But—Fifty Pounds!" quoth Miss Saphronia, pursing her shapely lips.

"No, m'am—No! The price to you is—Twenty Pounds."

"Ri-diculous!"

“No, Madam—Miss Saphronia, no! Considering your late munificence in the case of Widow Potter’s little Rose. This brings me to the other case,—a girl, mam, scarce seventeen years old and in a—hum—certain condition, —deserted by her should-be husband, is quite destitute, and, in fact, starving —”

“Where, Inigo, where?”

“She, name of Lucy Baxter, occupies a cellar, straw and misery and motherhood imminent,—in Number Five Jagger’s Rents, three streets hence.” Miss Saphronia leapt to the bellrope and tugged it, she rang her silver handbell, she called:

“Tom! Tom, oh Tom! Jemima! Anne! Betsy! Maria—”

A knock and Tom’s grimly square visage looks in on them:

“Marm?” he enquires, “What’s the word, Commodore?”

“Take this money, Tom, to Number Five, Jagger’s Rents, a cellar there and take Jemina too—where is Jemima? Jemima! Oh—there you are! Go with Tom, and take Anne with you, find a girl named Lucy Baxter, do all you can for her. Tom, take some brandy too, go! No,—wait! Jemima!”

“Mem?”

“Soup! In a bottle! At once!”

“Yes’m!”

“Remember, Tom, a child about seventeen years old named Baxter—Lucy! Jemima and Anne, see she is made comfortable as possible! And summon Doctor Spring. . . . Don’t forget the soup! And then you, Tom, report here to me.”

“Ay, ay, Commodore, Marm!”

During this animated scene Mr. Drake had eyed Miss Saphronia with a certain fixity of gaze, a bright intentness and now glanced from her to Oliver with a look almost joyous; then he drooped mournfully, shook his head sadly and enquired in tones of profoundest dejection:

“Do you take this magnificent rapier, mam, complete with—”

“Yes, yes of course.”

“At—fifteen pounds, mam!”

“You said twenty!”

“I say—twelve!”

“Oh, very well.”

“Done at—ten!”

“Inigo, don’t be so ri-diculous!”

Here Mr. Drake’s spirits sank to such deeps of woe that he again had recourse to his snuff-box, whereat Miss Saphronia instantly cowered, hid face in handkerchief and sneezed—all in a moment. Mr. Drake snuffed however, bowed humbly, apologised meekly and addressed himself to Oliver:

“Mr. Dale, sir,” sighed he, “I think perhaps you conceive why I had rather such magnificent and peerless weapon and perfect example of a vanished art should adorn the home of such peerless mistress at any price, indeed, sir, at no price at all,—perfection to perfection, sir!” Having thus delivered himself Mr. Drake became so extremely meek of aspect and drooped so despondently that he seemed to shrink until he started at Miss Saphronia’s challenge:

“Inigo! Mr. Drake! Sir! To business! Mr. Dale here is—my Oliver, the loved pupil of whom I’ve spoken oft ere now. In those early days I loved him as I were his own mother, to-day—more so! Owing to circumstances and his own proper pride he is anxious to earn his own livelihood,—you, Inigo, need a clever assistant of good appearance, you’ve told me so scores of times! Well, Inigo—well?”

Out came enamel box, up went snowy handkerchief,—a shower of snuff, a stifled, plaintive sneeze and Miss Saphronia reappeared to frown at Mr. Drake, who cowered beneath her eye, instantly abashed.

“Why, oh why,” she demanded, rather shrilly, “why should I be so pestered and plagued—sneeze on sneeze? If you must so drug yourself with the abomination why not puff it about in smoke, Inigo Drake, smoke?”

“Sick, ma’m, sickness!” he sighed. “At your kind suggestion I attempted smoke—with dire results—oh—very dire! Now, as regards Mr. Dale, I fear —”

“Inigo—stop! There should be no fear—especially for Englishmen! I don’t! You shouldn’t! Now—what?”

“I was about to say, ma’m, that for such young gentleman . . . a shop, dusting old pictures, scouring old armour, repairing antique furniture,—dust, ma’m, and rust, and cobwebs . . . would hardly suit! Should it, however, I

could proffer no more than a pound per week to begin with—no, thirty shillings, if that suffice, so be it.”

“Sir,” said Oliver, who, mute thus far, had been glancing from one speaker to the other, absorbed, joyous, and his heart warming to both, “Sir, I accept your kind offer very gratefully, the more so as I have always been interested in such things, particularly old swords.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Mr. Drake, sitting up. “You can then, perhaps, tell me the difference between rapier and colichemarde?”

“I think so,” answered Oliver. “The rapier was for your galliard fighter, the colichemarde, devised by Count Koningsmarck and named after him, was especially designed for your vicious killer.”

Mr. Drake’s depression seemed lifted from him, his eye kindled, his shoulders squared themselves, his voice grew sonorous.

“Admirable!” he exclaimed. “Exactly true, by Jingo! Between these weapons, sir, was and is as much difference as between the Great Vincenzio, that gracious master of arms, and Lord Mohun the vicious, gentlemanly slaughterer. . . .”

CHAPTER XXIII

OF BILL BARTRUM, HIS OCCUPATION

THE days have passed and Oliver is striding homewards through the busy streets; in his pocket is three-quarters of his first week's salary, under his arm, boxed and neatly wrapped up, is the remaining quarter in the shape of a large wax doll (complete from bonnet to shoes) and ridiculously expensive (thinks Oliver) but purchased nevertheless since it is his first present to Clia.

But now as he threads his way along crowded pavements and amid the thunderous roar and nimble of iron-shod wheels on cobblestones, it is not of the child he is thinking, nor of her new but already devoted benefactress Miss Saphronia, but of brown, wistful eyes in a vivid, beautiful face and the wave of slim, gauntleted hand as when Deborah had ridden away, beside joyous, high-hearted Roland, to face—what?

Was she back home with her Aunt? Was she at Blackheath with her Miss Blenkinsop? Was she safe? Where was she? How was she?

Busied with these anxious speculations and giving no thought to direction, he unconsciously went astray, plunging ever deeper into a maze of back streets and crooked ways, turning corners haphazard until the bustle and harsh roar of the great thoroughfares was muted by distance; roused at last by this comparative quiet, he halted suddenly to look about and thus found himself as it were in a different world. For here, instead of the rush and tumult of ceaseless traffic, was silence save for the thin squeals or dismal wailing of children; instead of broad, clean pavements athrong with decent life and bustle, here were narrow, dingy ways seemingly deserted except by ragged, half-naked urchins and slatternly women who stood in dark entries, lolled or peered down from dim casements, ceasing their shrill babel to stare at the solitary intruder.

Now as Oliver stood thus hesitant, uncomfortably aware of all these watching eyes, a voice spoke just beneath his elbow:

“Wot-o, me lud! Lorst yer w’y ’ave ye?”

Glancing round and down, Oliver beheld a bare-footed, half-naked boy staring up at him out of eyes quick and bright with knowledge of all evil, beneath a shag of matted hair; even as Oliver gazed down into these boldly impudent eyes their owner uttered a shrill yell and instantly turned himself into a cartwheel, spinning on fingers and toes, threw a nimble somersault and was back again to pursue his enquiries:

“Lorst yer road, ’ave ye, Squire?”

“Yes,” answered Oliver. “Yes, I have,—here’s sixpence to direct me. I want Cherry Orchard Court, Lamb’s Alley, by the river.”

“Mek it a bob an’ I’ll tek yer there, dook.”

“Right!” said Oliver. So off they went, the boy pattering along on his bare feet very purposefully, glancing back frequently to nod, beckon and wink in evil, knowing manner; on and on until grimy streets became grim lanes and grimmer alleys; on until they reached a court at last more sordidly grim than any,—a silent, seemingly deserted place shut in by lofty, blank walls but with a frowning archway at one end.

Here, once again, Oliver halted to glance about uncertainly.

“Boy,” he demanded, “where are you taking me?”

Instead of answering the urchin whistled shrilly; and instantly Oliver’s heart began to pound, for he saw that dark and frowning archway alive with movement . . . a glimmer of pallid faces. . . .

Back to the nearest wall stepped Oliver and leaned there, parcel clutched beneath left arm (now almost well) powerful right fist clenched,—a desperate man fronting odds and men yet more desperate. . . . Five of them he counted, slinking, oncoming shapes of ferocious misery, faces merciless with want or vicious with brutish ignorance.

“Shags!” cried the boy, leaping and dancing like a small, exultant fiend. “Shags on this yere—” the words ended in a shrill screech of warning: “Stow it, the cuffin dicks!” Then, ceasing his evil dance, away he leapt on soundless feet and, as fled the boy, so ran the five men to vanish all beneath that scowling archway while Oliver, leaning back to wall, stared after them in wondering disbelief.

Then upon the stillness was a slow, measured tread of approaching feet behind him and, glancing round, he beheld a pair of top-boots, a neat, blue coat, a hat low in crown and broad of brim above a face that beamed on him in hearty welcome.

“Mr. Shrig,—!” he exclaimed, joyfully.

“That i-dentical, sir! Though betwixt friends—Jarsper. And werry glad to ha’ been o’ service to you, Mr. O., pal.”

“Service?” enquired Oliver, as they grasped hands.

“Ar! Them five objex o’ wiciousness,—they was my tit for your tat, pal, d’ye see?”

“Then it was sight of you sent them running? Is it possible? They looked pretty formidable!”

“They are, pal! And it were! Ye see I’m purty well known hereabouts to Wiciousness in every shape, size, age, sex and con-dition—”

“Yah-boo!” screeched a voice fiercely shrill, and there peering at them evilly from the archway was the ragged boy. “Boo-yah!” he yelled and setting thumb to nose, spread his fingers, shot out his tongue, squinted hideously at them in derisive defiance ere he ducked and vanished.

“That’s young Snod, that is!” sighed Mr. Shrig, shaking his head. “A reg’lar imp o’ Satan is Snod!”

“An ugly name!” said Oliver.

“Ar, and a norrid young bag-o’-bones as I’ll lay von’t make old bones, it’ll be the river or gallers for Snod,—a precious fiendly young warment!”

“And looks hungry!” said Oliver. “Those five men looked the same.”

“Then let ’em vork, pal, an’ live decent—”

“Suppose they can’t get work, Jasper?”

“There’s the parish. But oh no, them sort prefers the streets an’ wiciousness, it’s in their blood, they’re born in it, bred up to it and dies of it eether by starvation, blue ruin or the noose.”

“Terrible!” exclaimed Oliver.

“It is, pal, for them as is born destitoot! I was, so I know. You grows up anyhow, to live the best ye may. Sink or swim and none to care,—them as has character swims a while, them as ain’t—don’t! They sinks,—starves, dies—the kennel, prison or the gallers—”

“When a man is hungry, Jasper, starving—he’ll do anything.”

“He do, pal. I did. I stole,—a buzzman and prig, like I told ye.”

“No one,” cried Oliver, fiercely, “not one creature should be permitted to die of hunger,—there’s the crime—that any child should want, ah—there’s the crime, Jasper!”

“Ar!” nodded Mr. Shrig. “And talkin’ o’ crime,—how do you find yourself at ‘The Jolly Young Vatterman’, friend, vere to I am now a-guidin’

you—how?”

Oliver stopped, for they had been walking on, side by side, he now halted to look his surprise and enquire:

“How on earth do you know I’m living there?”

Mr. Shrig, halting also, rubbed his square, clean-shaven chin with the knob of the formidable stick he carried and beamed, though his mild gaze roved above and below, to right, to left, before them and behind with a ceaseless watchfulness.

“If ’tis all the same to you, pal, I’d rayther keep moving,—chimbley-pots, coping-stones and sich is apt to come a-toppling hereabouts, this being a vindictive neighbour’ood werry set agin The Law in general and me in particklar! So I’ll be more happy like if ve move.” Oliver moved instantly, striding at such rate that Mr. Shrig’s shorter legs had some ado to keep pace.

“Easy . . . all!” said he, a little breathlessly at last. “Ye see I’ve took a dislike to yon cross alley since a month ago vun o’ my officers, smart and youngish,—’appened to get bonneted by a chimbley-pot as extinguished him on the spot, com-plete, poor lad! The Feet o’ the Law treads a stony track occasionally, friend Oliver, sir.” After this, they went in silence until, noting Oliver’s gloomy visage, Mr. Shrig enquired solicitously:

“Anything worriting you, pal?”

“No,—yes, I’m thinking of those miserable five men, that poor, little lad, their misery—”

“Lord love ye, Mr. O., they’re used to it, never having ’ad nothing else —”

“Someday,” sighed Oliver, “when the world is sufficiently civilized, no one will be permitted to starve.”

“Hows’ever, friend, there’s a lady doing her best that way, spending oceans o’ money constant, I mean Miss S. Bagg your old govern-ess, though she ain’t so old, neether.”

“My governess, yes!” said Oliver, turning once again to look his surprise. “So you are aware of this also?”

“And werry simply!” nodded Mr. Shrig. “Y’see I’ve knowed the ‘Vaterman’ all my days, long afore ’e were turned pious. I know him now and all con-sarned; they’ve got tongues and I’ve two listeners. And that’s how! Ah,” sighed he, rather sadly, “I mind the ‘Vaterman’ when ’twere a

sink, a werry cesspool o' crime as the Eyes an' Ears o' the Law took constant and particklar notice on. Many's the Capital Cove as I've took at the 'Vaterman' and thereafter seen dooly topped."

"Topped?" enquired Oliver.

"Hanged, sir,—and some on 'em vas even rose to the dignity o' tar an' irons,—gibbeted as a varning to Willainy in general. Ay, I was purty sure to get noos o' the bird I was seekin' at the old 'Vaterman',—but not now, oh not now—he's growed so to piety and getting that respectable all along o' Miss S. Bagg. Vich, pal, do make the path of a devoted Law Officer more stonier than vot it should ought to be."

"She is certainly reforming the place, Jasper."

"Pal, she's making it into a reg'lar Gardin of Edin without ary a snake, sarpent nor yet wiper as dares lift its napper to so much as spit—let alone sting."

"Talking of serpents," said Oliver, laughing, "have you seen or heard any more of the Whiskered Gentleman?"

"Never a breath nor glimp', sir, neether 'ide nor 'air, pal, he's wanished com-plete, along o' Number Two, and so long as they so remains, so be it! Though . . ." Mr. Shrig shook his head, "ven I ponders them vords,— you mind 'em, pal?"

"'Poor trash'?" suggested Oliver, smiling.

"Ar!" nodded Mr. Shrig, rather mournfully. "When I ponders that obseruation I lives in hope o' getting my daddies werry firm among them viskers, for, as viskers, they goes beyond natur'!"

"You think they're false, perhaps?"

"Mr. O., pal, at this moment I'm thinking as, by your leave, I'll speak Bill Bartrum,—in the skiff yonder!" The crooked alley they had been following, now making a sharp turn, had brought them out suddenly upon the riverside, to a small, grimy wharf beneath whose rotting timbers the sullen tide made unholy whisperings and ghastly sucking noises; moored to this wharf was a slim, speedy-looking boat wherein sprawled a man, head pillowed on arms, hat on nose, very much at ease. Soft and flute-like, Mr. Shrig whistled the opening bars of "The British Grenadiers" whereat the man sat up instantly, blinked, touched a ragged eyebrow and spoke:

"So, there y'are, Governor, an' here's me—wi' nothin' to report."

“No noos, eh, Bill, ’bove or b’low bridge?”

“None, Guv’nor!”

“Business flourishing, Bill?”

“Never worse! Only two this week! And the weather s’ perishin’ ’ot! The dog-days gen’rally keeps the likes o’ me purty busy, as you know, Guv’nor, none better!

“Ar!” nodded Mr. Shrig. “Hot veather and feller-desees goes ’and in ’and.”

“Right so, Guv’nor, they do. Consequently I can’t think wot folks is up to,—’ere’s the old river all ready for ’em, nice an’ cool an’ deep,—but no, they’ve took to razors, shootin’ an’ ’angin’, which ain’t ’ardly respectable in ’em, an’ comes ’ard on me, Guv’nor, perishin’ ’ard on me!”

“And nothin’ to report, eh, Bill?”

“Not me,—but Tom Martin at ‘The Waterman’ took one s’ mornin’ as come ashore on the ebb b’low Tidmans.”

“Man?” enquired Mr. Shrig, his eyes suddenly keen.

“Woman,—and fresh! Couldn’t ha’ been in long.”

“Any marks o’ wiolence?”

“Not as I could see. ’Ow I missed ’er I dunno, she must ha’ come down in the race ’ard astarn o’ me. Which is just my perishin’ luck!”

“Here’s wishing you better, lad.”

“And I needs it, Guv’nor!”

“Tell James Rigg and Bob Sankey to report at my office for further instructions—without fail. Go find ’em,—now, Bill, now.”

“Ay, ay, Guv’nor! Mebbe my luck’ll turn afore sunset.” So saying, Bill Bartrum loosed painter, shipped his long sculls and shot out and away upon the broad bosom of the river.

“There ain’t,” said Mr. Shrig, gazing thoughtfully across these ever-flowing waters just now agleam with sunshine, “there ain’t a tradesman of ’em all as knows more of Old Feyther Thames than Bill Bartrum and honest as can be expected—almost! Considering the trade is vot it is.”

“Very horrible from what I heard, Jasper!”

“Ha!” mused Mr. Shrig. “It is, pal, and then again—it ain’t! ’Tis all in the p’int o’ view. Found drowneds and cadavers as is so by reason o’ wiolence, takes a bit o’ gettin’ used to, but use is everything! And a corp’ is—only a corp’ arter all. There’s Bill takes ’em as a matter o’ business, here’s me studies and goes over ’em perfessionally for evidence o’ The Fact and to see ’ow much they can tell me,—here’s yourself, on the other ’and, a young gent to oom a cadaver couldn’t make no manner of appeal—not till you’d been mixed up vith ’em pretty close and frequent!”

“God forbid!” exclaimed Oliver fervently.

“And now, pal, foller me!”

Reaching the end of this desolate wharf, Mr. Shrig led the way down a very sudden flight of steps, along a perilous causeway above the river ooze, up other steps, this time of ageworn stone, under a narrow stone arch bearing a half obliterated coat of arms, along a flagged passage dim lit, here and there, by narrow openings in crumbling masonry, up a spiral stone stairway very dark and narrow,—up and out into a spicy gloom redolent of horses. Here Mr. Shrig paused to remove The Hat and mop perspiring brow while Oliver, glancing about him in the fragrant dusk, was amazed to behold his horse Dobbin, knee deep in clean straw, munching contentedly in a stall near by.

“Why then,” said he, caressing Dobbin’s velvety muzzle, “these must be the ‘Waterman’ stables?”

“Ar!” nodded Mr. Shrig. “Stables now, but vonce the noble ’all of a lordly mansion—”

“Well,” exclaimed a sudden, astonished voice, “shiver me tops’ls if it ain’t Jasper and Mist’ Oliver come aboard by the old, secret gangway as nobody don’t know but me!”

“Except me, Tom, except me!” quoth Mr. Shrig as they shook hands. “There’s precious few corners o’ this old place as I don’t know. . . . How goes it with ye, Tom?”

“Fine and hearty, Jasper, I says, all ataunto alow and aloft. . . . Arternoon, Mr. Oliver, the Commodore,—Miss Saffy, passes the word as she’s in the kerrige along wi’ your little lady, sir, but’ll be back for tea. . . . And now, sir, says I, if you and Jasper will take a noggin, I says—say the word.”

“Ar!” nodded Mr. Shrig. “Summat vith a touch o’ leming-peel, Tom lad.”

“Ay ay, sirs, come forrard.” Across the neat stableyard Tom convoyed them, through deep doorway and into the wide taproom where all things showed as bright, as trimly shipshape as unremitting care could make them; a spacious yet comfortable place with great open fireplace at one end flanked by high-backed settles, roofed with mighty carven beams, its stone floor newly sanded, furnished with wooden elbow chairs, wide benches and long, oaken table, its wide lattices flounced and curtained, its beamed and plastered walls adorned by aqua-tints of ships of every rate and rig from saucy sloop to stately three-decked line of battle-ship.

“There ain’t,” said Tom, glancing about with the eye of pride, “I says there ain’t a taproom in this here City o’ London, like this here, says I, eh, Jasper?”

“Ar, Tom! But talking o’ leming-peel, p’raps a clove or so—?”

“Right, messmate!” Now while Tom instantly busied himself with his concoctions, Oliver’s wandering gaze encountered three large-printed and neatly-framed notices so very characteristic of Miss Saphronia that he smiled as he read; these:

Order Number One

Strong language strictly prohibited. For each and every infraction of this rule A FINE shall be inflicted of not less than SIXPENCE per OATH. Such monies to be expended upon children’s CHRISTMAS TREE.

Order Number Two.

INEBRIETY is forbidden ABSOLUTELY. No person shall be served after his THIRD POT.

Order Number Three.

Refrain from ALL EXPECTORATION on pain of being FORCIBLY ejected.

“Mr. Oliver—sir,” quoth Tom in tone of mild reproof and still busied at his fragrant work, “was you, I ax, laughing, sir,—at them texes?”

“Yes,” answered Oliver, smiling. “I’m wondering if your customers understand such texts, or obey them.”

“They do, pal!” said Mr. Shrig, watching Tom with the eye of a connoisseur and rather anxiously. “Pal, indeed they do!”

“Eh, Jasper, ‘pal’ says you? Mr. Oliver?”

“Ay, Tom,—saved me from bein’ snuffed out ’e did, so pal it is. Now explain about them texts and how they acts, lad.”

“Well, Mr. Oliver,” quoth Tom, “them texes is the rules o’ conduct aboard the ‘Waterman’ and, being the Commodore’s own orders, they’re enforced, sir, to the very letter by young Willum an’ George an’ me, and obeyed in consequence by all ratings, sir, every man and boy and breathing soul as steps aboard us, sir.”

“But, Tom, can everyone understand them,—such words as ‘expectoration’ and ‘inebriety’?”

“No, sir, no—first because d’ye see there’s very few as can read, and them as can, can’t, and asks their meaning, and them as can’t, does likewise, and here’s George and Willum and me to explain and see as these here texes be dooly obeyed,—if they does, sir, then they do—if they don’t then out they goes,—forcible. . . . Do me the favour to taste this, sir.” Oliver took the proffered glass that gave forth a delectable fragrance, drank and choked. Mr. Shrig on the other hand, sipped, savoured, sighed and spoke:

“In this here Wale o’ Sorrer, Tom, I knows three men as truly understands the vartue o’ leming-peel,—only three! There’s Corporal Richard Roe, o’ the ‘Gun’, there’s Mr. Gillespie, o’ Clifford’s Inn, and there’s—you, Tom, you!”

“Jasper, I says you do me proud! Shipmate, your health!”

It was at this moment that Oliver, happening to glance towards the window, saw a hand creep into view, a very furtive hand that, lifting stealthy finger, began to tap softly on the pane. Oliver rose, but in that moment Mr. Shrig spoke:

“If Dan’l—show your chevvy!” The hand disappeared and instead came an extremely meek-seeming visage framed in hay-like whiskers, a face that blinked colourless eyes and spoke murmuring:

“Ay, ’s me, Jarsper,—important!” Mr. Shrig had risen and was half out of the lattice all in a moment; ensued a sibilant whispering on the one part, a hoarse muttering on the other, and back came Mr. Shrig a changed man—eyes keen, mouth grim, his powerful figure instinct with purpose. Glancing at Tom, he nodded, looking on Oliver he murmured one word then, draining his glass, he strode to the door and was gone leaving Oliver to stare after him with suddenly awakened interest, for this one murmured word had been:

“Viskers!”

CHAPTER XXIV

GIVES FURTHER AND MORE INTIMATE GLIMPSE OF THE “JOLLY YOUNG WATERMAN”

“SIR,” quoth Tom, folding mighty arms across broad chest and nodding his head, “I says—there goes A man! Jasper should ha’ made a prime sailor R.N.—a reg’lar bulldog an’ mastiff rolled into one, bold as a lion and wise as a sarpent! And, Mr. Oliver, he names you ‘pal’ and any as Jasper so names is also A Man, says I, wherefore, sir, I now respects you according. And now since Willum’s ashore on leave and George is abroad on business for the Commodore and you and me alone, sir, I’m agoin’ to tell you summat—if so be you cares to ’ark, sir.”

“I do indeed,” answered Oliver, “but please know that Jasper greatly overrates my service, I ran no personal risk on his behalf.”

“And me name’s Tom, sir. And will I charge your rummer?”

“No more, thanks, Tom.”

“Well, Mist’ Oliver, sir, I’m telling you of the Commodore, Miss Saffy, Lord love her,—and why she commands and I obeys so long as I’m me! It begins all o’ ten year ago, ah more, being the year arter Trafalgar fight—”

“Were you there, Tom?”

“Ay, sir. ‘Bully Sawyer’ seventy-four. . . . Well, sir, I’m a sick man discharged from the sarvice and hospital by reason o’ wounds and insubordination to a surgeon as was for chopping off me arm. So I starts for London, fall among sharks and am robbed clean. How’s’ever I make London at last and pretty nigh starving and am minded to end me misery in the old Thames yonder. But, says I to me, ‘one good drink first,’ I says, ‘rum,’ says I, ‘and plenty of it,’ I says—and never a brass farden, sir, not one! So, being clammed and desperate, I determines to make the next person I meet stump up and pay down all as they’ve got,—much or little. To which hee-nious purpose, Mr. Oliver, I stands off and on, backing and filling, in a street not so fur from this here blessed spot, sir, till I hears someone bearing down on me,—so I hauls me wind, brings up in darksome corner, draws me gully-knife and waits. And then, sir, oo should heave into sight but—Miss Saffy, though I didn’t know her then o’ course. So I lays meself athwart her hawse, knife in fist and: ‘Bring to!’ I says, very fee-rocious, ‘Stand an’ deliver!’ says I. ‘Your money or danged life!’ I says, flourishing me gully and lookin’ bloody murder. . . . And, Mist’ Oliver, were she anyways afraid? Sir—she were—not! ‘Lord bless the man!’ she says, lookin’ up at me with

her two bright eyes. ‘You look weak and ill,’ says she, ‘Here’s me purse,’ says she, ‘only a miserable ten shillings, but ’tis all I have with me. You’ve been a mariner, haven’t you?’ she axes. ‘Ay marm,’ I answers. ‘Then,’ says she, ‘if you need more money and would rather steal it, wait here, if you’re brave enough and’ll trust me, and I’ll bring more,—if you’re an honest man, foller me and earn it,’ she says. ‘Commodore,’ says I, hiding me gully like a flash, ‘Commodore, you speaks and I obeys! Lead on!’ I says. . . . Well, sir, she leads me here and, Mist’ Oliver, here I’ve been ever since. So when she speaks I obeys as ever, smart and prompt, and see as everybody hereabouts does likewise.” Here Tom rose to straighten and adjust one of the three framed notices, his texts, that he fancied hung askew.

“Sir,” said he suddenly, “I do b’leeve as Shrig knows more about this old ‘Waterman’ than what I do.”

“That was certainly a strange way he brought me, Tom.”

“Ay, sir, there’s precious few knows it, and there’s another way as nobody has ever seen, I’ll warrant, except him and me. But, Lord love you, there’s more secret nooks and ways in this old place than even we knows on,—gangways in the walls, little rooms wi’ no winders, cupboards wi’ backs as slide, and cellars—miles on ’em.”

“Did you ever explore them?”

“Here and theer, sir, but never found anything—except old rags and mouldy bones, a rusty knife and a skull as had been split open.”

“I should like to see that knife, Tom.”

“Which, sir, me being a naturally orderly man, I hove it into the river along wi’ the rags an’ bones.”

“Talking of the river, Tom, we met Bill Bartrum as we came.”

“Ay, he’s often plying hereaway.”

“He told us how you found a . . . body.”

“Ay, I did so, sir,—sighted it on the ebb so in I went and brought it ashore, hoping to revive it, as I have more than once, but the pore soul was gone beyond me.”

“I wonder Jasper didn’t ask you about it.”

“Why, ye see, Mis’ Oliver, he ain’t nowise interested in she-male bodies just at present, ’tis males he’s arter, sir, a male body tall and whiskers, a great black bush—”

“Good heavens!” murmured Oliver. “Can he mean. . . I wonder.”

“Commodore’s comin’ aboard, sir!” cried Tom, rising alertly. “I can hear her kerrige putting in.”

Sure enough through the open window came a sound of approaching hoofs and wheels,—then into the yard rolled a large, open chariot behind a pair of splendid, high-stepping horses. So forth went Tom and Oliver to let down the steps and open the door; and down minced Miss Saphronia a vision of chaste elegance from deep bonnet to dainty sandals, with Clia, a smaller almost daintier vision, in her silks and laces, her flounces and snowy frills and more lovely for the light in her eyes as they beheld Oliver. Then, hand-in-hand, indoors they went all three,—there to be presented to the doll, at sight of which the child clasped her little, mittened hands, gazing wide-eyed in a mute ecstasy.

“Well,” demanded Miss Saphronia, loosing her bonnet-strings, “have you no word of thanks, my dear?”

“Ah—no!” sighed Clia, “I can’t—yet! Her’s . . . I be . . . too full!”

“And a pretty penny that must have cost you, Noll!”

“But worth it, Saphronia! I got one dressed as much like you as possible.”

“So I perceive,—though my bonnet carries but one plume, if I remember rightly. . . . Poof! Bonnets are plaguey things in the hot weather! Look after our elf while I rid me of mine. . . . And pray, Noll, ring for tea!” Scarcely had Miss Saphronia rustled away upstairs than, with quick, light movement, the child had Oliver in her arms (or as much as she could get of him) and, with dainty bonnet crushed against him, was whispering brokenly:

“Oh, Darlingest. . . . Oh, my Oliver . . . you’re so good to her—me! An’ please how did you know I’ve prayed an’ prayed in my prayers for a . . . doll? Every night I’ve prayed all whispering just to God an’ He heard . . . an’ you knew. . . . So now, oh kiss me ’cause I so do love you . . . an’ my dolly she’s so bootiful an’ fine!” And when they had kissed, she looked up at him wet-eyed, wiped her tears of gratitude, looked at her doll with an awed tenderness, kissed it also, rather fearfully, took it up tenderly and clasping it to her small, motherly bosom, announced with grave and hushed finality:

“I be going to name her ‘Liz’!” Then smiling radiantly on Oliver, away she tripped up that grim old stair, filling its murderous gloom with the light of her innocence. Or so thought Oliver.

“That child, Noll,” said Miss Saphronia, descending on him in sensible buckled shoes and bombazine, “our Clia, Oliver, so adores you that such love becomes your responsibility, boy,—it behoves you ever to be worthy.”

“Yes,” he sighed, a little ruefully, “the knowledge almost overpowers me.”

“She is a remarkable child, Noll, of nature so intense, of a sensibility so extreme . . . her people, whoever they were, poor souls,—were undoubtedly refined, folks of condition, I suspect.”

“And her age, Saphronia, how old do you suppose she is?”

“Well,” answered Miss Saphronia, pausing in the nice adjustment of the small, decidedly coquettish cap she affected within doors, “being probably stunted by ill-usage, precocious by hardship, her sensibilities sharpened and deepened by suffering, she is a child-woman of varying ages,—her years I estimate at ten. And . . . she warmed your uncle’s chilly arrogance, nay indeed, won him completely!”

“My—uncle!” gasped Oliver.

“She bore herself towards him with such innocent assurance, such quaint un-childish dignity, such complete unawareness, she talked to him so confidingly—and mostly about the glory of you, Noll,—that, despite her linguistic lapses, she, as I say, moved him to such degree that he so far forgot himself, or rather his stately aloofness, that he actually—fondled her!”

“Do you, can you possibly mean—Uncle Everard?”

“Not that he went so far or so unbent as to embrace or perch her on his knee as any ordinary human would have done, but more than once he touched her pretty hair, of course I’d made her remove her bonnet to expose its glory,—and, at our departure, he stole a guinea into her mitten and actually and positively—kissed her! And what do you say to this, Noll?”

“That if indeed you refer to Uncle Everard—I’m amazed.”

“Then be so, for I do.”

“But why call on him, Saphronia?”

“Why not? And for various reasons, and chiefly—you. . . . And did you ring for tea? If so—where is it? If not, why not? And I parched! Did you ring and order?”

“No, by heavens, I forgot!”

“Goodness me!” wailed Miss Saphronia. “And I languish!” and forthwith she tugged bellrope, she tinkled silver handbell, she called:

“Jemima—tea! Anne, Mary, Betsy—tea! Oh, Noll, life would be a drear desolation without tea! Heaven bless the Chinese—especially the one who discovered tea! And here it is! Jemima,—and you, Anne—girls, this evening we have company,—we dine at seven-thirty! Soup, fish, entrée and a joint. No! No entrée, the fish must be salmon and instead of joint a bird—two fowls or a capon. And the wine—claret. La Fitte, is it? However, Tom will know. And burgundy—or should it be champagne and if so—what? Send Tom to me!”

“Pray why the feast?” enquired Oliver, when the maids had bobbed and departed.

“Because I would have my ‘Waterman’ do his best for your uncle.”

“He? Coming—here?”

“Yes! And why not? Take your tea and—don’t slop it! Sir Everard manifested such kind interest in my old house and, oddly enough, this neighbourhood, that I could do no less than invite him to see it and, to my wonderment, he accepted.”

“Wonderful indeed!” said Oliver. “Considering his abomination for the sordidness of towns—more especially London.”

“Ye-e-s!” said Miss Saphronia, musingly and sipping her tea with forgetful gusto. “Dear me—how thirsty I am! Yes, he ever preferred the country as I remember. But I prove Sir Everard . . . changed, subtly yet definitely . . . grandly superb of course, but . . . yes . . . more human than of yore. . . . But, Gracious,—where is our child? Jemima! Anne! Mary! Oliver, pray ring the bell—never mind! . . . Oh Mary, pray desire Miss Clia to descend for tea. Where is she?”

“Oh mem, she be singin’ her noo dolly to sleep that soft and pretty to wring a body’s ’eart, mem.”

“‘Heart’, Mary,—with an aitch! Now go find Miss Clia—no matter, here she is! Come, child, sit you here by me—so! Well, is your dolly asleep, my Clia?”

“Oh no, she’s too happy to sleep an’ forget ’bout it. She’s in my pretty bed—waiting for me.”

“And such a beautiful doll, my dear!”

“And her name,” said Oliver, “is—Liz!”

“Ah—no!” cried Miss Saphronia, shaking her comely head, “That name will never do!”

“Yes, please!” said Clia, gently though firmly. “She’s gotter be Liz ’cause I know Liz an’ love her, I do.”

“Oh!” murmured Saphronia, viewing this small, determined face with wise, calculating eyes, “And was Liz beautiful like your doll, my dear?”

“No!” answered Clia, shaking her head, “not outside, she isn’t, her hair’s all grey an’ tangly, an’ she’s only got one eye . . . but Liz were kind to me. ’Cause when Flaming Sal got drunk an’ screamed me out o’ the tent into the rainy dark, or Mumper Joe clouted me an’ I crept out into the wind an’ night, then Liz ’ud cuddle me up an’ take me into her warm van . . . so I love her—always, I do.”

“Right!” said Miss Saphronia, with her quick, emphatic nod. “You are quite right, dearest! Now I understand why Liz must be the only name. . . . And God bless Liz wherever she be! Now tell Oliver what you said to the grand gentleman this afternoon that made him laugh.”

“Well,” said Clia, gravely but incisively, much as Saphronia might have spoken, “I telled him I liked his face ’cause it was like Uncle Roland’s face only not so pretty. So then he ask me ’bout you, Oliver, an’ I telled him I loved you lots an’ lots, ’cause you was kind to me an’ clouted Joe, an’ when I folleyed arter you all in the dark froo the woods an’ waited till you was bofe asleep an’ crep’ in between you an’ slep’ too, an’ afterwards you bringed me along on your big ’oss—’orse—”

“‘Horse’, my precious—with an aitch!” said Miss Saphronia, kissing her very heartily. “Now eat, child, and drink all that milk—every drop. . . . And do you wonder, Noll, that His Loftiness forgot to be aloof?”

Tea over, Miss Saphronia sat down with her small pupil for an hour of lessons while Oliver, lured by a distant, never ceasing hum like the swarming of bees, made his way towards the sound until, opening a certain ponderous door (all doors in this ancient structure were massively reminiscent of the Bad Old Times) thus found himself in the taproom, named but never called: “Salamander”—blue with the reek of tobacco and loud with voices, shrill, hoarse, deep, but all hearty. Now scarcely had he let fall latch behind him than this cheery babel was hushed, and instead of the many voices was one, and this the deep voice of Tom.

"I says, no foul-mouthed, longshore lubber, no wife-beating swab is served aboard the 'Waterman'."

"Ho?" growled a hulking, narrow-eyed hairy fellow in glazed hat and sea-boots. "Well, I says as this yere's an' 'ouse o' publick entertainment an' you're bound by law to sarve me—see?"

"Ay," snarled Tom, "I see, ye swab, and sarve ye I will, right willing, with both fists if you ain't out o' this in the twinkle of a rope's end,—blast your eyes—"

"Bung!" cried a gleeful voice, and George appeared, Tom's second-in-command; a trim, soldierly man rather stiff in the back, was George, and very precise from neat shoes to neatly trimmed side whiskers. "I come to attention, Tom," said he, "the moment you opened your tattler and waited, comrade, for you to let fly and loose off you did. So—bung! says I." And he jingled a large slitted box under Tom's pugnacious nose.

"Bung it is, Shipmet!" growled Tom, extracting sixpence from his pocket. "Rules is rules, so—there 'tis!" And into box went coin. "The word was out afore I knowed, and worth double the money,—it done me good, George, lad!"

"Me, too, Tom, and very sailorly! The swab's a skringer!" quoth George. "But me, speakin' as a soldier and a Buff, I should ha' put it a bit harsher like myself. . . . Ah, good evening, Mr. Oliver, we're proud to see you here, sir. Eh, Tom?"

"Ay, George,—and cheerly, Mist' Oliver, sir."

"That box seems pretty heavy, George," said Oliver smiling.

"Sir, it cert'nly is!" nodded George. "But the money goes to good cause—children, sir. And we're all in it, every man jack on us, specially Tom an' me an' Cap'n Sim, here."

"S'me, Governor!" said a small, fierce-eyed, grizzled man, remarkably hoarse and deep of voice, "I'm Sim—Sim Purvis, Cap'n o' the *Marthy Boles*, Lime'us 'Ole an' Leith. But 'ere's a strange thing, though I'm agin swearin' on principle, bein' a pretty God-fearin' kind o' cove, I swears constant and 'orrid afloat an' ashore—by natur'! Ye see, it comes nat'ral to us 'uns, wot wi' one thing an' another 'specially two—tides an' the weather—though I keeps my oathin' battened down hereaway out o' respect for The Commodore, Miss Saffy—bless 'er 'eart. But a sailorman must swear—eh, Tom, wot says you?"

“I says, messmate, ay ay to that!” answered Tom. “There’s o-casions when sich can’t nowise be avoided,—if, say, some lubberly swab, ’aving been dooly warned as per printed orders, I says, spits or ex-pectoriate, then a proper curse is needed to bring him up with a round turn, says I.”

“On t’other ’and, comrade,” said George, “if needed curse be with’eld there’s satisfaction in making said defaulter mop it up afore marching him into the yard.”

“Mebbe,” demurred Captain Sim, “you being only a pipe-clayed lobster, George. But all right sailormen swears like they breathes, by reason o’ the elements. Say f’rinstance, we’re makin’ out an’ ’tis blowin’ ’ard wi’ lash o’ blindin’ rain—off the Black Deep, say, or at sea, runnin’ slap into it, rollin’ gunn’le-under an’ shippin’ ’em heavy—when summat carries away aloft and she won’t answer her hellum—an’ the Goodwins hiss in your lee,—then a man’s apt to do a right bit o’ swearin—”

“No, praying, Sim—then’s the time for arnest prayer, Sim!” said a piping tenor, and Oliver was surprised to note this voice issued from the bearded lips of a colossus whose lofty, grey head was crowned, somewhat precariously, by a too small, extremely jaunty hat whose rakish cut was strangely at odds with his large, sedate person. “Ay, Sim,” he repeated, shaking reproving head till his hat toppled, “then is the time to cry ’umbly in prayerful supplication, old lad.”

“And so, Jacob, I swears—’ard!”

“And, Sim, I prays—fervent!”

“Yet you ain’t no more alive an’ ’earty than wot I am, Jacob! . . . Sir, you be’old Cap’n Jacob Pell o’ *The Brothers* brig! And now, shipmet, if that’s your first pot, ’ave your second wi’ me.”

“No, with me—if you will?” said Oliver, rather diffidently. “I should like to hear more of the perils of our coast-wise seas.” He said this with such evident sincerity that lips usually dumb for strangers became eloquent: and presently came others of these masters of craft to cap each other’s stories.

So Oliver talked and drank with these hardy men of the river and open seas and heard tales of storm and stress, of deadly tempest-lashed coasts, and learned something of vessels of divers sorts, especially of the staunchness of these clumsy-seeming, seagoing barges when properly trimmed and handled. Thus he questioned and listened with deep interest until, glancing casually through the open lattice, his grey eyes widened

suddenly and he stared amazed to see a man step suddenly into the yard—backwards, but a form this whose tall elegance there was no mistaking.

With brief apology, Oliver rose, stepped hastily to the door and hurried across the yard.

“Uncle?” he exclaimed. “Uncle Everard?”

“Myself, nephew,” answered Sir Everard, still without turning. “Can you contrive to get me indoors,—to your own room, unseen? I would not shock the child, or Miss Saphronia.” And now Oliver saw his Uncle’s gloved right hand was clenched tight upon his left forearm, and this gloved right hand stained with blood; but all Oliver said was:

“Follow me, sir.”

CHAPTER XXV

WHICH IS A CHAPTER OMINOUS

“It is nothing of a wound,” said Sir Everard, slipping out of his coat before Oliver might aid him, “but the sight of blood is usually disquieting! There,—as you see, it is merest scratch! The sponge,—thank you! No, no—I can manage . . . Ah, you are noticing this old scar? I have another in my shoulder, these were wounds . . . a rapier, nephew! The days of my fiery youth . . .

“May I know, sir, how this happened?”

“A rascal attacked me in one of the miserable alleys hereabout . . . a footpad probably. An interesting neighbourhood full of grim possibilities for the adventurous stroller. I sent my carriage by the broader thoroughfares and walked—with this result.”

“But—a knife-thrust, sir—”

“This happens to be no great matter, nephew. See, the effusion has stopped already! Now if you can oblige me with some clean linen,—a handkerchief shall serve.”

“Here, sir. Pray be seated and allow me.”

Smiling, Sir Everard obeyed and thus Oliver saw his hurt was indeed little more than an ugly scratch.

“Your left arm, sir! The blow then was aimed for your heart?”

“But missed it, nephew, and so—enough of the incident. Tell me of yourself. You seem extremely comfortable here, not to say luxurious. The bed-tapestries! This priceless rug! The furniture! Miss Saphronia’s purse must be deep!”

“I believe it is, sir. By the way, Uncle, on our way to London you passed us on the road, Roland and myself. It was storming at the time and we saw you distinctly by the lightning-glare,—you rode very wildly, sir, and looked desperately troubled.”

“I had urgent business here in town, nephew. As for my looks,—the lightning can play strange tricks. But coming back to yourself, Miss Saphronia informs me you have a situation and earn your own livelihood?”

“Thanks to her, sir.”

“And, oddly enough, you are with Drake.”

“You know him, Uncle?”

“We were at Oxford together, an odd, clever fellow as I remember him. What is your work?”

“Cleaning old weapons, sir, and rusty armour, mending and polishing antique furniture, which interests me, and doing a little book-keeping, which does not interest me in the least.”

“And what else, Oliver? You were writing a book, a novel, I believe?”

“I’d no idea you guessed or knew anything of this, sir.”

“How does your novel progress?”

“It doesn’t, sir. I left the manuscript at Dapplemere and of late I’ve felt no urge to write.”

“A pity, Oliver! But if you lack inspiration I may someday afford you stuff for an extremely readable novel, not to say—highly entertaining!” Here Sir Everard laughed softly but rather terribly,—or so thought Oliver, as his Uncle continued in his pleasant, chatty manner that struck Oliver as bitterly ironic:

“Tempests of the soul, my dear nephew, tragedy, grief, remorse,—the wilder emotions, if not his own, of course, should be easy for the scribe and enthralling for his reader.”

“My book, sir, deals with the ordinary, the quite commonplace.”

“A far, far more difficult art, nephew! I suggest you try drama, the stronger the better,—describe as adjectivally as possible the woeful disillusion, the heartbreak and suffering—of others, naturally! Our own painful emotions are usually too sacred to utter or set down. . . . How is the stab in your own arm, by the way?”

“Healed, sir. . . . But, Uncle, pray how . . . Ah, Clia told you of this, perhaps?”

“She did, Oliver. Little Clia—yes. . . . The helpless innocent you lifted from nameless evils. . . . I intend to settle money in her name—dress, schooling and so forth, a dowry if she marries. It is chiefly to this purpose I am here. To-night we must provide her with a name to be duly registered. . . . And Roland? I understand he left you on the road in company with a lady—a very ‘bootiful’ lady according to Clia.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Which,” murmured Sir Everard, “is precisely what Roland would do.”

“Sir, she . . . this lady was alone and needed, was thankful for his escort.”

“Which he, of course, was perfectly glad to afford, always supposing the lady was sufficiently attractive. Who is she? Do I know her?”

“She is a Mistress . . . Deborah Standish.”

“Lady Mereworth’s ward,—then I do know her, by sight. And Clia is right, Miss Standish is a beauty, though somewhat headstrong, I believe. And Roland, have you seen him since?”

“No, Uncle. I found he had given up his expensive chambers and could hear no word of him at any of his clubs.”

“Why give yourself so much trouble on his behalf?”

“Sir, I would remind you of the old adage that ‘blood is thicker than water’!”

“Even though you shed that blood frequently as a boy and may again, as a man?”

“God forbid!” said Oliver, fervently.

“Amen, nephew! Though, as boys, you never met but you began by fighting. . . . However, you need be under no apprehension on his account, Roland has the faculty, peculiar to felines, of always alighting more or less gracefully upon his feet. . . . Your little waif, your Clia, informs me he named her Madam Spindleshanks,—she has a quick ear for words, it seems,—and was for leaving her behind, which was exactly like him.”

“On the contrary, sir, he later showed a very lively affection for her.”

“Astonishing!”

“But true, sir!”

“In my experience your cousin’s chiefest concern and deepest affection was for himself.”

“And yet, sir, Roland can be truly magnanimous and rather splendidly generous.”

“Amazing!” murmured Sir Everard. “And that you should be his advocate is more so. Now as to the child, what do you propose to do with

her, or rather—what should you have done had there been no Miss Saphronia?”

“Taken her to my housekeeper, Mary Purdy, at my farm, sir, and remained there with her.”

“Oh indeed, Oliver?”

“Indeed, Uncle. I should probably be there now but for Roland.”

“Be so good as to explain.”

“Well, sir, when I informed Roland how I was minded to give up all pretence of winning your favour and money—”

“May I venture to ask why?”

“Oh because I love the country, sir, especially Dapplemere and beside, foolish or no, had rather earn little money than inherit even so vast a fortune as yours.”

“Admirably ridiculous! But pray continue.”

“Then briefly, sir, I told Roland that since I should not go on with your year’s trial he might count himself your heir.”

“And what said Master Roland?”

“Sneered at me, raged and ended by protesting that if I refused, so would he, rather than win your favour and wealth in such manner.”

“And again, nephew, I profess myself amazed. It seems I possess nephews of a preposterous altruism almost unearthly!” Sir Everard laughed, then gestured towards the narrow, open casement with its prospect of grimy roofs and reeking chimneys.

“Such deplorable surroundings,” said he, “—hardly fit for a delicate and too-sensitive child, Oliver.”

“Agreed, sir. But what is in your mind?”

“The echoing loneliness of Abbeymead, nephew! Your action in rescuing this child is a . . . reproach to myself and the solitary years of wasted opportunities!” Oliver could scarcely believe his ears, and for a moment sat dumbstruck.

“But, sir . . . sir,” he stammered, “you . . . indeed you did your duty most generously by Roland and myself!”

“More or less!” nodded Sir Everard. “As I might have done for many other lonely children in far greater need than ever were the sons of my sisters . . . I might have done so very much! And . . . life so uncertain! A wise woman your Miss Saphronia to do while she may rather than grieve for what might have been and never can be—with life so quick to go.” Into the pleasant, softly modulated voice had crept a deeper note, upon these handsome features Oliver glimpsed a haggard weariness.

So now, for the first time, as they sat thus remote and talking more familiarly than ever before, it struck Oliver suddenly, like a blow, that his Uncle’s arrogant face, so calmly assured, so ineffably serene, was in reality a mask for emotions much the opposite; that the graceful figure lolling so easefully, was truly that of a harassed man anything but easeful. Indeed it seemed now to Oliver that these lips that smiled and spoke so lightly, might part to dreadful utterance but for the fierce repression of a mighty will, a relentless self-control. But if this grim restraint should ever weaken, this mask ever slip . . . how then? thought Oliver, viewing his stern kinsman’s pensive form in the light of this discovery rather apprehensively.

From the wide landing beyond closed door stole the softly mellow chime of a clock, whereat Sir Everard started, glanced at his watch and rose.

“Pray tell me,” said he, looking down at his immaculate person with great particularity, “do I show any traces of the recent incident?”

“None, sir.”

“Then you may conduct me to my hostess. Oblige me with my hat. And you will be careful to burn my gloves. Now, let us present ourselves.”

So downstairs went they to that small, cosy room called “Griffin,” where Miss Saphronia and Clia rose to greet them.

Sir Everard acknowledged Miss Saphronia’s deep curtsey with a deeper bow; he reached forth both hands to the child who, having duly “made her reverence” (though still a little tottery about it) lifted her small face expectantly, and Sir Everard stooping from his stately height, touched his lips to her smooth brow, her shining hair.

“Now kiss my Liz—please!” said she, and taking up her beloved doll she held this up invitingly and Sir Everard, very gravely, kissed these waxen features. Then Tom, extremely smart for the occasion, appeared to announce dinner and usher them into that more spacious chamber called “Unicorn.”

During dinner Miss Saphronia, led on by her guest’s adroit questioning, told of how, finding herself a wealthy heiress, she had devoted this fortune

and herself to the very poor, and, for years now, had laboured among them—to comfort their woes bodily and mental, striving to bring a beam of joy into their cruelly sordid lives. “To-day, Sir Everard, they are my family, men, women and children, good and bad, honest and criminal,—a great and very mixed family. Good Gracious—yes! But I love them all,—every one—almost, for their heroical fortitude, their unfailing kindness to each other, for the way they bear each other’s burdens and share their pitiful little so generously.—Yes, I love them and I think they love me.”

“Do you go among them often, Miss Saphronia?”

“Oh daily, sir, and frequently at night when trouble or sickness calls me,—which is terribly often.”

“Are you ever molested?”

“Never, since they learned to know me,—but woe to the stranger who so attempts! Joe Marsh would have quite slaughtered the last poor, misguided wretch but for me. I had to box Joe’s ears to save my brutal assailant. And Joe is quite a horrid brute himself, robbery with violence, oh a terribly bloodthirsty wretch, though a lamb to me. You see, I tended his little ailing daughter and Joe’s grateful,—but so are they all!”

“And you visit these quite dreadful places alone and on foot?”

“Oh yes. But the odd thing is—these poor folk love me to parade myself for their behoof, horses and carriage, the greater ostentation I assume in public the more they welcome me in private. So every Saturday afternoon I am ostentatious as possible and go visiting in the chariot.”

“You do a noble work, Miss Saphronia, a great work in which I desire to be associated. I have property somewhere hereabout, mostly derelict warehouses and so forth, these shall be pulled down, a . . . hospital or some such built to your own design, Miss Saphronia, and I shall endow it . . . for sake of the child here. There is also a farmhouse at Abbeymead I shall give for your ‘poor ones’—the children preferably.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Saphronia, clasping her hands in ecstasy of gratitude. “Oh, Sir Everard! . . . What can I say? How express my deep thankfulness? Such princely gifts! So unexpected! Oh indeed I . . . I . . . for once I am quite, quite—speechless!”

“Or—comparatively!” said he, his sombre features brightened by sudden, wistful smile.

“But oh, Sir Everard . . . when I think . . . my poor children! These desolate creatures! These lost and hopeless ones! Here shall be new hope, new life for them and joy for me, by . . . your noble generosity. . . . Oh joy!” And, with the word, her tears flowed and she sobbed for very gladness. “Ah, Sir Everard!” she gasped, “dear sir . . . Oh may God bless you!”

“I wonder!” he muttered softly, but so bitterly that Oliver, overhearing, glanced at him and was instantly frowned at. And yet when they rose from table, Sir Everard’s smile was back again and his look so gentle that when he reached his hand to Clia she took and pressed it to her cheek in that instinctive, loving way that was all her own, and so brought him into the withdrawing room, called “Gorgon,” with its wide latticed window opening on Cherry Orchard Court where indeed, as Miss Meekins had said, “no cherry ever burgeoned now.”

Here presently Tom reappeared with bottles and glasses on silver tray, followed, like a seductive ghost, by the fragrant aroma of coffee, which presently made its entrance in charge of Jemima.

“Tom, oh Tom,” said Miss Saphronia, a joyous, bustling figure, her deft hands busy among the coffee-cups, “pray draw the curtains.”

“By your leave—no!” said Sir Everard, gently. “I take a certain pleasure in watching day fade into night.”

“Tom, you may leave them!” said Miss Saphronia. “And, Tom, warn Mary to have Miss Clia’s chamber candle alight precisely ten minutes hence.”

“Ay, marm!” answered Tom and rolled away.

A truly noble chamber this of the “Gorgon” (thought Oliver) its aged oak panelling and richly carved ceiling beams aglitter in shaded candlelight that gleamed upon rich, old silver, sparkled in cut glass and shone back from delicate china,—a worthy setting for its three chief occupants: Sir Everard, his grand manner seemingly forgotten, chatting so lightly with his hostess, and smiling with such watchful tenderness upon the child: Miss Saphronia, a shape of vivid, talkative gladness; little Clia all eager, dainty prettiness as she aided with the coffee-cups. All this Oliver observed in his thoughtful manner and—this one other thing,—that when not answering Miss Saphronia or smiling on Clia, his uncle’s keen eyes, veiled almost furtively beneath their languorous-seeming lids, were watching that uncurtained window beyond which lay Cherry Orchard Court, its harsh grimness now

magically softened and almost beautified by dusk and ever deepening twilight.

Now, therefore, when Clia had kissed them good night and gone up to bed attended by her devoted Saphronia, Oliver in his blunt, downright manner, instantly spoke his thought:

“Uncle, you are worried, troubled,—pray what is it?”

Up went the stately white head, down came the thick, black brows; but Oliver met this look serenely, he leaned nearer and lowered his voice:

“Sir, this is no idle question. I ask that I may serve you, if possible.”

“Meaning, nephew?”

“Your wound. The change in yourself. Your every look—”

“I have rarely tasted coffee so delicious!” murmured Sir Everard, sipping daintily. “And permit me to say, my dear Oliver, that my looks are entirely my own concern.”

“Meaning—none of mine, sir. I ask your pardon.”

“Granted, nephew, granted. For I confess your anxiety on my behalf gratifies me, but——”

Sir Everard seemed to stiffen in his chair, his dark eyes looking beyond Oliver, widened suddenly; now, following this look, Oliver saw, in the gathering darkness beyond the window, a nebulous, crouching shape, the pallid oval of a face peering in at them . . . then he was afoot and interposing himself between Sir Everard and this dim shape, leapt for the window, flung wide the lattice and leaned out into the gathering darkness to see—nothing, and hear only hoarse voices from the distant taproom uplifted in the chorus of a sea chanty.

“Nobody, of course!” said Sir Everard, setting down his coffee-cup very precisely. “Pray close the window!”

“There was!” said Oliver, frowning anxiously, and he made to clamber through the casement.

“No!” said his Uncle, imperiously. “I forbid it! Come in, sir, and close that window. And you may draw the curtains.”

“But,” Oliver demurred, “someone was there——”

“Certainly, nephew, very probably a patron of this ‘Jolly Waterman’.”

“Possibly, sir,—though the taproom opens on Lamb’s Alley.”

“However, Oliver, your instant and instinctive zeal for my protection touches me sensibly. Had death indeed menaced me, your action, instinctive as I say, must have balked my murderer’s aim. Now pray close the window and draw the curtains. Ah, Miss Saphronia approaches,—not a word of this, sir.” So saying, he rose as his hostess entered, bowing her to a chair; but she, espying their empty cups, instantly pounced on them, vowing they must be refilled.

“Someday perhaps,” sighed she, thus busy, “when the world is older and kinder, such dreadful neighbourhoods as this, these frightful cellars, these dens and dreadful rookeries will be swept clean away. . . . And oh, Sir Everard, while I knelt with our sweet innocent in prayer, as I ever do, I implored the blessing of our Heavenly Father on you . . . it is such noble generosity as yours shall help to make this great London of ours a cleaner, better place, and these many poor ones healthier and happier.”

“And somewhere,” said Sir Everard thoughtfully, “somewhere amid the misery and wretchedness round about us now is a poor, lost fugitive . . . an elderly woman whom her friends are . . . most anxious to . . . find. Her name is . . . Maxton, beyond this I can afford no just description of her except that she is under the average height and walks . . . with a slight, though noticeable limp. I wonder, Miss Saphronia, if in your so many errands of mercy hereabout, you have ever seen or heard of . . . such person?”

“Oh, many—that is, several!” answered Miss Saphronia, brightly. “There’s Mrs. Purdy—though she uses a crutch, poor soul, and being named Purdy it can’t be she, of course! Then there’s Molly Rawlins hobbles dreadfully, yet her beast of a husband used to beat her until I set Tom on him,—Tom beat him—severely! But no—it can’t be poor Molly either. There’s Sarah Merkles, but she’s too old, I fear—and only one leg, whereas your person possesses two, I opine?” Sir Everard bowed. Miss Saphronia sighed:

“No,—no, I fear I have never yet heard of or seen such person, but should I—you shall be informed—immediately.” Sir Everard bowed again, smiling a little wearily.

“Now there is the child,” said he. “I intend to settle money in her name, consequently a name she must have.”

“Money—oh!” ejaculated Miss Saphronia. “Good Gracious me! More munificence! As to a name this is quite simple. With your permission she

shall be Clia Everard,—a most splendid name, euphonious and distinctive! How say you, Noll?”

“Excellent!” nodded Oliver.

“And you, Sir Everard?”

“It pleases me,—greatly! Pray God my name may bring her all happiness. Henceforth then she is Clia Everard and shall be so registered. Heaven bless her!”

“You love the child, Sir Everard?”

“Indeed! Rather . . . painfully! A childless man grown older than he realized. . . . When I look on her bright innocence,—the echoing loneliness of Abbeymead, the emptiness of these latter years . . . mock me with my own futility.” Then he laughed suddenly and rose.

“Dear me!” he exclaimed. “I become plaintive and grievously pitiful for myself to my own infinite surprise and disgust. It is high time I removed myself. Miss Saphronia, I am grateful for your hospitality, it has been a joy. I am returning to Abbeymead shortly. I hope I may see you and the child there—soon . . . in matter of the farm. . . . Oliver, pray order my carriage.”

Now as they stepped into the darkness of Cherry Orchard Court, Oliver had the impression his uncle had turned suddenly as if to address him:

“Yes, Uncle?” he enquired.

“I did not speak, nephew—ah, there is my carriage!” he sighed, for in this moment lights flickered and the vehicle rumbled out from the yard; the coachman checked his stamping horses, down swung footman and opened the door; but instead of entering his carriage Sir Everard turned abruptly and led Oliver out of earshot and beyond the glaring carriage lamps.

“It is . . . yes I . . . I think . . . it is but right I should tell you,” said Sir Everard in such faltering, woefully changed accents that Oliver shrank within himself and was glad he could not see the speaker’s face, “that I . . . fear I . . . recognized my assailant this evening—hush, don’t speak—suffer me! I . . . was almost sure in the street but . . . dared not, would not believe. The glimpse I caught at the window, I . . . God help me. . . . Should he be whom I . . . dread he is indeed, then . . . my life is in grave jeopardy . . . I must make all provision for a sudden exit. You will come to me, therefore, without fail at St. James’s Square two days hence at eight o’clock in the evening, you and Roland! Find Roland if possible and bring him, but come you, Oliver, without—”

Sudden shouts and sounds of struggling in the gloom of the court; then into the light of the carriage lamps came Tom and George hauling between them a man who strove desperately; now this man's hat was gone and thus beholding his face, Oliver hastened forward, crying:

“Keep him fast, Tom, he's wanted by the law . . . Jasper Shrig—”

“On the contrary,” said Sir Everard's smooth, imperious voice, “you will loose him—and instantly!”

“But, sir—your honour—”

“I say, let him go, this moment! Obey me!”

There was no resisting such tone, such look; Tom and George obeyed and the man, thus freed, uttered a strangled, inarticulate cry and leapt at Sir Everard with such blind and beastlike ferocity that he seemed to see nothing of Oliver, the powerful fist that dropped him or heavy foot that pinned him down. But Oliver was wrenched aside and once again Sir Everard spoke—two words only:

“Madman! Go!” And his fallen assailant, muttering indistinctly, got to his feet, glared wildly about him and slunk away into the dark.

Sir Everard had moved out of the lamplight and was standing utterly still, but it was not too dark for Oliver to behold this stricken face and hold his breath, appalled,—for the mask indeed had slipped at last. . . . So was a moment of dreadful silence,—then from these quivering lips issued a broken whisper:

“Oliver . . . God help me . . . there went . . . my wretched son! . . . Help . . . help me into my carriage. First,—this dreadful secret must remain so. You . . . will speak it to . . . no living soul!”

“To no one, sir. Pray take my arm.”

And thus, instead of the tall and superbly stately Sir Everard, it was a feeble, bent old man who stumbled into his carriage, who, white head bowed and face hidden between clutching hands, was driven away to meet and to endure that which was to be.

CHAPTER XXVI

CONCERNING ROLAND, HIS LIFE'S PURPOSE

THE GIANT is at rest. The Great City is almost still; instead of the tread of countless feet, the harsh roar and rush of traffic, is peace; the well-nigh empty streets echo to the sweeter clamour of bells calling from the many spires and steeples near and far,—for to-day is Sunday, this blessed day of rest.

And amid it, but not of it, rides Oliver, astride his leisured Dobbin, on his way to Blackheath to enquire after Deborah her welfare,—perhaps to see her face (O joy inexpressible!), to hear her voice, clasp her hand perhaps even . . . he trembles at the mere thought and turns from contemplation of this breath-taking joy to that which has troubled his slumbers all night and which shocks, amazes and confounds him yet. So now as he rides, his mind is a confusion of whirling thoughts that centre upon the one:

“His uncle’s son! . . .” And this son a convicted felon, a murderous ruffian. . . . His uncle’s son! . . . His own cousin,—here then was the reason this man’s face had haunted him . . . a family resemblance, of course, though marred by hardship and evil. This man who, according to Jasper Shrig (and indeed the evidence of his own senses) was the unnatural wretch eager to shed the blood of his own father! A parricide. . . . And this the son of the proud Sir Everard. . . .

The placid Dobbin snorts suddenly and almost shies as from sudden by-street a fiery prancer walks out upon them fore-feet proudly beating the air, a mettled steed topped by shape of militant glory from dancing plume to gilded spurs, a youngish, resplendent being, magnificent with gold lace, galoons, dolman and sabretache, the very perfection of a dashing, light hussar.

Magnificence, muttering an apology, would have ridden on, but Oliver, quick to recognize, intercepts him, bows and speaks:

“You are Captain Joicey, I think?”

“Eh? Oh? Who says so, demme?” demands Magnificence, sitting his restive animal with a gracious abandon. “Do’ know ya! Who are ya? Hold hard! Are ya runner for that dem nose-grinder Jasper Gaunt? If so, curse’m, it’s no go! Are ya boots and saddlery, wines and spirits, m’ confounded tailor poor deyvil, or—”

“I am Oliver Dale, cousin to Captain Roland Verinder, a friend of yours, I believe?”

“Cert’nly, heart ’n hand, hell fire ’n so on,—P’ninsula, Quatre-Bras, Waterloo ’n so on, comrades ’n so forth. You Roly’s cousin? Ha, b’leeve I know ya now. Charmed m’ dear flah! What can I—”

“Pray have you seen Roland lately, do you know where I can find him?”

“No. Not since last week,—borrowed a pony.”

“Twenty-five pounds? He did?”

“No, I did.”

“And did he oblige you?”

“Cert’nly, as usual, like a dem flash. Always flush, Roly,—rich old hunks of a nunks rolling in rhino.”

“Where did you last see Roland?”

“St. James’s Street?”

“Riding?”

“No, walking.”

“He didn’t mention where he was living, his new abode?”

“Devil a word.”

“Thank you.”

“Pleasure! G’bye—hold hard though! To-day’s Sunday,—try the Park, everybody’s there, if Roly’s in town he’ll be there, too, ’stride a bit o’ blood. G’bye again, sir, an’ g’luck!” Oliver bowed, Captain Joicey saluted and rode away radiant in his glory.

So to the park rode Oliver, crowded at this fashionable hour by Gallantry and Beauty, ahorse and afoot, filling the sunny air with the glad babblement of more or less modulated converse, cheery salutations and joyous laughter.

And here, after some while, Oliver’s patient search was rewarded by glimpse of the face for which his quick glance had quested so persistently; here, sure enough, was Roland but—remote from this gay and brilliant throng and, instead of careering gallantly upon fiery steed, seated gloomily upon a hard, small and inadequate chair, slim legs outstretched, arms folded, chin on breast, heedless and unheeded, a very figure of gloom.

Reining up before this solitary, Oliver sat mute and waited while Roland, glancing up with a weariness more than mere languor, surveyed Dobbin from muzzle to tail, Oliver from heel to head, scowled, nodded and spoke:

“So here you are again?”

“As you say, Roly, here I am, but—”

“And damnably out of your way.”

“How so?”

“You must go by Kent Street for Blackheath, Ass!”

“I’m aware of it, Mule. And how d’you know I’m intending for Blackheath?”

“By your dashed, smug, calfish look! Well, Mr. Would-be Lover, I can save you the journey. . . . She . . . is not there!”

“Not?” demanded Oliver, in sudden anxiety.

“No—not! And you needn’t trample me under your dam cart-horse in your confounded lover-like dashed perturbation and be cursed to everything!”

“Where—where is she, Roly?”

“Ass! Fool,—why ask me?” cried Roland, rather wildly. “She’s . . . gone, vanished, swallowed up in this cursed city! She may be dead, she may be lying sick and helpless . . . in want! Ha God. . . . She may be dead or . . . worse—”

“Her Aunt—”

“No!” snarled Roland, “I’ve been to Mereworth and no word of her! I . . . I’ve been everywhere I can think. I’ve sought her high and low . . . ridden and walked these dam streets and—not a sign.”

“Roland, we must find her!”

“How man, how? In God’s name, tell me how?”

“We must look for her, Roly, day and night . . . yes and set others to do the same,—Jasper Shrig. . . .”

“Listen, Oliver! I have devoted myself to this search body and soul! I’ll find her again though it cost my life or wears out my days! I’ll find her again, somehow, sometime . . . living or . . . dead!”

“And God help you, Roly . . . old fellow!”

Roland's fierce expression softened, his mouth twitched and, bowing head again, he spoke almost whispering:

"Noll, I worship her! I love her with all the best there is of me,—in an odd, sacred way. She is my . . . religion, and find her I must—and shall, if there is a God! All yesterday I walked, scanning every face, tramped till my strength failed. To-day I'm here dead beat resting for to-morrow, but searching still,—every face, every form. And now . . . because you love her too—ah yes, I've known this from the first,—so now, because I do so love her, should I ever find her alive and she . . . prefer you, well . . . her choice shall be mine, yes damme and . . . and here's my hand on it!"

So, for a moment, their hands met and held tight; then they averted their eyes from one another, almost as though ashamed, and for a moment was a rather awkward silence.

"And what," demanded Roland, suddenly, "what the devil brought you into the Park, Noll?"

"I met Captain Joicey."

"Old Topples? What of him?"

"He said I should probably find you here. He also told me he borrowed twenty-five pounds of you."

"He did. And 'twas pretty well all I had."

"Why be such stark fool, Roly?"

"Oh—divers reasons."

"What?"

"Well,—one, because I've accommodated Topples so often it's become a sort of habit. Two, he always pays me back—when he remembers. Three, because not being able to afford it, I did—to thumb my nose at damned Circumstance. Which reminds me I haven't quite finished my watch yet, so let's go eat—"

"Eh? Watch? Eat? But how . . . what watch and where?"

"My ticker, Noll! The gold, repeating chronometer bestowed upon your very humble by an adoring Nunks on my coming of age."

"You mean to say you pawned—"

"Precisely! It and everything pawn and saleable. I lived like a deuced fighting cock on old Highflieger until I dropped what was left of him in a

confounded gambling hell,—no luck! So to-day we'll swallow the last of my watch together—I haven't eaten to-day—no appetite, but now,—come and help me.”

So away they went, side by side, Oliver leading his horse, until they reached a certain famous hostel in quiet street wherein, having left Dobbin in the capable hands of a smart ostler, down they sat together in a snug box, where Roland, his money being scarce, ordered lavishly.

“And how,” enquired Oliver, when the waiter had bowed and departed, “how shall you live?”

“Somehow, Noll,—anyhow! There's only one thing in life that matters now, as you know.”

“And,” said Oliver, with the utmost finality, “for such object you need money! Here are three guineas, almost all I have with me, take them and—I say take them, Mr. Asinine Numps . . . for her sake, Roly-man! Now! Give me an address shall find you and I'll send more.”

“Oh well . . . I use this house mostly now.”

“Right!” said Oliver.

“But how do you live, Noll, and where?”

Oliver told him.

“So?” nodded Roland, “Saphronia sounds less of a she-dragon than my callow experience conceived her. And you say little Clia grows prettier? She will! She'll be a beauty someday—before you know it. And how goeth Sir Superbus, the Nunks?”

Hereupon, laying down knife and fork, Oliver described his meeting with their uncle, of the mysterious attack upon him, of his extraordinary generosity to Saphronia and tenderness for little Clia,—all to Roland's growing wonderment.

“He is greatly altered, Roly, in looks and ways! He's changed . . . and changing!”

“Dam remarkable!” exclaimed Roland. “But who the devil should want to murder him?”

“Who indeed!” said Oliver, mindful of his promise. “But you may learn something of this on Friday next—”

“Oh? Why then,—and how?”

“Because on that day he expects us at St. James’s Square—”

“That stately pile o’ gloom, dammit! No, I hate the place, always did! Besides, I shall be out and away tramping these cursed streets on my devoted, relentless quest.”

“Even this must wait, Roland, yes—under the circumstances,—even this! For, Roly, I . . . there is some dark mystery. I believe Uncle Everard is in danger . . . dreadful danger and—we must be there!”

“Eh—danger?” repeated Roland, sitting up. “How? Who? Where? What the devil? What danger?”

“Death!” answered Oliver, beneath his breath, and with such look that Roland slowly recoiled, then leaned swiftly across the table, whispering also.

“Tell me what you mean! Say what you know—tell me!”

“I know that he needs us, both of us, and that go to him we must.”

“Of course! I’ll be there. Friday next,—at what hour?”

“Eight o’clock.”

“Ha, after dinner, thank my stars! Dining with the Nuns is always such a dam and dooced function. But this danger, Noll, can’t you tell me the how or what, the when and where of it?”

“No.”

“But you think it is very real and imminent?”

“I know it!”

So they ate and talked; they talked and sat until afternoon drew to evening; and when at last Oliver rode away it was with fingers warm from Roland’s hearty clasp.

CHAPTER XXVII

TELLS OF ONE WHO FEARED THE LIGHT

SHADOWS were deepening around him when Oliver swung aside from the broader thoroughfares to traverse the maze of those dismal back streets and tortuous ways that were now become familiar.

He rode at leisured amble (Dobbin's usual gait), but with eyes alert and heavy riding-whip in free right hand. . . . "I have no description of her except that she is under the average height and goes with a slight yet noticeable limp. . . ."

These words of Sir Everard's seemed ringing in his ears for there, moving before him in the gathering dusk, was a solitary woman who was below the average height and moved with a limp that yet carried her well and almost gracefully.

Now as he overtook this woman, Oliver, acting for once on impulse, drew rein, bared his head and, leaning from the saddle, addressed her, hat in hand.

"Your pardon, but pray does your name happen to be Maxton?"

The woman stopped instantly, but remained utterly speechless, head averted and face thus hidden in the deep shade of her shabby bonnet; so long she remained thus dumb and strangely quiescent that Oliver, thinking she might be deaf, was about to repeat his question more loudly when, with sudden, smooth motion, she turned, looked up at him and the words on his lip were never uttered; for, this face, despite greying hair and its lines of grief or hardship, was still so unexpectedly beautiful that he gazed dumbstruck, awed by something in these sad, patient features that rose far beyond mere beauty. And now she spoke,—one word softly uttered:

"No!"

Then she went on again with her limp that somehow was not ugly, moving before him, lightly, swiftly, until she turned aside down a narrow alley and was gone.

Thoughtfully, as ever, Oliver rode on, musing now upon this so strangely beautiful face, wondering what tragedy of grievous sorrow had so dimmed the glory of these lovely features and stamped them with such look of patient, long-suffering endurance.

He had reached that grim court where once the boy Snod would have betrayed him to violence and robbery, when from that same dark archway, darker now, there issued sounds that halted Oliver instantly, every nerve a-tingle,—a clamour this, the more dreadful because hushed; scuffling feet, gasps, fierce mutterings,—a faint voice that panted: “Help! Murder!”

Then, whip tight-grasped, Oliver rode from dusk into the gloom of the archway where Death, it seemed, was so busy,—a gloom instantly full of clutching hands, fists and bludgeons. But wheeling his powerful horse Oliver gave blow for blow, smiting at heads dim-seen. . . . A cudgel-stroke dazed and shook him . . . fierce hands were wrenching, twisting at his booted leg, dragging him down to be kicked and trampled, when—loud above this hubbub rose two familiar voices, one a deep roaring bass, the other a high tenor.

“Stand by, Sim!” piped the Tenor, “Damme, here’s murder!”

“By blood, Jacob,” roared the Bass, “so ’tis! Lay ’em aboard, shipmet!”

“Ay, ay, Sim!” piped the colossus, smiting now right and left, “Ha, lookee, Sim,—blast me eyes if ’tain’t Mr. Oliver! Ahoy, sir, here’s Sim and me heaving alongside and doing sailorly, damme!”

And indeed so sailorly wrought they, these two hardy mariners, that very soon the enemy, thus suddenly and so fiercely beset, turned all and fled.

“So much . . . for they . . . bloody pirates!” panted Captain Sim, “though me . . . starboard deadlight’s took one, with a curse!”

“Which sarves ye right, Sim, for swearing so very unseemly—”

“Swearing, d’ye say? Why, curse Jonah, I never heered better nor yourself, Jacob! You cursed, shipmet, and swore, messmate, with every blow—”

“And here lays the pore felly as they’ve murdered!” said Captain Jacob, stooping above a vague shape huddled against the wall.

“Dead, eh, Jacob?”

“Pretty near and curst bloody, Sim, exceeding bloody, lad!”

“Ha, damme, Jacob, but there ye go again! I never swore more hearty in all me days than you this here night, Jacob, Lord love ee!”

“ ’Twasn’t swearing, Sim, ’twas describing, for most extreme bloody he be, pore felly!”

“Lift him,” said Oliver, “get him up here before me across my horse, and gently.”

With much heave-ho and yo-hoing in tenor and bass, this was done and Oliver rode on slowly with Captain Sim helping to support the unconscious man on one side and Captain Jacob on the other. Now peering down in the half-light, Oliver saw this poor creature’s face no more than a mask of blood; but, even then, the limp form stirred feebly and from unseen lips issued a plaintive whisper:

“Hide . . . me!”

“You are safe now,” said Oliver. The injured man writhed again, lifted both arms and seemed clutching at his blood-smeared face, and again came the hoarse whisper:

“For love . . . of God let . . . no woman . . . child . . . see me . . .”

“No,” answered Oliver soothingly, “no!”

Reaching the “Jolly Waterman” crowded at this hour, Oliver sent for Tom, who came promptly, and with a lantern since darkness had fallen.

“Where to, sir?” he enquired, viewing Oliver’s ghastly burden with the calm dispassion of much experience. “Into the kitchen as usual?”

“No, Tom, to my bedchamber.”

So thither the senseless shape was borne and laid upon cushioned settee; then, the two captains having retired to their own refreshment and Tom for brandy, lint and bandages, Oliver took the sponge that had soothed Sir Everard’s hurt so recently, and began to bathe the face of this unconscious stranger; but hardly were these features revealed than he caught his breath and stared and shrank in fierce disgust from what he saw . . . a ghastly, shrivelled horror seamed and ridged by a very monstrosity of wounds inflicted long ago by some wantonly merciless hand . . .

Roused by the cold water, the man sighed, this frightful mutilation, that was no face, twitched, then out from this hideous ruin two eyes looked up at him, large, softly-dark, thick-lashed, eyes so beautiful indeed that the marred features showed the more hideous by contrast.

Meeting Oliver’s look, these beautiful eyes widened suddenly, then closed, and the man writhed groaning, and lifted both weak hands to his furrowed cheeks with that same strange, fumbling gesture.

“The . . . same look!” he muttered bitterly. “Ever the same . . . horror, repulsion or shrinking pity! I disgust you, sir, of course,—disgust and shock you, deny it and you lie, like a gentleman, yet you lie. It was meant I should be a general disgust and I am,—ah, I am, and equally my own abomination. Thus, sir, to offend your sight the less, I veil it beneath my arm—so, craving your forgiveness for the offence I am. . . . You see me humble in my shame, sir—ah, but very humble, I!”

A voice richly sweet and oddly pleasing, a cultured speech yet with quaintly foreign turn of phrase; a man, this, gently reared and doubtless well-born, a refined Caliban.

So thought Oliver and, wishful to speak some word of comfort, dared not and was dumb; for what words, howsoever eloquent, might soothe a despair so infinite? Suddenly, and despite his weakness, the injured man started to his elbow, glaring fearfully towards the door whence came sound of heavy feet ascending the stair.

“Ah—who . . . who is it?” he gasped. “Let no one in upon me, I charge . . . I command . . . implore you—let none other see me.” And, uttering desolate, wailing cry, he cowered down, hiding his repulsiveness in the cushions.

“No! No, they shall not!” sighed Oliver, and touching this written form very gently, he went to the door and there met Tom heavy laden.

“Thanks, Tom!” said he. “Give me those things,—I can manage now, and this is a busy night in the taproom, I know.”

“Ay, Mist’ Oliver, I says, sir, busy we be! So if ye can do without me for a spell—”

“I can, Tom. And again—my thanks.” So Tom saluted and departed, whereupon Oliver closed and locked the door.

“Now, sir,” said he, laying the needed medicaments to hand, “if you will allow me, I’ll try to make you a little more comfortable.”

“Might I first . . . a sip of . . . brandy?”

And presently Oliver, the best he might, began tending the many cuts and abrasions wrought by brutal hands and merciless feet, and his patient very submissive and dumb the while.

“You are nobly good, sir!” he murmured at last. “So kind to a stranger! Your hands gentle as a woman’s,—though no woman has dared venture near me these many years. . . . Ha, yes—yes! Cover my face, sir, bandage it well!

Hide it—hide it for me much as you may. . . . And I think it was yourself also saved me my life?”

“With the help of two good friends, sir.”

“Then accept my gratitude, it is most sincere and so deep, it goes far beyond poor words. . . . Who serves or . . . harms me I never forget,—ah but never—no! . . . I now, of your great kindness, sir, beg one more bandage, if I may—just one more! Leave only my eyes to show, for these are yet as kindly Nature made them, all that remains of my vanished, so great beauty.”

So Oliver bandaged him from chin to brow, to his comfort and Oliver’s own wonderment for now,—his scars thus hidden,—the oval contour of his face, lit by these wonderfully luminous eyes, showed some pitiful glimpse of the exotic beauty that once had been.

His hurts thus soothed and comforted, revived by the potent spirit, this stranger now lay back on his pillows, looking at Oliver with such fixed intensity that, meeting this close regard, Oliver felt vaguely disquieted; for in this eloquent look, in these soft, dark eyes almost feminine in their beauty and rapid change of expression, he thought to read a passionate gratitude giving place to awed wonderment and then to such impish mockery that Oliver almost expected to hear the stranger laugh; instead, he spoke:

“You have never seen me before?”

“No,” answered Oliver, thoughtfully. “No!”

“And yet,—may the Good God, if there be one, bless you for it,—you can use me like friend beloved! Oho, a strange world this! A joke, a bitter jest, this life of ours! . . . So now, my friend, for your care of me I am your friend the most devoted. I do not ask your name, I do not tell you mine,—still am I your grateful friend to serve you if so I ever may. Also, before I steal away into the dark to hide me in the kindly night like the thing of night I am, I shall recount to you the tale of my . . . calamity, something of the reasons, the wherefore and the why you behold me the monster that I am—”

“Sir,” said Oliver, rather hastily, “should it any way pain you, I beg not to hear.”

“Pain me? But no—no! Pain is gone long since, only shame abides and . . . one other emotion. . . . Well, sir, it was many years ago for, notwithstanding my night-black hair, this erect, this so gracious youthful form, I am old enough to father you,—then was I young and of a god-like beauty, rich, a Corsican, nobly born and highly placed when first we met,—he that was foredoomed to be my hated enemy and I—that am to be his

unrelenting Nemesis. . . . He feared and hated me from the first since, as I say, a beneficent Nature had dowered and blessed me with the bodily perfections of a young Antinous, so to his fear and hatred envy was added and I—scorned him. . . . There was, of course, the Woman, of a perfection surpassing, and she, alas, his wife! He became absurdly jealous. I laughed. He deemed I had wronged him in her love, still I laughed. His lady wife fled from him at last . . . to me? Ah no, but he so thought, blind fool, and so I let him think. He wrote accusing me. I made no denial, only I laughed the more. One day it chanced we met again and alone, and presently with our walking-swords we fought—ah, with what fury! Alone, unseconded, without witnesses like madmen we fought,—though he was cold, ah—cold as ice! Once I wounded him and cried: ‘Enough!’ He grew but fiercer. . . . Twice I wounded him and bade him ‘go with life!’ But he was cold,—a thing of ice! . . . And then . . . ah my friend . . . I was bleeding! I was down! I was beneath his foot! I was disarmed, helpless, weak with loss of blood, while from his eyes a devil looked down on me. . . . I pleaded for life . . . and merciless, dumb, this devil smiled down on me . . . I begged then for death . . . this devil laughed and . . . carved me with his merciless steel . . . made me the sexless horror that I am, this thing, this monster of dread and shame! But . . . he left me life, useless but to one purpose and for this single purpose I cherished life and—exist! . . . Now, good friend, what think you of such enemy as he?”

“A devil!” muttered Oliver, between stiff lips, “a very devil . . . as you say!”

“True, my friend, most true—a fiend of hell is he. And yet—a man to suffer in mind and body . . . a man to die when I deem he has suffered a little, ah—a very little of what he has made me endure! The Wheel of Life is turning, slow and remorseless, turning ever, and when it shall come full circle then shall he . . . die.”

“Die?” repeated Oliver, starting. “But if . . . when your enemy is dead—how then?”

“Joy, dear my friend! Rapture and deep content, for then shall I also die,—hiding the useless shame of me in the kindly earth where this my poor, blemished, most hateful body shall rise and bloom again and yet again in the vivid beauty of flower and tree! Death for mine enemy and translation for me. For this have I lived, schemed, suffered and wrought. . . . The Wheel is turning! . . . And now, my friend, your hand in friendship, your strong, young arm to guide me forth to my good friend the darkness—unseen. And,

sir, I shall go bearing with me this memory of your gentle kindness, 'tis memory shall endure. Come!”

And thus, supporting this stranger's weakness with his sturdy might, Oliver brought him down the stair, unseen, and out into a windless, brooding night. Now seeing the stranger so feeble, so lost and profoundly desolate, Oliver clasped his arm the closer.

“Sir,” said he, “ 'tis very dark and you but hardly recovered, in no fit state to front the dangers of these grim streets alone. I'll go with you, or better—hire a carriage—” The words died on his lip as the stranger, freeing his arm suddenly, laughed, soft yet very joyously, his dim-seen form appeared to dilate, his luminous eyes, catching some earthly ray or beam from distant star, seemed to glow and his voice came sweetly resonant.

“Oh, blessed Night! Sweet time of dreadful darkness when all save things most frightful are asleep! Ha, friend,—'tis then I wake, I live, I am a man again,—one with bats and owls, with things that creep unseen, with fearful dreams and—the winking, everlasting stars! Therefore, dear my friend, trouble not for me and so—farewell!”

CHAPTER XXVIII

EXPLAINS ONE OF THE REASONS FOR SNUFF

“YOU may possibly have noticed,” sighed Inigo Drake, showering snuff over himself and the battered, rusty burgonet he had been tinkering. “I say, you may have observed that on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, Oliver, my dear fellow, I am low, distinctly and deplorably low in spirits?”

“Indeed,” began Oliver, then paused to set down the fluted pauldron that had engaged him and sneeze, for, being seated at the armourer’s bench close beside Mr. Drake, he received much of this flying snuff.

“Ah, then you have noticed this, Oliver?”

“I think,” answered Oliver from behind his handkerchief, “that on those days you—dispense more snuff than usual.”

“Snuff?” sighed Mr. Drake. “Ah!” Having said which, he became so extremely low that laying down his pliers he bowed head in hands, thereby smearing his care-lined brow with rust.

They had been mending and furbishing a sadly neglected but splendid suit of Maximilian armour, but now they sat looking at each other, or rather Oliver looked at Inigo who gazed in mournful abstraction at the littered work bench.

“Oliver,” he sighed, “it is on the stroke of four, and with the hour there will appear a sniffing, slip-shod, vastly unlovely creature bearing our tea,—thick bread and butter and swill—”

“If you mean your housekeeper Mrs. Murcher—”

“Who else, Oliver, who else? When she obtrudes upon my shocked and unwilling vision I can but marvel at the temerity, the extraordinary hardihood of the man who married her—abhorrent thought! Nor is she anyway useful, she cannot cook and I am necessitated to do my own house-cleaning,—yet is she forever clashing pans remorselessly or clattering crockery at unexpected intervals to the persistent guttural chant or intoning of sacred airs,—hymns, Oliver, that never seem to end, in a voice that is excuse for suicide!”

“Then why not rid yourself of her?” enquired Oliver, hiding a smile.

“Because she would starve—at my door, at least her death would be, for who else in this whole, wide world would ever employ her,—who but I? . . . And now, my dear fellow, let us contemplate a prospect the very opposite.

Suppose I am alone here and there enters to me, instead of the Murcher, a shape of vivid life and loveliness to waft me with her into dainty parlour there to sip tea from exquisite porcelain rather than gulp stuff from cracked mug of Delft. . . . A sweet and gentle companion to chat over the day's events or . . . perhaps to . . . 'leave a kiss within the cup' as saith 'rare Ben',—or perhaps upon . . . one's lips . . . soft arms to cling! A home, a nest, a haven bright with her loving face,—the sweet, brave woman's face of . . . I dare to think you can guess of—whom?"

"Yes, Inigo, I dare to think I can."

"Ten years, Oliver! Ten years of such unselfish doing that they have made her but the more lovely and lovable."

"Have you never . . . spoken . . . asked her, Inigo?"

"Oh yes,—hence the damned snuff!"

"But, Inigo, what in the world—"

"Everything, Oliver! I use the vile stuff as a counter irritant. When yearning becomes too intense for calm endurance, when the 'might have been' rises before me too vividly, when heart pounds, senses reel and sight dims—I snuff, and in the tingling discomfort find a brief surcease."

"Am I to understand she refused you, Inigo?"

"No, Oliver, not exactly. She did and she did not. . . ." Here Inigo started and recoiled to a long-drawn, dolorous sniff; thereafter was the flip-flop of loose slippers, and to them entered Mrs. Murcher,—tall, bony, in a limp mob-cap perched as by chance upon a small, hard knob of hair above a visage stern with an unrelenting woe,—in large, mittened hands she grasped an iron tray whence a battered teapot flanked grimly by mugs backed resolutely by slices of bread and butter—cut thick and spread thin, seemed to challenge them.

"Ya tay's usual, sir, right on the blessed tick!" said Mrs. Murcher in tone reminiscent of wind and knotholes. "Honly there ain't no loaf sugar so I've give ye brown, an' t'other pot's gorn an' broke itself agin the pump, sir, very determined an' all to pieces I declare! An' for wot you're 'bout to receive the good Lord be 'umbly thanked, an' Gord bless it to ye both, hay-men! An' thankee Mr. Dale, sir, I'm sure from the bottom o' me pore, throbbin' 'eart, sir, for them nice noo 'ankerchers, reel linen too, an' I'm needin' a noo pudden-cloth. An' should ye require hanythink more, gen'lemen, 'ammer on the hanvil if ye'll be so good an' I'll hanswer hinstant,—though me lumbager's crool bad, but 'tis the Lord's will an' oncomplainin' I endoors."

An' the butter's been an' used itself all up, but there's plenty o' nice dripping, sirs, beef an' mutting. Oh deary me, ho lor!" So saying, Mrs. Murcher bobbed a curtsy and slip-slopped away.

"A . . . pudding-cloth!" murmured Inigo, and shuddered; Oliver, taking a sip of tea, chuckled and choked. So sat they, in their grimy aprons, among their tools and the rust of ancient iron and steel, eating and drinking heartily, like the workmen they were.

"Ten years ago," sighed Inigo, "I spoke . . . and tenderly, sweetly, like the woman she was and is, she answered me: 'Dear Inigo, my heart'—or 'my love', I have never been quite certain which it was, Oliver, 'my heart' or 'my love lies a thousand fathoms deep with the shattered bones of my hero, my Alfred! Let us speak of love no more, dear Inigo.' And, Oliver, we never have. Alfred was one of Nelson's officers killed at Trafalgar and buried at sea . . . ah, but his shattered bones have lain between myself and happiness ever since. . . . Yet every week, my dear fellow, rain or shine, I go to look on her, to hear her voice . . . on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays!"

"And to-day is Monday, Inigo!"

"And we exceeding grimy, my dear fellow! To-day has been a rusty day . . . and by the way, Oliver, you possess the true craftsman's hand, light yet firm and sure, your work on this dinted pauldron pleases me. But no more work,—come let us wash and make ourselves presentable . . . for that sweet presence, that dainty home I may never call mine own . . .!" Here, while Inigo fumbled for his snuff-box, Oliver rose.

And after some while forth into the busy streets they went, master and man, but talking intimately together like the good friends they had become.

"Ten years is a long time!" said youthful Oliver.

"And yet—how quick to pass!" sighed middle-aged Inigo.

"It seems ridiculous," said Oliver, "and most unreasonable that Saphronia should so cherish a memory, a vague dream,—a ghost, when life calls."

"Yet 'tis Saphronia's will, Oliver, and so I strive to make it mine. And yet again, but for her money I might have carried her off . . . married her. . . ."

"And why not, Inigo, she would prove such tender wife, and perhaps—mother."

“Don’t!” groaned Inigo, and wrenching out his snuff-box, had instant recourse thereto; after this they were silent some time until at last—said Inigo, almost whispering:

“I . . . also love children, Oliver, and the thought that we, she and I might perhaps . . . but for certain bones—”

So went they in familiar confab though often pausing, amid these drab streets, for cheery word with the folk, to whom Inigo seemed kindly familiar, especially the children for whose behoof and joy he carried small packets of sweetmeats which he slipped into little, eager, grimy hands with shyly furtive gesture, leaving behind mumbling, nibbling, sucking joy.

They reached Lamb’s Alley at last, beyond which gleamed the river, to hear an excited hubbub and see a small crowd of folk who shouted encouragement, who stared and pointed in the one direction—at an object bobbing above the hungry ebb . . . the head of a man . . . the head of sturdy Tom swimming shorewards with long, powerful strokes and bearing something with him . . . a child’s body . . . a small, frail, drowned thing that hung so limply in his great arms as he staggered from sullen water through the clinging, sucking ooze; and the crowd’s many voices now vociferous:

“Oo is it this time, Tom? . . . Lemme ’elp ye, matey! . . . Gimme yer arm, guv’nor!”

But, mute and unheeding, Tom strode on, gazing down with the speculating eye of much experience at the small, pale, still face pillowed upon his wide breast; at sight of which little thin features, Oliver’s sudden, fearful anxiety gave place to an impersonal pity for he saw this the face of a boy.

“Oo, blind me!” shrilled a ragged urchin, nearby, hopping excitedly. “Blin’ me if it ain’t little Snod!”

They followed dripping Tom within doors to the spacious, stone-flagged kitchen where, Miss Saphronia being summoned, all was instant and purposeful bustle while Tom began to work on the little, inanimate body.

“Hot blankets, Jemima! . . . Will he live, Tom? . . . Hot water, Mary, and plenty of it! A brick, Anne,—heat a brick for his poor, little feet! . . . Oh Tom, can he live?”

“Commodore,” answered Tom, still hard at work, “this lays atwixt me and you and the Lord, Marm. ’Tis a case o’ never say die!”

“Then I won’t, Tom, I won’t . . . I’ll pray!”

So, while Tom laboured and wrought as only Tom could, Saphronia knelt close by, hands folded and head bowed in silent though earnest supplication, perceiving which, down knelt her four maids also, watching their mistress reverently askance and waiting for that moment when Tom should call them to aid him or announce his efforts vain.

Then silently Oliver left that hushed and reverent company and thus presently found himself side by side with Inigo in Lamb's Alley quite deserted now, for the crowd, used to such incidents, had melted away.

"If ever," murmured Inigo, staring away beyond the wide, darkening river, "if ever there was sweet and holy angel in human shape we've seen her now. . . . And, oh Oliver, to think that but for certain—sea-bleached bones . . . ha, damnation!" And, turning abruptly, he departed in a cloud of snuff.

CHAPTER XXIX

CONCERNING THE BONES OF A HERO

TO-DAY being neither Monday, Wednesday, nor Friday, Oliver walked homewards alone; but, moved by an ever-present anxiety, turned aside from his usual course and, after divers and sundry enquiries, found his way into a somewhat dingy building and was directed to a certain dingy door which opening to his knock, admitted him to a small, much dingier office that seemed completely filled by a very tall desk, two extremely hard-looking chairs and one large man straddling a small, empty firegrate,—a vastly placid, extremely leisured man of unshakeable urbanity who, having duly pondered Oliver's question, bowed him to the chair, straddled his large, booted legs a little wider, pulled down his scarlet waistcoat, smoothed his trim whiskers pensively and finally made answer:

“Mr. Shrig, sir, being habsent and busy, very much so indeed, what can I do for you?”

“Men,” said Oliver, “I want three or four to keep watch about Sir Everard Matravers' house in St. James's Square.”

“Ha!” quoth the officer, stooping to examine the blunt toes of his dusty boots with appearance of extreme interest, “You require three or four men, sir, I understand, which may mean six or seven, to fore-go their hown particular dooties to keep a observation upon one only domi-ceel, in a square, Saint James's, which is reg'larly and dooly patrolled by an officer, according to standing orders, night and day, sir—day, sir, and night!”

“These extra men,” continued Oliver, “are needed because the life of this gentleman is in danger,—as indeed Mr. Shrig himself may have warned you.”

“Well—no, sir—no. Mr. Shrig being in charge of one department, d'ye see, and myself of another, we keep ourselves to ourselves and general routine, sir. Thus, sir, or I might say—'ence, this matter being in Mr. Shrig's department and himself habsent, sir, the matter, d'ye see, must wait until—”

“But, man, I tell you this is possibly a matter of life and death!”

“Possibly—ah! And, sir, if I was to tell you the many folk as come here and all in matter o' life and death, I should as-tonish you, I should indeed! And your case, sir, must nat'rally wait for Jarsper Shrig to 'andle it, d'ye see?”

“No, I don’t!” retorted Oliver, hotly. “Sir Everard has already suffered one vicious attack—”

“Eh? Attack, sir? Come, come—that’s better! Assault and battery, sir, intent to maim and kill’s our meat. Just relate the partic’lars in few words as possible, if you please,—now sir!” And out came notebook and pencil. “Was said assault committed on plaintiff’s premises, sir, the ’ouse, the ’ome? If so then ’tis likewise a case of breaking and entering—”

“It happened in the street—”

“Ah!” sighed the officer, his interest languishing, “that’s different, sir, that’s ve-ry different indeed. We can’t be ’olden responsible for what takes place or trans-pires in the open streets of this here himmense metropolis.”

“When will Mr. Shrig return?”

“Can’t say, I’m sure, sir. He may be at ’and this moment or, again, ’e may be an ’undred miles ’tother side o’ nowhere,—there’s no telling with Jarsper Shrig, a most extremely zealous officer, sir. But pray leave your name and address and you shall ’ear from same the very moment ’e returns.”

So home went Oliver, to arrive in a thoughtful gloom sweetly dispelled by Clia’s eager kisses, the fond clasp of her small arms and Miss Saphronia’s bright welcome.

“He is,” said Miss Saphronia, pouring out that inter-meal cup of tea she insisted on having ready for him (and drinking with him) the moment Oliver returned from work, “a perfect little monster!”

“Who?” enquired Oliver, sipping joyously.

“The child. I mean little Arthur, of course.”

“Oh?” enquired Oliver. “But who in the world—”

“That—boy! The small, snubby-nosed fiend who calls himself . . . Snod! Horrid appellation! He is, my dear Noll, a perfectly dreadful imp! So blasphemous! Such odious—oathing! Such—other language—oh my!”

“I’m glad to know he’s so well recovered, Saphronia.”

“Of course, Noll. But—he is almost beyond even my powers! He respects nothing and nobody,—not me, not even Tom, and of God he has not the remotest idea, poor little creature. He endeavoured most earnestly to bite Tom to-day when Tom bathed him. He’s totally ignorant, amazingly sharp-witted, a vile-tongued, precocious little savage! And so fierce! Such blood-curdling threats, oh—diabolical. This very morning he threatened to take his

—something—eye out and throw it at me, also to tear his arm out and beat me with it,—so ghastly! And whenever I called him ‘Arthur’ he hoots at me.”

“Hum!” quoth Oliver, hiding a smile. “‘Arthur’ doesn’t strike me as altogether a suitable name for such truly fiendly urchin.”

“ ’Tis beautiful name, Oliver, and ever to me suggested tenderness.”

“Exactly!” nodded Oliver. “That’s what I mean. But how do you propose to cope with him, my dear?”

“I don’t, Noll, and shan’t, because ’tis done,—he’s being ‘coped-with’ now,—by Clia, bless her sweet loveliness! Oh, Noll, it is truly wonderful,—no sooner does he behold her than his fierce eyes grow gentle, his vile little tongue hushed, his hard, bitter little mouth smiles, and he becomes almost the sweet child God meant him to be. . . . Ah me, what he must have suffered, I can guess, poor lamb . . . and when he sleeps he shows like a little angel of heaven despite his snubby little nose. . . . And—he even suffers her, Clia I mean, to call him ‘Arthur’! She’s with him now reading to him from that book of fairy tales you brought her, reading the short words and spelling the long, dear little soul,—she so earnest to interest him and he so politely attentive! Oh, children can be such sweet and blessed things—treasures, I mean. Come, let’s steal a peep at them. . . .”

Propped up in bed sits the fiendly urchin though at present showing more like a wan and too thin cherub, for his shaggy hair shows trimmed and glossy, his grime quite vanished, his too experienced eyes have lost their leering evil and are dreamily intent, his hard little mouth has softened to a half-smile as he looks at and listens to the small, feminine, extremely dainty person who sits reading aloud so laboriously but in tone so sweetly cultured. . . .

“Stop a bit, will yer?”

“Yes, only you must say ‘please’!”

“Awright—please, then! So now wait a bit.”

“Don’t you like me t’read to you, Arthur?”

“No, I don’t, only I likes you, see. An’ wot’s a fairy?”

“Well, I can’t ’xactly say. I can only feel, but I think all good fairies must be like teeny angels an’ fly into your dreams wiv bee-ootiful butterfly wings.”

“Not my dreams they don’t—no! When I dreams bad it’s dogs bitin’ me or coves chasin’ me wiv choppers, when I dreams good it’s puddens an’ cakes an’ sassengers ’ot an’ fried fish wi’ taties, but sassengers is bestest—d’yoo like sassengers? An’ don’t call me—Ar-thur!”

“I . . . I don’t know, Arth—boy!”

“Coo! You don’t know nothin’. . . . Lumme there’s the ol’ Missis! But . . . oo’s ’im wiv ’er?”

“Only my Oliver.”

“’Tain’t—no, it’s—it’s ’im as I nigh got nobbled come for t’ trounce me. Blin’ me, it’s you, Squire! I knows ye . . . don’t ’it me too ’ard, me lord!” And he cowered down beneath upflung elbow. “Oh, little un . . . Missis, don’t let ’im belt me too ’ard . . . not till I’m able t’ run! Gimme a chanct, Squire.”

“Why should I hit you, boy?”

“Aw—you knows! An’ don’t come no nearer else I’ll spit in y’ eye.”

“Hush, Arthur, hush now!” said Miss Saphronia, smoothing tumbled pillows and patting his curly head. “Nobody shall hurt you, child,—hush now.”

“Well, mak ’im lemme alone, ’e wants t’ clout me, I know ’e do. . . .”

“No no,” said Oliver.

“See this wet, see this dry, cross yer froat, ’ope ye may die! On y’r perishin’ oath?”

“Yes!” Oliver answered. “I’ve come to pay the shilling I promised.”

“So,” said Miss Saphronia, “you’ve met before?”

“We have!” nodded Oliver, and laid a shilling upon the bed. The urchin stared at it, clutched it, glared up at Oliver, looked at little Clia, who at gesture from Miss Saphronia followed her softly from the room, unperceived by the boy, who now was staring up at Oliver again; then his clutching hand opened, the shilling fell.

“Don’ want it!” he muttered, and pushed the coin from him with one thin finger.

“Boy, why not?”

“Cos—aw, you knows!” answered the urchin cowering again in guilty expectation of blows. But Oliver’s long arm clasped this little, shrinking form, Oliver’s fingers thrust the coin back into this small, eager hand; and the wild, young spirit, sensing a kindness, a fellowship all unknown till now, was tamed awhile, for butting his head closer beneath this comforting arm the boy whispered:

“Now I’m . . . agoin’ t’ blub,—don’t let the little un see, send ’er away!”

“She’s gone. And don’t be ashamed of crying, old fellow, only real men can cry such tears. . . . There, now let’s wipe them away . . . and let this shilling make us friends, we ought to have a hole bored in it and hang it round your neck.”

“I . . . didn’t fink as there was coves like you, Squire, blow me tight if I did . . . ’cept Bill!”

“Who was he?”

“A good un, only ’e got scragged an’ they ’ung ’im in irons on Kennin’ton Common. I useter go an’ look at ’im sometimes, but ’e didn’t look like ’isself in them irons,—but ’e was a good un—kind t’ me, Bill was. An’, Squire, if I says ‘please’ to yer very ’ard will ye please don’t call me—Arfur! Me name’s Snod, so call me Snod, will ye?”

“Well, no, let’s find you a better name. . . . See now, boy, how would Bob do, or Robin? Yes, you shall be Robin.”

“Mak’ it ‘Will’, then, Squire, it sounds summat like Bill, an’ ’e were a right good un!”

“No, you are Robin, Robin Goodfellow, and I hope you will be—and here, I think, is your supper.”

“Some nice bread and milk!” cooed Jemima, entering at this moment with dainty tray.

“But why can’t I ’ave a sassenger, or tripe, or a pig’s trotter?”

“We’ll see about it, Robin, when you’re well again. Now eat what’s here, like a good fellow.”

“A’ right, Squire . . . only, will the Missis let the Little Un come back t’ me? I likes ’er ’air. I got ’old of it ’s arternoon while she was readin’ an’ she didn’t know. So will she come back if I bee-’ave an’ say ‘please’—will she?”

“I think so.”

“Then ’op off, Squire, an’ send ’er.”

So forthwith Oliver “hopped.”

“There’s lots of good in that boy, Saphronia,” said he when Clia had sped lightly away, the precious fairy-book clasped to her bosom, “yes, there’s hope for your small fiend.”

“Of course, Noll! There is hope for all of us or this world would be a—
What is it, Anne?”

“A letter for you, please, mem.”

“Thank you, child! Oh, Anne, tell Jemima to bake a custard—a large one with plenty of sugar for the children.”

Then Saphronia took up her letter, murmured an apology, broke the seal, glanced at the first line, screamed faintly and dropping it as if it had stung her, stared down at it wide-eyed.

“Not bad news I hope, my dear?” said Oliver, picking it up for her.

“No—yes! No—oh, I don’t know!” she answered breathlessly, one hand upon her agitated bosom, the letter shaking in her other; she read it through swiftly and gasped dumbly, she read it again more slowly, and staring at Oliver with look almost fearful, exclaimed:

“Oh my Gracious! Oh Goodness! Oh Goodness Gracious me! Oh, Oliver, whatever shall I do? Oh, Noll, Noll, I . . . Oh read it . . . read it aloud!”

So Oliver took this letter, written in large, nourishing hand, glanced at it, frowned and read as desired:

“‘My own and ever loved Saphronia, when your oft-remembered sweet eyes read these lines, your love, thine Alfred will be flying to thine arms, oh happy thought! Yes, my beloved, after all these weary years of suffering and travail by land and sea, of search, heartbreak and hope deferred, thine own Alfred has at last traced thy beloved whereabouts, and is speeding fast as sail and wheel can bring him, back to the precious haven of thine arms to make thee his own at last and forever. This from thy long lost but ever faithful and devoted—Alfred Ray (late Capt. R.N.).’ ”

“Oh, Noll . . . Oliver . . . such letter! What am I to do?”

“Burn it, Saphronia! Tear it up!”

Instead she snatched it to the still tempestuous haven of her bosom.

“I gave him my word, Oliver! I pledged him my troth!”

“Ten years ago, Saphronia!”

“A sacred pledge is no less binding, my dear boy. Mine is,—ah mine must and shall be!” Here she gazed down at this letter with eyes that seemed even brighter and yet quicker than usual, for she demanded instantly:

“Why such frown, Oliver?”

“I was thinking of . . . poor Inigo.”

“Him!” she murmured, sighing also. “But why of him? And why—poor? No, don’t tell me! Don’t answer, I forbid! Instead tell me what you think of . . . my poor Alfred’s letter?”

“Fulsome, Saphronia, and doesn’t ring true.”

“Oh—Noll! My dear, how can you? Fulsome indeed! Alfred was ever and always so . . . so tender! So . . . sweetly affectionate! So handsome in his uniform . . . epaulettes and cocked hat . . . so gallant!”

“And Inigo is so shabby, Saphronia, yet such a man, such true and kindly gentleman, and therefore so nobly humble he could never have scribbled such letter as—that!”

“Pray, Oliver, remember this letter was written by . . . the hero of my dreams, the hero I thought dead—whose shattered bones lay—”

“A thousand fathoms deep!” said Oliver, grimly.

“Gracious!” she exclaimed. “The very words I was about to utter!”

“Instead of which,” Oliver pursued, “these bones are bringing themselves here—whole and sound! Which raises the question,—what have they been doing with themselves all these years?”

“Oliver—! Oh—! Do not—blaspheme!”

“And, Saphronia, how long has he known you are not the poor, underpaid governess—for you were beyond price—he left you, but an heiress whose wealth, marriage will make his own . . . while our Inigo—God bless his strong, gentle soul—but for this same wealth”—Oliver paused, somewhat astonished by his unwonted eloquence, while Saphronia, seeming to fondle her letter, sighed over it and murmured at last:

“Well, my dear, what of—Mr. Drake?”

“Would have carried you off perforce and married you years ago, but for your money.”

“Oh! How can you say such thing? My word! Gracious me! How dare you?”

“Because it’s true.”

“Carried off indeed! Gracious! How do you know this true? And—so shocking! So—indelicate!”

“He told me so.”

Now at this, Saphronia laughed oddly, then instantly sobbed wildly and was gone, slamming the door after her,—all of which was so extremely unusual in such sedate and decorous person that Oliver stared after her in no little perturbation, and was about to hasten in quest of her when she as suddenly reappeared, that is to say she peeped round the door to murmur:

“I’m going to bed. Goodnight . . . dearest Noll.”

CHAPTER XXX

TELLS OF A RED SUNSET

At precisely a quarter to eight Oliver turned into that stateliest of squares, called St. James's with its noble houses, lofty, wide-fronted, pillared or porticoed, looking down so majestically upon the spacious, thick-planted garden in their midst, shut from the vulgar by tall, forbidding palisades of iron; a cloistered, green oasis for the sole delectation of the residents—these magnificently elect, none of whom were ever known to enter therein.

Having time to spare, Oliver paused to look upon this green seclusion (as he had often done when a boy) to see, then as now, throned on high-pacing steed the effigy of King William, third of the name, looking, despite great periwig, extremely Roman by reason of his costume and his nose; or so thought Oliver. Roused by impudent clatter of hoofs and wheels, he glanced up—to see a hackney-coach lumbering towards him at unusual pace, it swerved towards him, stopped with jolt and jingle, the door opened and down stepped a somewhat dusty and haggard Roland who, tossing his jehu the fare, came hobbling wearily on tasselled cane.

“Don't look so goggle-eyed, you ass!” he exclaimed, smiling rather wanly. “I've not been 'out,' it's neither steel nor lead, nothing so dashed romantic, no more than a confounded blistered heel, with a curse! I'll sit down!” Which he did forthwith on the curb of the railings, having first fanned away the dust with his hat.

“And—no luck, Roly?”

“Devil a bit, Noll! On my dam pins, my infernal trotters, all this day from eight o'clock this morning till an hour ago and—not a sign! And how am I to walk to-morrow with this accursed heel?”

“Don't. Have my Dobbin.”

“Kind of you, but no go. I could never get your lumbering elephant down the narrow, frightful lanes and alleys I mean to search to-morrow. For, Noll, I've a dismal, ghastly feeling she's destitute . . . in want . . . starving in some fearful hole.”

“No!” said Oliver.

“Eh? Now what the devil d'you mean by 'No'? Why 'No,' confound you?”

“Because I don’t think she is of such heroic and foolish resolution as to endure such misery so needlessly.”

“Well I do!” groaned Roland. “Yes, by heavens, I do! When I picture that little, dimpled resolute, dashed adorably kissable chin I am only too frightfully certain and miserable.”

“And, Roly, when I remember her lips . . . that beautiful mouth all tender, lovely curves, I am comforted to think that before permitting herself to suffer any harm or pain or evil she will fly back to comfortable safety like the sweetly feminine creature she truly is.”

“Gad, I hope so, Noll! Let me die but I most devoutly hope you are right . . . though I’m horridly afraid she is so proud and determined that she’ll endure to the uttermost—my God—like the wonderful, splendid heroine I believe she is. . . . Oh, let’s move, I can’t sit still! Let’s take a turn round the old square and dam my heel! Lend me your arm. D’ye remember climbing these very railings—in our night-shirts, Noll, to play robbers in the bushes, aha, and pelting Old Hook Nose on his horse there? B’Gad, what imps we were! We ended the night’s adventures by fighting each other, as per usual.”

“I made your nose bleed, Roly.”

“And wiped it on your night-shirt after I’d blacked your eye . . . aha, and Miss Saphronia’s dignified horror in the morning! She was new then and unused to us, but she managed us, small devils though we were, ruled us with a rod of iron—”

“Sheathed in velvet, Roly!”

“How is she, by the way?”

“Blooming, Roly, the years have been kind to her. And she deserves it, God bless her!”

“And Little Clia, does she flourish?”

“Amazingly, Roly. Can read already, very nearly, and speaks so prettily, such dignified little soul,—but Saphronia could teach manners to a gatepost.”

“Noll, d’you know is McGregor in town?”

“No,—but I hope so.”

“Yes, he always makes things easier twixt us an’ our Lord Paramount High and Mighty the Unk, always did,—prime soul, Greg! And have you seen or heard any more of the Nunkish Kinsman of late?”

“No.”

“I’ve been pondering, Noll, what you could have meant by dangers threatening him and so on. It seems so dam ridiculous, so utterly preposterous that any earthly peril could anyways have the sublime, dashed audacity to affect our Magnificent Olympian.”

“Exactly!” nodded Oliver. “It should be no common danger, no ordinary peril for such as he, but rather some monstrous evil. . . . And . . . Roland, I fear it is!”

“Great Jupiter, Noll—what?”

“We shall probably learn soon enough . . . it is now on the stroke of eight and there’s the house!”

“Yes—there it is, dammit!” said Roland, halting to shake his cane at it. “Look at the curst thing staring us out of countenance with its every dashed window, trying to shrivel us with awe as it used to do when we were two devilish grubby, dashed self-conscious little urchins! D’you remember how the great doors seemed to yawn at us, the pictures glare at us, the dam furniture creak and crack at us when we were in bed and the candles out—”

“Wheesht!” cried a voice behind them. “And ’tis ye’sel’s, m’ dears,—and tae the vera meenute!” Turning, they beheld Gregor McGregor striding towards them, his lugubrious visage woeful as ever but his blue eyes glad and bright with welcome, a greeting that was returned so warmly that Gregor McGregor very nearly smiled.

“You expected us, then?”

“Ay, I did that, Noll. But whaur’s wrang wi’ the laddie’s wee leggie?” Roland made a playful pass at him with his cane.

“Hoot-toot!” he exclaimed. “ ’Tis nae mair than blistered heel, Greg, ma mannie. But what brings you so far from Abbeymead, old fellow?”

“Och,—juist business,” answered Gregor, lightly, though Oliver thought he showed even more careworn than ever, and his bright eyes more anxious as they glanced swiftly about them in manner that reminded him instantly of Jasper Shrig.

“And now,” demanded Roland, taking his arm, “how is the August Person, The Relative?”

“Himself, Roly, is always—himself!”

They ascended wide steps, ponderous knocker resounded, lofty door opened, obsequious footman bowed and stood aside, disclosing a weazened ancient of immaculate person who bobbed silvery head at them and smiled.

“What, Ben!” quoth Roland, reaching for the aged butler’s shy hand. “Are you still on your pins, Benny my lad?”

“As ever, Master Roland. The years pass, sir, the sands run, you and Master Oliver be gentlemen grown, yet I’m still here, sir, thanks to the Master! All my life have I been privileged to serve the Family and shall still serve to my last breath, thanks to Sir Everard’s goodness. Lord bless ’im!”

“And now, Benson,” said Gregor as the footman relieved them of hats and gloves, “present their compliments to Sir Everard and say his nephews are here.”

“But, sir,” answered the old butler, shaking hoary head, “the master is out.”

“Eh? Out?” repeated Gregor, in such tone that the aged servitor jumped and the young one stared. “Out, d’ye tell me,—out?”

“Indeed, Mr. McGregor sir, he departed very . . . hurriedly, sir.”

“But when, where—och, man Benson,—why?”

“Sir, there came a . . . a poor-seeming person with a letter which appeared to . . . well, somewhat unsettle the master.”

“Did he ride or take the carriage?”

“He . . . he went afoot, sir.”

“When?” enquired Oliver.

“It would be, sir, about an hour ago.”

“Who brought the letter, man or woman?”

“It was a lad, Mr. Oliver.”

“Och!” exclaimed Gregor, clenching bony fists. “Why was I no’ here? Did Sir Everard leave no worrud, no message for us?”

“Oh yes, Mr. McGregor, yes he did, sir—a note for Master Oliver, in the libraree, sir, if you please.”

To the library they hastened, to find this luxurious, book-lined chamber precise of general aspect as usual, each volume in place, every paper on the large desk neatly disposed . . . but the note addressed to Oliver upon the

floor beside an overturned chair that, asprawl thus amid such stately orderliness, found a dreadful eloquence that filled them with a growing apprehension.

“The note,” cried Roland, impatiently, “read it, man, read it aloud!” So, unfolding this loose sheet of paper, Oliver read out these words:

“‘Dear Nephew, I am gone suddenly to a call must be answered. Wait my return one hour. Should I not appear, come with Gregor to the Weir House.’”

“And here,” Oliver explained frowning anxiously at what he saw, “here the note ends abruptly and with an ink-splash as if the quill had fallen or been tossed aside very hastily!”

“The Weir House!” repeated Gregor, striding restlessly to and fro. “Now why there, by all that’s damnable?”

“What, you know the place, Greg, I suppose?” questioned Roland, sinking wearily into cushioned chair.

“Ay, fine I do that!”

“Where is it?” enquired Oliver, still frowning at the paper with its wavering scrawl so very unlike his uncle’s usually bold, firm script.

“’Tis part of Everard’s London property down by the river, a fine old mansion vera antique, but a’ shut in wi’ slums and wharves,—’twas let as storehouse and offices to a firm o’ wharfingers but is vacant this whiles while, but—”

“Vacant!” nodded Oliver, folding the note hastily and thrusting it into pocket. “The carriage, Gregor—will you order it or shall I?”

“Ay . . . but . . . ha, Noll—ye mean—?”

“The Weir House, at once, Greg!”

“Hold hard!” said Roland, sitting up. “In your note uncle distinctly bids us wait one hour—”

“However, I, for one, go this instant, Roly.”

“Oliver’s right!” quoth Gregor, tugging at the bellrope. “We’ll no bide another second!”

To the round-eyed footman Gregor issued such orders that very soon Sir Everard’s spacious travelling carriage was at the door, driven by his old

coachman, Jonas, who touched cockaded hat and smiled down upon the “young masters.” So in they got, but had gone only a short distance when Oliver pulled the check-string and they jolted to sudden halt.

“Eh?” exclaimed Gregor, glancing out of the window, “Doctor Fell? You think so, Noll?”

“Yes, he is uncle’s doctor and friend besides. Will you go for him or shall I?”

For answer Gregor opened the carriage door and alighted.

“Lord!” exclaimed Roland, “Is it . . . murder you suspect, Oliver? Is this the danger you feared?”

“Yes!” answered Oliver, glancing at his watch, “Twenty minutes past eight! He’s been gone almost an hour!”

“But, damme, Noll—what’s it all mean? What do you know. . . Who’d want to murder him?”

“I’m wondering, Roly, what could have been in that letter he received? What power on earth could induce him to take such dreadful risk?”

“He knew his life was threatened, then?”

“Yes.”

“Then why must he go to such murder hole?”

“Exactly! Why? And there’s Gregor—and with old Fell, thank God!” With the words, forth leapt Oliver to greet this small though portly doctor who had ministered to, and snorted over, his childish ailments, and who now snorted, nodded at him, clambered into the carriage, plumped his bag down on Roland’s unready knees, himself into the nearest corner, blew out his cheeks, scowled on McGregor and exclaimed:

“Curses!”

“Now, Jonas, for your master’s sake, drive fast!” said Oliver to the old coachman, and leaping into the carriage, slammed the door and away they went.

Though a fashionable practitioner and famous surgeon, Dr. Fell was a man of few words, particularly when work was to do; but, borne thus rapidly away and finding them all so silent, he questioned them in manner characteristic:

“What’s meaning of ’t?”

“Sir, we fear Sir Everard has met with some accident.”

“Ha, you fear? So I starve! Dragged from dinner! I say damn! Fuss and feathers!”

“We hope so, sir!”

“ ’Portant meal, dinner! I say curse! How far, Gregor?”

“Just beyond Blackfriars, Fell man.”

“ ’S miles! I say hell!”

But the horses were fresh and eager, the ways fairly clear and old Jonas, obedient to orders, drove with loose though cautious rein. Thus soon they were jolting and clattering along riverside streets until before them rose tall warehouses and factory buildings stark against a fiery sunset, so vivid that Dr. Fell must needs remark on it:

“Look yonder,—sky’s like flame!”

“Ay,” nodded Gregor, “or—blood!”

They swung down a narrow bye-street, they rumbled beneath a stone arch where rusting gates of cunning smiths’ work hung askew, and so into a desolate courtyard to draw up before a house of noble proportions but blackened by the smoke of centuries and woeful with neglect.

“Doghole!” snorted the doctor.

“Devilish!” nodded Roland.

“The old Weir House!” said Gregor.

“And the door’s open!” said Oliver.

They followed him into an echoing gloom of aged dinginess and dust and redolent of decay and slimy ooze from the river nearby; but as they went the gloom about them lightened to a rosy dusk for beyond broken and cobwebbed lattices the river flamed with sunset, which reflected glory, striking upward, showed something of richly moulded cornice, carved mantel and lofty frescoed ceilings.

From room to room they went, hushed and fearfully expectant now, until at last this ruddy glow, this unearthly light showed them that which, for a moment, halted them all four. . . . A huddled shape, a white head at their feet, a pale, set face prone amid the dust of grimy floor,—it revealed the graceless huddle of sprawled limbs, it twinkled like a red, malevolent eye in

the gold knob of that whose narrow blade, deep driven, was redder yet and with a more awful stain.

“God!” whispered the doctor and leapt to kneel beside and peer down at this pitiful thing that had been Sir Everard Matravets.

“Is he . . . Oh, Fell man, is he . . . deid?”

“Not yet. Bag. Stand back. This knife—ha!”

Dr. Fell, head acock, viewed the weapon’s angle of incision with professional interest, took from his bag a phial; pads and lint, then laid his plump, white hand on the dagger-haft. “Now!” said he. Oliver turned away; he heard the sudden hiss of Gregor’s indrawn breath, Roland’s stifled exclamation and glancing back again, saw the dagger, a red and ghastly thing, lying on the floor, and Dr. Fell’s quick, deft hands desperately busy.

And thus, once again, Oliver looked on helplessly while human skill wrought and battled against Death, and heard, yet again, the same awed and fearful words:

“Is he . . . still alive?”

“Yes.”

“Will he . . . can he live?”

“Don’ know. There! Done all possible here.”

“Can we move him, Fell?”

“Must. Perish here. Door or shutter’ll do.”

“Come, Noll, a shutter,—d’ye hear?” Together they wrenched one from its rusty hinges; they padded it with their coats: they stooped.

“Easy all!” said the doctor, closing his bag. “May die as we lift him. Must risk it. Gently . . . all together—now!”

Carefully they lifted this pallid, senseless thing, tenderly they bore it out into the air. . . .

And presently, slowly and very slowly now, in hushed and watchful silence, they drove back through the darkening streets; and all unseen, yet chilling them with his grisly presence, Death rode with them all the way.

CHAPTER XXXI

TELLS OF THOSE THAT WALKED UNSEEN

THE stately house in St. James's Square is more hushed and silent even than usual though all day and all night long it is become a place of sleepless vigil and tireless effort. A staff of nurses has been installed; doctors, surgeons and physicians are in daily attendance—four or five besides Fell himself,—and all specialists.

So by day and by night is a hushed stir; nurses go up and down the wide stair on soundless feet; surgeons and physicians move as silently but with a dignified authority, like the important persons they are; they exchange grave bows, they whisper together portentously in corners or behind closed doors, they hold murmurous consultations,—and all for the behoof of that pale, still form in the great bedchamber upstairs, this once-vigorous man who is neither alive nor dead.

And amid all this hushed doing, unseen by nurses, surgeons or physicians stands an ominous shape, peering up this wide stair, sometimes with the gentle eyes of a benevolent ancient whose flowing hair and beard are snow-white, and bearing a scythe, sometimes with the hollow sockets of a grinning skull; and, as the hours lengthen to days these shapes, that being two are yet one, begin to mount the stair towards that silent chamber where Sir Everard Matravers lies waiting for what is to be.

It was with some such thoughts in his troubled mind that Oliver sat at the desk in his uncle's library staring at the half-written letters before him which he now proceeded to finish, this:

“MY DEAR SAPHRONIA:

“It is kind and just like you to proffer your aid at such time, but even you could do nothing. I grieve to say, for the doctors,—and so many forever coming and going,—are agreed at last that Sir Everard is now beyond human aid, that it is but a matter of days or hours—all except old Fell, who pins his faith on my uncle's vigorous constitution and indomitable will, and maintains that if he would but rouse himself to make the necessary effort, he should probably recover. To this purpose Doctor Fell intends to wake him if possible from his lethargy in last desperate hope, to-night.

“Give my love and a kiss to my Clia. Also may your Hero (unshattered) prove all you have dreamed him through the years.

“These from your ever loving, grateful,

“OLIVER.

“In your prayers to-night remember one who lies so very near death.”

Having sealed his letter Oliver rang for the footman, but instead came old Benson, a woeful old man who sighed and shook white head, himself showing so frail and near death that Oliver, despite the old fellow’s protestations, insisted he should be seated.

“Ah, Master Oliver,” he groaned, “all these doctors and nurses and all to no purpose. . . . Master is dying, they say! I’ve known him all his days . . . such merry boy! Such gay and handsome gentleman . . . ’till he married, and so young! Ah, but she was beautiful . . . no two were ever happier . . . till she ran away from him with her baby. That changed him dreadfully,—to stone,—to ice. No more joy for him, no more friends, he saw nobody but Mr. McGregor. He closed the Château, we were living in France, Master Oliver, and sent me and his other English servants home. He took to travelling . . . we heard tell of a duel. When he came home at last I hardly knew him,—such terrible change! And now they tell me he’s dying,—oh but, Master Oliver, I tell you his poor heart died years ago! A live man with a dead heart! And now his body is dying too . . . to die at fifty-seven almost a boy compared with me? It don’t seem right, here’s me eighty-six, hale and hearty and himself to die at fifty-seven. Well, when he goes I’ll go too! Will you partake of tea here and now, sir?” But before Oliver might answer was a knock and the footman appeared to say, almost breathlessly:

“Doctor Fell, sir, desires you to walk upstairs, sir, the Master’s bedchamber, if you please.”

So up sped Oliver to that room whence he had been so rigorously excluded of late, to find Dr. Fell beside the great four-post bed looking down at his motionless patient beneath drawn brows.

“Ha!” snorted the doctor so loudly that the attendant nurse glared reproachfully. “Lookee! Won’t rouse, Noll, but we’ll make him, damme! Kill or cure,—specialists say ‘Kill’ but—mere specialists! Here’s more ’n a body involved,—soul, mind, ego, spirit,—no effort, willing to fly, hop, depart into void, infinite unknown. Word is: rouse ’n’ hold on! I’ve given strong restorative, affected him already! Blinked, opened eyes, shut ’em again, but respiration deeper, pulse stronger. Crisis t’night, between three ’n’ four, life or death, Noll! Now I’m called away, curses, but ’nother case as

desperate! Back again midnight sharp. Nurses here o' course but want you—watch, listen. Begin vigil eleven o'clock. Understand?"

"Yes," answered Oliver, looking down also at this pillowed face so long familiar but now so direly changed. "You think there's . . . a faint hope?"

"Always hope till buried. Constitution of a horse, Everard. Body mending, mind indifferent live or die—don't care a curse, needs inspiration. Nurse, small phial if necessary,—five drops! C'm on, Noll, downstairs, cup tea 'n' off." But despite the doctor's words, it seemed to Oliver that the dread shapes no eye might ever see were mounting slowly yet surely towards the door of that dim-lit, silent room.

CHAPTER XXXII

TELLS OF CRISIS

ELEVEN o'clock was chiming as Oliver softly opened the door of his uncle's spacious bedchamber, dim-lit by shaded candles, where sat a nurse busily knitting; at his entrance she started up, staring at him almost apprehensively he thought,—a tall, middle-aged woman who frowned, shook her head and spoke in harsh whisper.

"Excuse me, sir, but you can't come in, the doctors' orders, sir, being most strict, nobody is allowed here."

"Except myself," answered Oliver, closing the door behind him. "I am here by Doctor Fell's wish, as you should have been told." At this, the nurse let fall her knitting and stood at gaze, hand to mouth, biting at and worrying a finger, staring thus in manner so very odd that he stared back at her.

"I don't seem to know your face," said he, in his thoughtful way.

"No, sir, I . . . I came this afternoon . . . replacing another. . . ."

"Then be assured, I am Sir Everard's nephew and here, as I say, by Doctor Fell's expressed desire."

Speechlessly the nurse groped for her knitting while Oliver drew up a chair and sat down within reach of the great bed with its heavy, carved pilasters and voluminous silk curtains which had been drawn back so that he could see the head upon its pillows; the white hair, the thick, black brows, the long-lashed eyes half-shut, the arrogant line of nose and chin rendered even more so by the hollow gauntness of the whole face. . . . A man neither alive nor dead. . . . A senseless thing, inert, blind, deaf.

Now looking upon this once strong, handsome face, these waxen features ennobled, it seemed, by the great change that was soon perhaps to take place, Oliver wondered where now was the calmly-assured dominant soul . . . suddenly he started forward, breath in check, for these long lashes had flickered . . . the eyes were opening to stare up at the embroidered bed-canopy . . . then from pallid lips a faint whisper:

"I . . . want . . . her . . ."

"Yes, Uncle,—yes, sir, what is it?"

"I've . . . been seeking . . . her . . . so long . . . Bring her. . . ."

"Who, sir, whom do you want,—is it little Clia?"

“No . . . no . . . Rosamond. . . .”

“I would, sir, but who . . . who is Rosamond?”

A deep, shuddering sigh, the feeble movement of a thin hand, eyes that stared sightlessly . . . that closed.

“Good God!” Oliver gasped. “Nurse,—nurse is he . . . gone?”

“No, sir, ’tis the drops he needs.” Swiftly and very capably the restorative was administered and once again was silence save for the faint click of the nurse’s busy knitting-pins, while Oliver leaned beside the patient listening anxiously to his slow, deep breathing.

Thus sat Oliver oblivious of the slow-passing minutes, watching, listening and praying dumbly until he was roused by a soft tap and sound of the door opening.

“Is that you, doctor?” he whispered, eagerly.

“Here!” answered a soft voice so extremely unlike the staccato accents of Doctor Fell that he rose, peering,—and thus beheld the form of a tall man who stood, gazing back at him, a man this whose softly melodious tones struck him as vaguely familiar:

“Ah! Not alone, nurse? This is not well managed. However, you may leave us and see to it we are nowise interrupted.” Without word or look the nurse stumbled to her feet, sped from the room and the door was instantly closed and locked.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Oliver, rising. “Who are you, sir? And why do you lock the door?”

Instead of answering, the newcomer approached the bed, glanced down at its motionless occupant, then turned and looked at Oliver, showing a face that at first glance seemed strangely beautiful, smooth, youthful, aglow with health and framed by thick-curling night-black hair, yet a face that, as he gazed, struck Oliver with chill of growing horror for, though the large, dark eyes gleamed with vivid life, the surrounding features were utterly expressionless and dead, living eyes in the painted face of a corpse. And now these lips smiled and spoke:

“Strange it is that I find you here, dear friend, and yet perhaps as well. You do not know me in my mask, my face of gutta-percha,—no, my first was lost so I hid me in much black hair, this arrived from Germany but three days since, wonderful is it not? And so easily fixed or removed,—see now!”

A quick, deft gesture of shapely hands and Oliver was staring once again upon those frightfully mutilated features his hands had bathed and bandaged not so long ago. And this ghastly face was smiling on him as, coming nearer, the stranger lolled gracefully against the great, carved bed-post. Now in one hand he dangled the gutta-percha mask, but in the other he grasped a small pistol and its muzzle bore directly between Oliver's wide eyes.

"Yes, it is I," said the melodious voice, "the nurse, of course, is in my pay, so, my friend, I am here! Look again and shrink from this monstrous face and behold—here on this bed beside us, the master-craftsman who wrought it! Oliver Dale, for your kindness to me I love you—yes, but, my dear friend, move from that spot, utter one cry and I shall kill you and then, myself, for, after this night of triumph and farewell, I am done with this sickness called life. So pray rest quiet this little while and suffer I make good night to my enemy, nor fear I shall so much as lay finger on him—no! . . . See, he stirs at my voice! He wakes to my nearness,—he becomes aware of me . . . Aha—Everard, do you hear me? Come back from death for a while, a very little while and hear what I have to tell. Open your eyes, Everard, and look once more on your handiwork—look, I say!"

Slowly, slowly as if against their will or as moved by some power greater than his own the dying man lifted his heavy eyelids and looked . . . gazed up into the dreadful face that smiling down on him, spoke:

"You are dying, Everard,—dying by the hand of your own son and only child, your Eustace,—but 'twas I killed you—I! Also I would slay your soul as you slew mine. . . . To-night I end my life and you die,—perhaps we shall meet beyond death to hate and fight and die again and yet again until—who knows? . . . Well, Everard, I killed you by the hand of your wretched son, the child I snatched from you. He was wild and leapt to evil with little aid of mine, though I helped him, ah yes—for your sake. So to-day he is your murderer, a parricide, a drug-sodden wreck, to perish miserably when I am gone,—and this is very good! And you will die yearning to live,—and this is better. For life will become suddenly precious to you for sake of your wife, your Rosamond! By your son I slay your body, by your spotless, so immaculate wife I kill your soul—ha yes! For Everard, proud fool, she, the wife you spurned in your blindness and drove away, whose supplications you refused to hear, whose letters you returned unopened—is guiltless as holiest saint in heaven! Ah, this touches you to the soul at last,—for you know I speak but very truth on this the last night of my life! She was and is innocent, Everard. Think, now, think on all the wasted years! Your abiding misery of loneliness! Her sufferings and privation,—she has sometimes

lacked her bread, Everard, remember now her misery and heartbreak, and—all so needless, so utterly unjust! Think now on all this, Everard, look your last on my face and die—body and soul! . . . Good my friend Oliver, to this my enemy I leave remorse—a hell that is and shall be,—to you certain monies and my loving gratitude. When I am gone, comfort your sufferer here, but there shall no medicine cure his grief, no salve to ease the agony of his dying soul, these and my hate shall drag him out of life to deepest hell!—Die, Everard, grieving for your ruined son, your most wretched, heart-broken wife and your own wasted years!”

Speaking these last words, he backed to the door, to pause there a moment with hand upflung in gesture of threat or farewell, then, silently, was gone; and Oliver, like one dazed, staring at that softly-closed door until roused by a hoarse whispering:

“God . . . forgive . . . a fool! Bless her . . . forgive my . . . blindness . . . my cruel pride. . . . Oh bless her, Lord. . . .” Frail hands uplifted, eyes that held a glory, tears that fell unheeded. Oliver rose to lean above the bed and thus these radiant eyes were now looking up into his, the pallid lips were smiling.

“Oliver . . . you heard! I . . . must live . . . to kneel . . . implore her pardon . . . I must . . . live!”

“’S it!” said a voice in the doorway. “’S the word—’live’!” Then, to his mighty relief, Oliver found Doctor Fell beside him, quick, deft and laconic as usual:

“’S crisis, Noll. Where’s nurse? N’ matter, gimme bottle ’n’ glass. No, no—’tother. ’S crisis, help him turn corner. ‘Live’s’ the word. Now, Everard. . . !”

Hushed murmurs beyond the door that opened to show Benson the aged butler, a breathless shaken figure.

“Oh, Master Oliver . . . ! Oh Master, she . . . I couldn’t, ’tis her right . . . death or life. . . . She’s here! Shall I . . .”

A small, capable hand set the quavering old man gently aside and in to them came a woman who limped, slightly though noticeably, a woman below the average height and poorly clad, but whose shabby bonnet, back-thrown upon its strings, showed a haggard, strangely beautiful face lit by great eyes that saw only the head upon its pillows; a voice softly sweet and deep with ineffable tenderness:

“Everard . . . at last! . . . I knew Guido was coming and tried to be first, but was prevented. Yet God is kind and has sent me in time . . . you are alive and I am here. But . . . oh Everard, am I welcome . . . at last?”

She read her answer in his pleading eyes, the eager welcome of his feeble hands, it was in his broken whisper.

“Wife . . . Rosamond, I’ve been . . . seeking . . . dying for you.”

The wasted hands were clasped by others—small, work-roughed but very gentle.

“I dared not come to you, Everard, in your strength and pride . . . but now, oh now . . . if you want me—?”

“Now . . . yes . . . and forever . . . Rosamond!”

She was beside him on her knees, kissing, weeping, murmuring, her cherishing arms close about him.

“Is this . . . death . . . or fullness . . . of life . . . at last?”

“Life, if God is merciful. Oh—life, my Everard!”

Unheeded, unheard, Oliver stole away, leaving them to each other; and presently found Doctor Fell beside him again.

“Yon’s his medicine, Noll,—better’n all dam’ drugs in pharmacoepia! ’S go find cup tea.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

DESCRIBES THE ADVENT OF A YOUNG PERSON

DEATH, that Ancient Reaper, having sharpened his scythe in vain, and being aware of it, had betaken himself and grisly companion beyond farthest horizons,—or so it seemed to Oliver, for with every day and hour Sir Everard grew stronger.

Thus, his anxiety relieved, Oliver sat in the slumberous quiet of a certain afternoon to write this good news to Saphronia and send love messages for Clia whom he was missing more and more of late. But his pen had traced scarcely a line when the door opened and, glancing up, he rose to his feet.

“Mrs. . . . Lady Matravers . . .” She was still in her shabby attire, yet bore herself with a gracious dignity that seemed part of her.

“Yes . . . yes I am,” said she, closing the door softly and approaching him with her queer little hobble, “but it seems strange to hear such name after all these long years. But I am also . . . your aunt and would have you . . . call me so . . . if you will.” Gracefully she sank into the chair he proffered and looking up at him with her long eyes, so beautifully gentle and wise by experience, beckoned him nearer.

“You gave a good face, Oliver,” she murmured, “I liked it when you spoke to me in the street with such kindly respect. You have the gentle eyes that go with a fearless soul. . . . But you are so tall! Please to sit down beside me here, or better still, kneel . . . if you will . . . for I have something to tell you, something to ask you.”

Wondering, Oliver sank to his knees; and now beholding again the meek sadness of this lovely, tragic face, with its look of patient endurance, there swept over him a great surge of tenderness such as he might have felt for the mother he had never known; she seemed to feel this also, for, impulsively, yet with a shy timidity she reached one small, toil-roughened hand to touch his cheek, his brow, his curling, golden hair, and in her look now a yearning sadness far beyond tears.

“Oh, my dear,” she whispered, “my dear, you are such son as I might have gloried in! . . . And this . . . this brings me to what I have to say,—it is your Uncle Everard’s wish that you undertake a . . . a mission that will be very difficult and perhaps . . . dangerous!” Here she bowed head between her hands and was silent so long that at last he spoke, and softly as she:

“Pray what is it, my dear?” Now at this, she glanced up at him through slow-gathering tears,—then, before he knew, had caught his hand to her lips and kissed it.

“It was so sweetly welcome,” she murmured, “for, oh I . . . I have starved for such kindness.”

“What would you have me do?” he asked her, looking down at the small hand now clasped between his own.

“Your uncle tells me you were in the room when he—Guido—came, and that you know our pitiful story, and how . . . it was the hand of our poor, misguided son—”

“I know!” said Oliver, gently. “And I think perhaps you want me to help him if possible—”

“Now, God bless you for knowing and making it so much easier for me!” she sighed. “Eustace is our son and must be protected from the consequences of his madness . . . his dreadful wickedness . . . for when he eats those awful drugs he is truly mad indeed. . . . And he was my little baby once and, oh, Oliver, I . . . so loved him! We ask . . . beg you to go to him with money and promise of more . . . to help him away—out of England. I would go, but Everard grows frantic at the idea, and I dare not leave him—yet. Dear, faithful Gregor would go, but Eustace tried to kill him last time they met. . . . So we have nobody . . . except you, Oliver.”

“When do I go, Aunt—my dear?” Instead of answering, she started up and stood looking down on him like one terrified.

“What is it?” he questioned.

“You!” she whispered, wringing her hands. “Oh, if we . . . if I should be sending you into danger . . . as I am . . . perhaps to death!”

Smiling, he took those eloquent hands, kissing them in his turn and so drew her down into the chair again.

“Aunt Rosamond,” said he, “you are so like the mother of my boyish dreams, the mother I never knew, that I am proud and glad to serve you how and when I may.”

“But . . . the danger! Oh, my dear boy,—the dreadful risk?”

“I think,” he answered, avoiding her gaze, “I may perhaps enjoy it. So tell me when I must go and where to find him?”

“Everard himself desires to tell you this, dear Oliver. ’Twas he sent me to you and I a little nervous . . . for you look such an elegant young gentleman and I—” She made a little, graceful gesture to her shabby gown.

“And you,” said Oliver, in his downright way, “you are the dignified lady, the sweet and gentle presence this house, and Abbeymead, too, have always needed, cried out for, waited for,—had you been here years ago, two lonely boys and graceless imps would have been much, ah, much happier.”

“For this, my dear boy, I . . . I am going to . . . kiss you . . . if I may?” said she yearningly and yet with such breathless timidity also, that impulsively Oliver set his long arms about her and drew her to his lips, as she had been his mother indeed.

“Oh . . . my boy!” she murmured, between happy tears and laughter. “Dear Oliver, it seems I have truly . . . come home, at last. . . . God is very kind to me!”

A discreet knock and James appeared to bow, strike an attitude—large legs akimbo and pronounce:

“H-if your ladyship pleases, my lady, the nurse desires me to inform your ladyship as Sir Everard is now enquiring for your ladyship very h-urgent indeed, my lady.”

“Yes,” said she in her gentle, submissive way, “thank you. Yes, I will go at once. Oliver, my dear, your uncle desires to see you later, you and Roland. I will come again.”

Being alone, Oliver sat down to his unfinished letter, staring at nothing in particular and for so long that before he could take up his pen was a perfunctory knock and to him entered a young, rather calf-like footman carrying a heavy laden tea-tray, followed by James, his superior, bearing a spoon.

“Ah!” sighed Oliver. “But why so many cups, James?”

“Because, sir, Mr. McGregor has just come in and the doctor is hupstairs, Mr. Oliver, and Mr. Roland dooly expected as usual, sir.”

“Oh,” said Oliver, glancing at his watch, “later than I thought. Very well, James.” Hardly had the footmen retired and Oliver reached for the teapot than door swung wide and in strode Gregor, dusty with travel, speaking over his shoulder to Doctor Fell.

“Och man! I’m tellin’ ye ’tis an unco meeracle o’ heaven—”

“Stuff! Gammon! ’S nothing o’ the sort!” fumed the doctor. “Gi’e ’s cup tea, Noll.”

“I’m sayin’. Fell ma man, Everard was guid as deid—”

“Cert’nly! Wished to die, would ha’ died,—wills t’ live, will live! No miracle, ’t all, mere Nature ’n’ commonsense!”

“Plus bold and skilful surgeon!” said Oliver, pouring tea.

“Not t’ mention ’s wife! Devotion! Everard’s inspiration t’ health. Three lumps sugar, Noll.”

“Ay,” quoth Gregor, “he no can bear her from his sight! She’s a grand pairson, Rosamond! Always was! And still beautiful,—ay, she is that!”

“Sensible woman, Greg! Born nurse—instinctive! Exceeding capable! ’Nother cup tea ’n’ must jog. T’other case—touch and go—no reserve—constitution all to dollrags—do m’ best tho’ better dead—Nature says ‘die’—’n’ Nature knows. Now Everard—different quite. Nature shouts ‘live!’ Mending apace! Goo’-bye! Look in later.”

“Howandever,” quoth Gregor as the door closed upon the busy doctor, “I’m yet saying ’tis a vera miracle, Noll. Ay, I am that! ’Tis not only Everard’s amazing recovery but, upon ma living soul, he looks—younger! Ay, he does so—younger! ’Tis the light o’ joy back in his eyes, ay—joy! Like when he brought his lovely child-bride home. He can smile now as he used then, sae many weary, dreary years syne, before, ay, before . . . trouble came.”

“You mean,” said Oliver, “before he drove her away.”

Gregor gasped and nearly dropped his cup.

“Wheesht!” he exclaimed, whispering. “Wha’s been talkin’? Wha’ d’ye ken o’t, laddie? How much d’ye know and how, Noll, how?”

“Enough!” answered Oliver, grimly.

“Ye mustna’ blame him if he doubted her, Noll, ’twas a’ by reason of his great love,—man, he fair worshipped her, ay, he did that! But Jealousy came wi’ a devil in human form. . . . Ah, and God knows, he’s paid for it all these years, the poor, poor man!”

“And she also, I think, Gregor!”

“Ay, she too . . . but he did no’ exactly drive her away, Oliver—no! ’Twas all a vera woeful, most unchancy business. . . . They were both so

young, little mair than boy and girl, ay—juist bairns the two o’ them,—and wildly happy till yon Count Guido, handsome, laughing, reckless devil came betwixt ’em like shadow ever blacker. . . . So was Doubt born, then agonizing Suspicion . . . black misery! She fled from him at last, the poor child, taking their little Eustace with her . . . vanished and was lost. And in that hour Everard changed from joyous youth to cold and bitter man—vera grim, masking his shame and agony in icy pride. . . . And yon comes Roland! Does he know o’ this too?”

“Not a word.”

“Then mum it is, Noll!”

Roland entered scowling, dropped wearily into the nearest chair, cursed peevishly and, having thus relieved his feelings, enquired:

“How’s our invalid to-day?”

“Better and better!” answered Gregor. “But ye’sel’ now, Roly, what makes ma wee mannie sae unco’ fretfu’ and a’?”

“Streets, Greg,—the dam, endless streets, the countless faces, faces of every sort except the right sort!”

“Tea?” enquired Oliver.

“Heaven forbid! I need ale, brandy, claret, gin, beer, one or all—I’m dead beat. Ring the bell, damme I’m expiring! Miles of streets, Noll, mile on confounded mile—and never a sign, of course! Beginning to feel hopeless, but be cursed if I give up—no! I’ll seek and search, trudge and tramp till I’m a dashed, hoary, bearded, confounded ancient and can merely creep, totter and crawl! . . . Ha, James,” he groaned as that sedate person made his appearance, “bring me ale—in a tankard,—in two tankards,—ale and speedily!”

“And,” Gregor added, “another pot o’ tea, James.”

“Yes, sir. Him-mediate, gentlemen!” And James departed forthwith.

“Ha!” snarled Roland, “you’re both dashed mum and confounded glum!”

“No,” said Oliver, refilling Gregor’s cup, “we listen to you, Roly.”

“Well, say something instead—no, I will! And I say here’s a precious rum go!”

“Who, what and how?” demanded Oliver.

“The Avuncular Relative, His Nunkeyship,—to spring a wife upon us at a moment’s notice, by Jupiter!”

“Have you met Aunt Rosamond?”

“Hardly! She’s always in the sick-room, but I’ve made my bow, and it’s admitted *nem. con.* the Nunks has ‘an eye’—she must have been a regular, perfect beauty once!”

“She was!” quoth Gregor, emphatically. “Ay, she was that!”

“And is!” said Oliver.

Here, the ale entering and in capacious tankards two, Roland accepted one, sipped, moaned and pushed it aside.

“‘Jove!’” he sighed, “I can’t even take my ale, I’m too infernal low! . . . Those miles of streets . . . multitudes of confounded faces and never, ah—never the one! Life’s a devilish, dreary waste!”

“Mebbe!” nodded Gregor, “Noo and then, laddie—”

“It is!” scowled Roland, “And constantly!”

“There’s whiles it is not, ay—there’s whiles!”

“Never one!” growled Roland, rising wearily. “It’s all a curst, howling desolation! And if I’m bowled over by a dam waggon or cut down by footpads, like the Nunks, only more so,—so much the better.”

“Tell me,” said Gregor, pensively stirring his fourth cup of tea, “have either o’ ye troubled your heids to think juist how your uncle’s reunion and consequent change o’ living may alter the futures o’ the baith o’ ye, have ye so?”

“Yes,” answered Oliver.

“No!” cried Roland. “No, egad! I’ve been too busy on the one and only object of my dashed existence to trouble for any lesser consideration,—but now! By Jupiter Olympus,—our future prospects show pretty bleak! A man who would keep a wife up his confounded sleeve all these years . . . do anything, get new heir, perhaps. I wouldn’t put it beyond him! Noll, my precious tulip, we look like being properly flammed! Eh, Greg?”

“Ay!” nodded Gregor, sipping his tea with relish. “Your twa noses pit completely oot o’ joint! And wha’ d’ye say tae this, ma bonnie, braw laddies?”

“Nothing!” answered Oliver.

“Well, I do!” quoth Roland. “Fate has twisted my beak out of joint already. Life, except the lost is found and is so made enduring, is a perfect and positive dashed waste! Money, wealth, ease have no meaning for me,—to the devil with ’em! Noll has his plough and furrow, mud and so forth, I have my devoted quest. So—as for the Nunks—here’s health and long life to him, his wife and confounded heir whoever and wherever he be!” So saying, Roland caught up the nearest tankard, gulped, gasped, fetched his breath and continued in altered tone: “And here’s to—Her! The One and Only She that might be my joy and salvation,—wherever she is or may be, here’s my eternal love and dutiful homage to—Deborah, God bless her!”

“Amen!” murmured Oliver.

“And now,” sighed Roland, “I’ll go rid me of some of London’s vile grime.” And away he went.

“The puir laddie’s sair in love, Noll!”

“He is indeed.”

“Ay. And what o’ yoursel’?”

“I,” answered Oliver, glancing at his unfinished letter, “Oh . . . I love . . . my little Clia, bless her!”

“This’ll be the wee bairn, the child I’ve heard on. Aweel, the love of a child is sweet thing, Noll, a vera self-less, holy thing, ye ken! Howandever and moreover, children have a way o’—growing up! The wee lassie o’ to-day is unco’ soon—the woman, and then—wha’ kens, Noll, wha’ kens? Now, like Roly, I’ll awa’ t’ make mysel’ presentable as Nature doth allow. . . . I’ve been to Abbeymead the day in matter o’ Fallowfield, the farm your uncle is for giving your Saphronia, and weel I mind her years syne, a capable, sonsy body.”

“Good!” said Oliver. “And when you’ve gone I’ll finish my letter to her.”

“Laddie, I’m awa’ the noo!” And heaving his long, bony frame from chair-depths, off he strode. So down sat Oliver to complete his letter; but it seemed this was not to be, for scarcely had he taken pen than came knock and, thereafter, James.

“Not yet,” said Oliver, “there’s more tea in the pot which I shall drink.”

“Hex-cuse me, Mr. Oliver sir, but to remove the tea equipage is the dooty o’ young Willyam! I come, sir, to inform you as there is a . . . a person desires to see you, sir, most—pertainacious!”

“What sort of person?”

“A . . . young person, sir.”

“Yes but—man, woman, boy or girl, James?”

“Neether, Mr. Oliver, sir.”

“How in the world can that be?”

“Well, sir, I should describe this here young person or party as an extremely mere—miss.”

“Indeed, James? Why?”

“Well, sir, this young party’s hab-iliments, sir, proclaims her a person of the lower or labouring classes, Mr. Oliver, wherefore I have not allowed her to walk in nor yet intrude—”

“Then do so, James! Do so at once, this moment!” said Oliver, struck by sudden thought, a wild hope that brought him suddenly afoot.

“What—in here, sir?”

“Instantly!”

James departed rather more hurriedly than his usual dignity permitted, leaving Oliver standing at the great desk, forgotten pen in hand, his eager gaze upon the door; presently it opened, and, seeing for whom, Oliver dropped his pen and stood—dumb with a gladness beyond all words.

CHAPTER XXXIV

CONCERNING THE ETERNAL TRIANGLE

THE “young person” closed the door softly and leaned back against it, surveying Oliver great-eyed; a shabby young person, even as James had said, a piteously woeful young person whose cheeks showed pale and drawn, whose ruddy lips met in firmer line, whose deep, long-lashed eyes grew misted and then bright with slow, painful tears. So changed, and yet so much more womanly, beautiful and altogether lovable, or so thought silent Oliver; as for her worn bonnet and pitiful little shoes, he yearned to kiss them there and then (and all beside)—so mightily that speech was still beyond him until she broke the silence in small, faltering voice:

“Oh . . . Oliver I’m . . . a craven coward. . . .”

“Deborah!” said he, and with such look and tone that the firm young lips quivered, the brimming tears fell.

“You are . . . glad to see me then?” she questioned, brokenly.

“Yes!” he answered. “Yes! And Roland will be . . . very glad—”

“Roland?” she repeated. “But you,—are you . . . truly glad?”

“Yes, I am! Ah—yes . . . yes, of course! But, you see, Roland has been
—”

“No—you, Oliver! I’m speaking of you . . . and you haven’t even . . . shaken hands!” Then he was before her, had caught her hands to his lips, to feel them deathly cold, her whole body shaken by violent tremors . . . swaying.

“God!” he exclaimed. “You are going to faint!”

“Not . . . not if I can help it!” she faltered, but with chin set grimly. “But I think I shall quite die if . . . if you don’t . . . feed me. . . .” He picked her up and bore her to the tea table and seating her in the easiest chair, set a plate in her lap and dishes before her, tried to pour tea and spilt it, watching her with such anxious solicitude that she began to laugh, then to cry and then to eat.

“Now,” said she, looking up at him through her tears, “watch a poor, starving animal gobble!” But instead, gently as possible and while she ate, he untied, took off her poor little bonnet and then made another attempt to pour tea, this time more successfully, though his hand shook, which she was instant to remark upon:

“Poor Oliver!” said she, rather indistinctly since her mouth was full and extremely busy. “Dear Oliver to be so upset for poor me! But I wasn’t brave enough to starve any longer, so I ran away from all the sordid misery. . . . I read about your poor uncle in a paper I picked up, so I came here, hoping to find—just you, because you are such a calm, commonsense, comfortable person. . . . Oh dear—I nearly choked!”

“Then wait—wait!” he pleaded. “Eat first, dear girl, then tell me—”

“No, I’m going to do both! Though I can never, oh never, tell you all I’ve been through,—the agony of growing poorer and poorer, of sinking lower and lower—down and down . . . the loneliness, the misery, the dreadful men. Oh beasts! I know now why poor, frightened wretches, such as I, jump into the river,—the dear, kind, old river that sweeps them away from all misery and fear and shame,—away to sleep, forgetfulness, or God. . . . Oh, my dear, is there a God? He seemed so very far away . . . where I have been. Such cruelty! Such horrors . . . poor little children, terrified women, and none to shield or pity them! So, not being a heroine, I ran away—back to my ease and comfort. Yes, Oliver, I am going back to my Aunt soon as possible,—dear soul, what a sweet and gentle Gorgon she is, after the vile brutality I have seen! Oh London, poor, dreadful, cruel, sorrowful, London!”

“Thank God, you are safe back again!”

“And I thank Him too! And yet, Oliver, what relief is there for the poor creatures I have left in their misery? If God would only comfort them too,—they are so much braver than I; they endure because they must and make the best of it all, while here am I stuffing myself till I choke! Feeling myself alive again and all that dreadful reality of suffering—only a dream. . . . Gracious, how I talk! And what joy to do it and watch your dear, anxious, sensible, kind face. You are quite handsome, Oliver, and so beautifully spruce and—clean!” Here he smiled and she laughed, so joyfully that he laughed too.

“And so,” said he, when the fierce pangs of her hunger were soothed, “your Miss Blenkinsop didn’t take you in?”

“Oh, but she did,—in two senses! She took me in, promised to care for me and instantly wrote to my aunt,—discovering which odious duplicity, I, as instantly, stole away. . . . And, as I tell you, when I couldn’t starve any longer, I came here—the paper said you were here—meaning to pretend I had come merely to proffer my condolences, or services or—anything I could think of, but when I saw your kind, anxious face I grew all silly and

faint! So here I am at last safe with you, extremely full and glad of it, oh wonderfully glad! Because though you don't say much, Oliver,—but then you never do and I haven't given you much chance if you did,—I can see in those honest, good eyes of yours that you are truly glad to see me safe, and shelter me until I can go back to my beloved Gorgon, which I shall do the instant you lend me the money.”

“Anything you want, of course,” he answered, “but I'm hoping you'll allow me to take you—that is, no . . . Roland shall.”

“And why not you?”

“Because,” he answered, stifling a groan, “I must remain here.”

“Why?”

“A mission for my uncle.”

“Let it wait, put it off, defer it—just a few hours.”

“Impossible!” he sighed. Now at this she frowned and pouted at him, in which moment the door swung open and in came Roland, saying:

“By the way, Noll, to-morrow I'll borrow your nag, your elephantine plodder because I shall—Deborah . . .!” The word was a whisper; then he was across the room and kneeling at her feet though instead of attempting to touch her, he clasped his hands together almost as if in prayer.

“Now, God . . . oh God be thanked!” he stammered, “Oh, my dear, I've sought London over for you, praying for you as I searched, yes praying to God for you—I that never prayed since I was a child! And now . . . now that I see you all sweetly alive, now I . . . I cannot tell you . . . I cannot say . . . you will never know just how much I—we—love you, Noll and I! How much we adore and yearn for you,—yes both of us, though of course no man could ever possibly love you as I do,—but Noll thinks the same of himself and . . . well . . . there you are!”

Once again Deborah's eyes filled as she looked from the eager, passionate reverence of handsome Roland to the calmer though equally ardent homage of Oliver.

“Oh,” sighed she with a sudden new humility, “such welcome pays for . . . all the suffering. Oh, my dears—” With the word, she reached her hands to them, rather blindly because of her tears . . . and they all three so absorbed that they started at sound of a voice though it was very shyly soft:

“Oh . . . forgive me, I . . . I fear—”

“Aunt Rosamond,” said Oliver, rising, “you come at exactly the right moment. May I present Miss Deborah Standish? Deborah,—my dear aunt, Rosamond, Lady Matravers.”

“Our aunt!” said Roland, getting up from his knees to bow. “For, Aunt Rosamond, if you are dear to Oliver you are quite as dear, or more so, to me. And here is Deborah—equally dear to us both. And what say you to this, my lady Aunt?” Instead of answering she looked at Deborah, who had risen to curtsy, gazed on her with those gentle eyes that saw so very much, then, limping a pace nearer, Lady Rosamond spoke:

“So you, too, have known suffering, my child! . . . May I . . . will you kiss me?”

“Oh!” sobbed Deborah for the third time; then she was in the comfort of arms that mothered her.

So they kissed and murmured together a while and then, seeming quite unconscious of any save each other, they crossed the spacious chamber and were gone.

“Well, con-found me!” exclaimed Roland, blinking at the closed door. “What d’ye say to that, Noll?”

“Couldn’t be better!” answered Oliver.

“But damme, she’s scarcely spoken to me yet!”

“She will.”

“Ay, true enough, Noll, she will—and shall! Yes or No and soon as possible.”

“I . . . shouldn’t . . . rush things—”

“You? No! But I’m no cold-blooded, confounded stock-fish! I can’t bear to wait to woo and wooing wait—not I, by heavens, I’ve suffered too much. No! The burning question therefore is—who first? Which of us puts to her the greatest of all questions? Lord, I tremble at the mere thought,—which first?”

“You!” said Oliver, staring blindly down at the letter that was destined never to be finished.

“Eh? Me? Oh! And why me? Ha, damme, are you so sure she’ll choose you? Are you?”

“I was never,” said Oliver, tearing up his unfinished letter almost savagely, “never less sure of anything in this world.”

“Ha,—well, that’s a comfort—if you mean it. Do you? B’gad you saw her first, you’ve had her to yourself heaven knows how long,—you may have spoken already and she . . . oh damnation,—did you?”

“No!”

“And why not? With such heaven sent opportunity—why not,—why?”

“Perhaps because it . . . never occurred to me.”

“The more fool you!”

“Exactly! Fool indeed!” sighed Oliver. “Because I feel such opportunity will never happen again.”

“Well, by Jove and Jupiter, I hope not!”

“You would!” said Oliver, stressing the pronoun so bitterly that Roland glared.

“What the devil d’ye mean?” he demanded, fierce of eye.

“That you,” retorted Oliver, grim of mouth, “are the complete egoist as usual.”

“Nothing usual about it, Mr. Sullen Phiz. As a general rule it’s known I am the freest, most open-handed, big-hearted sportsman, but as regards . . . Her, well, yes—yes, I am all for myself and mean to be, by George, because . . . she’s my one hope, my only future, my very life!”

“And may be . . . mine, Roland.”

“No! Oh no! Not a bit of it! Quite impossible!”

“Why?”

“Because you are not, and never could be, the dashed miserable, lonely soul I should be—without her.”

“Can’t I be . . . lonely too?”

“Probably,—in some weak and washy way, but not with the wildly tragical despair of hotter blood than yours. Besides, you’ve your Saphronias and Clias and, failing these, your farm and yokels and confounded furrow and plough.”

“You tempt me to plant my foot on you—hard!”

“Then for once yield to temptation, Mr. Smug, and see what follows.”

So they scowled and fronted each other, all their old hostility fiercely ablaze. Then, turning abruptly, Oliver crossed to the great, carved mantel and leaned there staring down at the empty fireplace and when he spoke again his voice had lost its bitterness:

“When you’ve been married to her a year or so, treat her still with kindly respect, don’t break her heart or I shall probably kill you.”

“Treat her . . . with respect . . .?” gasped Roland. “Break . . . her heart . . .”

“Yes! Both! All fire and devotion one hour, all careless indifference the next.”

“Why you . . . you—” Roland choked, clenched his fists and strode at Oliver but, as he did so, the door which had been slowly opening, was flung wide and Gregor McGregor was between them.

“Wheesht, laddies!” quoth he, drawing them close, but keeping a long, powerful arm about the shoulders of both. “Yon abune stairs was anither meeracle! Ay, it waur so! And one that promises muckle weel for the future, I’m thinkin’!”

“How so?” enquired Oliver, frowning at Roland.

“Aha, my dear boys,” he answered, very nearly smiling, “in this old house of silence, of stately gloom and grim shadows I’ve just heard the blessed advent of Joy’s Angel!”

“Well, what, Greg, what d’you mean?” growled Roland, scowling on Oliver.

“A laugh, ma bonnie weans, the glad laugh of a happy woman!”

CHAPTER XXXV

HOW SIR EVERARD CAME BACK—AND OF STRIFE

PROPPED by many pillows and sitting upright as possible, Sir Everard glanced from the papers on the bed before him to the intent faces of his nephews and smiled; whereat Roland opened his eyes wider than usual for by this smile his uncle's usually cold, stern features were transfigured beyond his recollection.

“My boy, you stare at me, why?” enquired Sir Everard in tone kindly as his look.

“Sir, I . . . hardly know,” stammered Roland.

“You find me changed, of course, somewhat altered in looks?”

“A . . . a little, sir.”

“I am, naturally, very weak still and must show thinner and older.”

“Sir, what amazes me is that you look—younger!”

“Much!” Oliver added.

“Two courtiers, I perceive!” said Sir Everard, but with none of that biting irony that had so often hurt and chilled. “Yet I am changed,” he continued, “for when a man has been so very near to death as I, so vastly remote from this world, he beholds it and life and himself by new perspective. Roland, you have seen men die in battle, snatched out of living in an instant, and I think such death is merciful. But to lie 'twixt life and death, aswing in the great void between, then is grief and the anguish of remorse: for then a man sees at last, with eyes made clear by God's Infinitude, life and himself as they truly are,—himself so weak and puny, his proudest achievements so poor and ineffectual! He beholds then the very truth of himself, the pitiful failure he is—all that he might have been. He knows, at such time, how the things he counted great and strove for so desperately are in reality of little or none account, while the simple things, despised in rush of life, are in very fact the truly great, abiding forever. . . . Having seen and learned so much by reason of failing flesh and waxing spirit, a man usually dies,—but—should he come back, lifted up out of death by some pure and mighty love, even as I, then he must needs return a man chastened by deep and true humility and therefore a little wiser, even as I. . . . While you, Roland, fought, endured and perilled your life for Duty's sake,—while you, Oliver, were busied to good purpose on your farm, I was no more than self-pitiful recluse grieving vainly for the past and spending

my days to no useful end. . . . But now—” He paused to fetch his breath and look at them with smile that seemed to Oliver like a blessing. “Now that life and promise of a great happiness have been given back to me,—a happiness I cast away long ago in my hot youth and prideful blindness,—now I would see all those about me content as I can contrive, and you, my dear boys, most especially so. . . . Your Aunt Rosamond and I, so soon as I may compass the journey, shall retire to Abbeymead to take up our broken lives —”

“And, sir,” said Oliver, impulsively, “I’m heartily glad for her sake—and yours.”

“And I, Uncle,” added Roland, as fervently, “wish you both every happiness and long life.”

“Life?” repeated Sir Everard, glancing down at the many papers before him with eyes that saw not one, “life is a field for our ploughing, to turn our furrows the best we may though others gather the harvest. . . . The furrow I drove was crooked, nephews, ay indeed—a crooked furrow useless quite and labour in vain! Oliver you are a good farmer, I hear, and competent ploughman . . . but may we be all good ploughmen henceforth, driving life’s furrow straight and clean and true. . . . You, as I know, Roland, were a good soldier, yet in my blind assurance I checked your careers both, like an, I fear, extremely ‘Sir Arrogant Nunks’!”

“Sir—!” gasped Roland, aghast, “I . . . sir, I . . . if I ventured now and then—”

“Frequently, Roland! Oh, I knew. It used to shock and affront me once, but now, well—” Here, beholding Roland’s perturbation, Sir Everard leaned back on his pillows and actually laughed, so joyously indeed that Roland forgot his confusion for very wonder.

“Sir,” said he, laying his warm, strong young hand on his uncle’s thin fingers with impulse that amazed himself, “permit me to say you take it like a dashed—I mean a true sportsman, that is, sir—extreme handsomely!”

“The word,” sighed Sir Everard, “brings me to an extremely handsome person, I allude to Miss Standish—Deborah.”

“Yes, sir. Yes, Uncle—by Jupiter! You’re perfectly right. I always maintained you had ‘the eye’ for beauty! And she is indeed, and sweet and nobly valiant, a perfect heroine, sir, and infinitely too good for any confounded man—especially Oliver! And me, of course!”

“And what do you say, Oliver?”

“Roland has said it all, sir, and much better than I might.”

“Your Aunt Rosamond informs me that you both love Deborah. Well, I have known her by sight since she was a child, to-day I have talked with her and I commend your choice. She should make a noble wife to one of you though which, only Deborah knows and perhaps not even she—yet. But upon the one of you she marries I shall settle the Manor of Charlewood, in West Sussex,—him and his heirs for ever.”

“Sir—” exclaimed Roland. “Uncle—! By heavens it is a . . . a . . . by Jove, sir, a noble heritage!”

“To the one who must be disappointed I shall make such provision, both now and for the future, as, you may trust me, shall be adequate. . . . And now, Roland, by your leave I have a certain other and quite different matter to discuss with Oliver.”

“Oh, certainly, sir!” said Roland, instantly afoot, though his cheek flushed and he shot a flashing glance at his cousin. “By the way, Noll,” said he, pausing at the door, “when uncle has done with you, when you’re quite free, you’ll find me in the billiard room.”

Closing himself out of the bedchamber, Roland stood a moment listening to the murmur of tense voices, then scowling fiercely, strode along the wide passage to pause yet again at another closed door beyond which lay his Aunt Rosamond’s sitting-room whence other voices reached him with trill of laughter so joyous that, for a moment, his gloomy brow lightened:

But frowning still and savagely restless he wandered to and fro in this great house whose stately austerity had always chilled his boyish soul to defiance and impish rebellion, and so came at last to the spacious billiard room. Here selecting a cue he began driving the balls with practised hand, but now with such fierce inaccuracy that, tossing the cue aside, he sank into a chair, cursing beneath his breath till he saw the door opening and leapt up as Oliver entered.

“Have the goodness to shut that door!” said he, wrenching watch from fob while his cousin closed the door obediently.

“Well, Roland?”

“Well, Mr. Smuggish Ploughman, I’m giving you precisely one minute to think over and retract your very damnable remarks touching myself and . . . and . . . Her!”

Oliver looked at him with smile that was worse than a threat.

“Vain fool!” said he. “Put down your watch, and if you will have it at last—come!”

Then they were at each other; here in this wide and lofty room where was ample space for dexterous footwork they fought with the unskilled ferocity of primal savages; for, as civil war is always most bitter and merciless—so promised this sudden and desperate affray. Back went they through the years and were boys again, attacking each other with that same headlong, blind ferocity; so bitterly furious indeed that passionate Roland, forgetting all save his old-time, unreasoning boyish hate, leapt in to smite and smite only, staggering Oliver and nearly dropping him with one terrible right-hand blow but, in so doing, over-reached himself, and Oliver steadying, laughed savagely, felt again and more terribly than ever, that joyous fury, that inborn lust to maim, to rend and slay this born enemy, swung mighty left in lightning counter with all his power, and Roland reeling from this stunning impact, crashed backwards against the billiard-table, went down heavily and lay inert, his twitching face, seamed with a trickle of blood.

And now—as Roland struggled to rise and before Oliver might go to aid him, was hurry of light feet, flutter of petticoats and Deborah was there,—was upon her knees,—had lifted that dark, drooping head to the heaven of her bosom; and as she touched this handsome face (that instantly shut its eyes tight) Oliver saw her tremulous hands stained with his cousin’s blood. One flaming look she cast up at him, and spoke between white teeth:

“Murderous savage—go!”

And silently Oliver turned and went.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WHICH DESCRIBES THE END OF A CASE

ASTRIDE his leisurely steed Oliver jogged in truly dismal mood and not by reason of the grim and dangerous mission towards which he was riding, but because Dobbin's large deliberate hoofs were beating out the refrain that had so haunted and troubled his broken slumbers:

“Murderous savage—go! Go, savage murderer!”

Thus, though the morning was bright and gladsome and his mission, oddly enough, took him first to the “Jolly Young Waterman,” where he knew such sweet and such hearty welcome awaited him, he sighed often and drearily nevertheless and striving to think of Saphronia, of honest Tom, George and Will, of patient, faithful Inigo, was yet obsessed by memory of a fierce though lovely and so loved face while Dobbin's plodding hoofs beat out remorsefully on the hard cobblestones:

“Go, savage murderer—go—go—go, murderous savage!” And thus, he knew, ringing the very death knell of his dearest hopes.

Wherefore, grieving and fiercely angry with himself, Oliver rode through the harsh roar and tumult of the busy streets, resentful and bitterly weary of it all, yet of himself most especially, and yearning mightily for the open countryside, the broad green sweep of hill and dale where clean, sweet winds played; the hush of trees in leafy solitudes lit by the murmurous glory of sun-kissed stream or sparkle of chattering rill; the fragrant dusk of bosky, winding lanes; broad golden meadow and daisied mead; farmstead, cottage and sleepy village with its good, homely sounds;—the peaceful countryside, the sight, sound, smell of it and the calm, slow, kindly voices of its folk.

And with this yearning came the soothing memory of little Clia, her gentle looks and pretty ways, the touch of her small, loving hands, the tender clasp of her arms, the eager, innocent passion of her kisses. And weeks since he had seen her!

Dobbin snorted suddenly to the prick of unfamiliar spurs, but mended his pace and bestirred himself to such purpose that the morning was still young when he bore his master into Cherry Orchard Court and halted beneath the sign-board whereon the Jolly Young Waterman, bewhiskered, trim and extremely round of eye, seemed endeavouring to stare the world in general, and Oliver especially, completely out of countenance.

Scarcely had the clatter of Dobbin's large hoofs died away than forth stepped Miss Saphronia's stalwarts, this brawny and faithful trio, to greet Oliver in their three several ways: Tom pulled imaginary forelock and made a leg sailor fashion, George came stiffly to attention and saluted smartly, William lifted finger to eyebrow and nodded; together they smiled on him right cheerily, but for one brief instant only, then became suddenly three of the gloomiest fellows imaginable. Noting which fleeting smiles and gloomy dejection, Oliver sat back in his saddle, glanced from one honest visage to the other and questioned them in sudden anxiety:

"Lads, what's wrong?"

All three took one pace nearer, all three opened their mouths to answer, and all were dumb.

"What is it?" demanded Oliver, his apprehension growing. "Not Miss Saphronia, oh—not the child . . . my little Clia?"

"No, sir!" answered Tom.

"Not neither, sir!" answered George.

"Nayther o' they, Mist' Oliver," said William. "But—you tell on't, Tom."

"Mr. Oliver a pi-ratical shark's come aboard us."

"A skringing scrounger, sir!" added George.

"A perishin' wiper, sir!" nodded William.

"Ah!" murmured Oliver. "Do you mean the Captain has arrived?"

"And a-swilling our best rum, sir!" growled Tom.

"Bottle arter bottle, Mr. Oliver!" quoth George.

"Neat, sir!" sighed William.

"How long has he been here?"

"Three days, five hours and twenty odd minutes b' my watch, sir," sighed Tom.

"And so much too long, sir!" quoth George.

"And means to bide, sir!" sighed William.

"I almost imagine you don't like the gentleman."

"No, sir!" This in hearty chorus.

“What does Miss Saphronia say?”

“Nary a word, sir.”

“Not a blessed syll-able, Mr. Oliver.”

“B’leeve she weeps—secret!” sighed William.

“Isn’t she quite—happy with him?”

“Can’t tell, sir.”

“Don’t know, Mr. Oliver.”

“No!” quoth William. “She hain’t!”

Oliver dismounted, gave his horse to William’s care, and was convoyed indoors, only to learn that Saphronia and Clia were out driving.

“But, sir,” said Tom as they turned into the cool taproom, deserted at this hour, “though the Commodore and Midshipmite is a cruising, you’ll find the Cap’n—him, hove-to in Dragon, sir.”

“Then I’ll remain here in Salamander with you three. By the way, I’m expecting to meet Jasper Shrig here—”

At this moment a bell began pealing with a furious insistence and therewith a voice upraised in angry bellow harsher and fiercer than Oliver had ever heard.

“The Cap’n hailing for more rum!” quoth Tom with a desperate calmness. “Will you go, George, or—”

“I will!” said Oliver, rising. “In Miss Saphronia’s room, is he?”

“Sir,” answered William, his eyes bright and eager, “he are, indeed, and a-splashing of his rum all over yore little lady’s pretty copy-books.”

So presently Oliver rapped gently on the door of Dragon, this small, crooked chamber made sacred to him by sweet associations,—was roared at, opened the door and bowed.

“You rang, sir?” he enquired, viewing the small chamber’s one large occupant. “Sir, you rang?”

“Ay, I did, and got no answer, and be damned t’ye!”

“So you shouted, sir, bellowed with an extraordinary fervour!”

A personage, this Captain, of a commanding presence, a portly personage with a truculent eye, a man whose large countenance, red with

wind, weather and other things, grew even more so as, scarce troubling to look at Oliver, he demanded with the virulence of stately quarterdeck for captious fo'c'sle:

“Rum! Rum, d’ye hear? Where is it?”

Answered Oliver, his grey eyes also truculent:

“Judging by the empty bottle, sir, beneath your waistcoat.”

“Eh? What? What the . . . who the devil are you?”

“One who greatly reprobates noise, sir, especially voicy, bellowing noises.”

“Oho!” exclaimed the Captain, and making as if to rise yet remained seated. “Lookee now, whoever y’are, mind your weather eye and don’t run foul o’ me!”

“If,” said Oliver, “this means battle and strife, broadsides yardarm to yardarm, grappling hooks, pikes, cutlasses and boarding, this is my fighting season and I’m your man.”

“Blood!” roared the Captain, looking dangerous. “D’ye know who I am?”

“I’ll hazard the guess you are that Captain, late R.N., whose shattered bones should be lying a thousand fathom deep instead of pickling themselves in rum.”

“Now,” roared the Captain, “damn your eyes!”

“And,” said Oliver, “curse yours! And thus, having thrown out signals for close action, do we engage? Shall we fight, may we endeavour to ‘tap each other’s claret’?”

The Captain glanced at Oliver’s grimly smiling face, his wide shoulders and nimble, fighting-man’s legs and—smiled.

“No, no,” he answered, sitting tighter, “you’re a sportsman! True blue, I perceive! We’ll drink instead. And you’ve got me right, I’m Captain Alfred Ray, o’ The Service, at your service, ha-ha! Now, haul on that cursed bellrope, my hearty, and we’ll have another bottle!”

“Thanks—no!”

“Ha,—not all the sportsman I supposed! Not inclined for a friendly glass,—hey?”

“No, sir. And yet so much your well-wisher that I advise you to,—let me see—to ‘up anchor, loose your moorings, slip your cable, sheet home, square away, bear up and stand away’ for regions other than these.”

“Hey—what? Go, d’ye say? What the devil—”

“Or,” continued Oliver, “you will certainly be taken aback, thrown on your beam ends and cast away a sheer hulk. These may or not be the correct nautical phrases, but, sir, they are the best I can do, pray do your best with ’em for your own sake, reflect, sir, and act on them.”

“What—damme, d’ye dare threaten me, now?”

“No, call it a friendly warning, sir. And now, by your leave, Captain, I’ll take my leave.” The which Oliver did forthwith, leaving Captain Alfred Ray, late R.N., to scowl at his empty rum bottle in a gloomy dubiety.

Back in the taproom Oliver found the faithful three seated in attitudes of a somewhat too-studied ease; also they all three manifested a slight breathlessness as with haste of recent stealthy movement, moreover on the face of each was an expression of such demure satisfaction nearly approaching chaste glee that Oliver must needs demand the wherefore.

“Sir,” answered George, shaking his trim head, “you’ve showed us as how eddication is a—power!”

“It are!” nodded William.

“I says,” quoth Tom, “as I couldn’t ha’ come it better myself, sir, says I. ‘Sheet home and bear away!’ says you, ‘cast away and sheer hulk,’ says you. So I says what George and Will says, eddication is a wonderful thing, says I!”

“ ’Twere ‘power’ as George says, Tom.”

“Ay, ay, Will, power it is. And now, sir, seeing as Jasper’s expected, I’ll brew or con-coct the needful.”

“But where,” enquired Oliver, suddenly, “where is the boy—”

“Gone, sir!” answered Tom.

“Mizzled, sir!” nodded George.

“Along o’ being bathed, and washed constant, sir,” William explained.

“Ar!” nodded Tom, “last time I bathed him ’e kicks me amidships. This time he ups and slips his moorings instead.”

“Takes French leave, sir.”

“ ’Ops the perch, sir.”

“Poor little imp!” said Oliver.

“Imp it is, sir!” quoth Tom. “The Commodore rigs him out, from trucks to keelson, smart and trig as maybe just afore he cuts and runs,—yesterday I hears a yell as sounds familiar and, Lord love me,—there he is all rags and grime, spinning cartwheels, sir, and ’ooting at me like seven small devils. . . . And here’s Jasper coming aboard.”

Mr. Shrig’s countenance showed mild to meekness, his roving eye unwontedly lacklustre, the hand he gave Oliver was without its customary vigour, his voice low and mournful.

“Mr. Dale—sir, I rejoice to know as your respected uncle is on the road to ’ealth, sir, and recovering rapid. All o’ the vich, sir, I’m werry conscious is a black mark agin’ me.”

“No no, Jasper!”

“Sir, ’tis beyond all argiment or ex-cuse! Sir, it ain’t werry often as I’m took in, flammed, bamboozled and con-flummerated total—no! Yet, sir, in this here condition you now behold Jarsper—me—Shrig o’ Bow Street.”

“But, Jasper, you are not to blame. The attack on my uncle was so very adroitly planned, so cunningly schemed—”

“Sir—you says it! Them words goes straight to my werry grateful throbbler. Schemed it were, and planned it were, and by a master, so neat, so pretty, so werry a-mazing a-droit that I tips my castor to Viskers. If all criminals had intellects of his power and wollume Bow Street would fade, vither and languish as a flower. Viskers thought deeper and acted quicker than me, verefore and therefore, sir and pals, I sits afore ye werry ’umbled, meek and lowly in sperrit as I here and now confesses frank and free.”

“Then,” said Oliver, “now is the time for a cheering glass, eh, Tom? Brimmers all, to drink health, long life and happiness to my uncle, Sir Everard Matravers.”

The glasses being duly filled, this toast was honoured right heartily so that, slowly and by degrees, Mr. Shrig’s gloom was lightened, though he remained still so respectfully aloof that, said Oliver:

“Why must you ‘sir’ and ‘mister’ me so persistently, Jasper?”

Mr. Shrig gazed down pensively into his nearly empty glass, sighed into it and answered:

“Mr. Oliver, sir, you are my pal vich in Gipsy flash means brother and is therefore a werry sacred ap-ellation and should be dooly so honoured. But, Mr. Dale, sir, I have failed a pal, yourself, sir, and until I’ve made good to said pal that pal is not so named until I’ve arned the right thereto. ’Ence, Mr. Oliver I—”

A small pebble struck the table, leapt to the floor, gyrated and was still. Mr. Shrig glanced at this pebble, looked at the open lattice, took The Hat from beneath his chair, donned it and spoke:

“All bowmon, Dan’l? All as ordered?”

Ensued a moment’s silence, then from the most unexpected corner of the window, shot a face, framed in hay-like hair and whiskers, that nodded and instantly vanished. Mr. Shrig arose, emptied his glass with lingering regret, nodded to the three and glanced at Oliver with unmistakable flicker of right eyelid.

“Mr. Dale,” said he, tucking the nobbly stick beneath his arm, “might you care to take the air along o’ Jarsper?”

“Yes,” answered Oliver and rising, bade the Three tell Miss Saphronia he hoped to return shortly, and followed Mr. Shrig; but reaching the open air, saw no least sign of the furtive Dan’l.

“So you received my message, Jasper.”

“Ay, I did, sir. And since you axed me to be at the ‘Vaterman’ I guess you know as my two precious birds ain’t so werry distant.”

“Yes, Jasper.”

“And I guess you know this same, per Lady M. alias Mrs. Maxton.”

“How should you know this?”

“Dee-duction, sir. And I’m guessing again as you’ve come on the part o’ your respected uncle, Sir E. Matravers, to drop this here case agin’ his son, your cousin, Number Vun and Viskers, Number Two.”

“Precisely, Jasper, and you’ve mentioned the reason.”

“Ah!” sighed Mr. Shrig. “Fambly reasons, sir. But sich reasons ain’t reasons in the eyes o’ The Law. No, Mr. Dale,—The Law don’t never heed

personal considerations. Verefore and therefore, I'm agoin' to proceed again 'em as dangerous male-factors and proceed—prompt!”

“Then, Shrig, I must beg you'll do nothing of the kind,—indeed, protest most strongly against your taking any further action in this matter whatsoever.”

“Speaking, sir, for your respected uncle!”

“Of course. He bade me tell you his orders are that all proceedings must be stopped at once.”

“Mr. Dale, sir, I hears, disobeys said order and proceeds notwithstanding. For, sir, a malefactor is a criminal, the law is The Law and Jasper is—Shrig, sir, Shrig o' Bow Street!”

“But Sir Everard refuses to prosecute.”

“But—I shall, sir, the charge being assault on a nofficer—vith intent, agin' Number Vun, and assisting, comforting, aiding and abetting same—agin' Viskers, Number Two.”

“Then, Jasper, I can only ask you, plead with you as a friend.”

“You'll plead, eh, sir? Just plead and—no more?”

Oliver hesitated, then, quick to perceive a certain grimness in the aspect of his questioner, shook his head.

“No more, Jasper! If the pleading of a friend cannot move you, I'm certain nothing else ever could.”

“Oh—pal,” said Mr. Shrig, pausing suddenly to reach for Oliver's hand, “for them same vords I thank you! By reading my natur' and knowing me for vot I truly am—you crowns me with respect, so—pal, give me your daddle.”

“Why, Jasper,” said Oliver as they gripped hands, “you never thought I was such blind fool as to attempt bribery, offering money, to officer such as you?”

“Pal,” said Mr. Shrig, shaking his head, “for p'raps a moment—say two,—I did so misjudge you, and therefore dooly and humbly axes your pardon.”

So they walked side by side “up river” till dingy wharves, docks and unlovely warehouses were behind, and before them the broad stream winding between tree-shaded banks whereon, every here and there, stood

goodly houses secluded behind tall, green hedges or mossy walls past which ran the grass-bordered towing-path.

It was towards one such house that Oliver and Mr. Shrig directed their gaze, a small house built in an earlier age, surrounded by a lofty wall and with water-stairs before it whereon, perched like some large, solitary, dejected bird, drooped the elusive Dan'l; glancing up as they approached, he gestured furtively with stealthy finger, at which brief signal Mr. Shrig seemed to falter in his stride, then hastened on again, his face suddenly grim.

"Dan'l," said he, rather breathlessly, "you don't mean it, lad?"

"Ar!" nodded Dan'l, "your birds, Jarsper, has went!" and shifting his perch on the time-worn stair he showed them a great, broad smear there was no mistaking, with other dreadful spots and splashes beyond.

"Now—dog-bite—me!" sighed Mr. Shrig. "Both on 'em, eh, Dan'l? No sign o' them—alive or dead?"

"Nary sign, Jarsper. Been a bit o' doin' as ye see."

"You've been inside, Dan'l?"

"Ar. Plenty more on it there, walls, floors, stairs an' a spot or so on the ceiling. Winder broke, cheers broke, servants gone, everybody gone,—nothin' o' nobody left 'cept more o' this yere—and all along the gardin walk too!"

"Gone by boat, eh, Dan'l?"

"Must ha', Jarsper."

"Lads still on their posts?"

"Ar."

Mr. Shrig whistled, sudden and shrill, whereat, as if conjured from space, six stalwart fellows appeared, to salute silently and group themselves about Mr. Shrig, who muttered orders that sent three of them running "up river" and three of them "down."

"Wot o' me, Jarsper?"

"Take charge till relieved. Collect all letters and papers."

"Ain't ye goin' to peep indoors, Jarsper?"

"Later, Dan'l, not now, 'tis—too late!"

"Meanin', Jarsper?"

“As this here case has went and fell to pieces,—blow my dickey if it ain’t!”

So saying, Mr. Shrig turned and began to amble back along the towing-path, a silent, pensive man whose roving glance seemed to watch the tide-race, every eddy and ripple, with a certain gloomy expectation; and Oliver, guessing for what his speechless companion looked so patiently, began to watch these broad, ever-moving waters also—and with such horrified intentness that more than once he fancied to see the pale oval and staring eyes of a half-submerged face, an up-tossed arm, a vague shape that rolled grotesquely to the rippling flow.

“Look!” he cried suddenly, gripping his companion’s arm. “There, Jasper—there!”

“Ay, I’ve had my ogle on it this five minutes and more, a water-logged barrel.”

“What exactly are you—expecting?”

“Pal, I ain’t sure. If ’twas any other than Viskers I might wenter a opinion, but, being Viskers,—I don’t know.”

“That blood, Jasper?”

“A blind, p’raps, and the two on ’em a setting cosy in arm-cheers, taking a cheery glass, or a-strollin’ ’long Piccadilly, or galloping East, Vest, North or South.”

“What’s your surmise?”

“I think per-chance the case is finished com-plete. Jarsper’s cheated and The Law—bilked!”

They were almost within sight of the “Jolly Young Waterman” and the river busy with traffic of ships, boats and barges, when Mr. Shrig halted suddenly and pointed with his nobbly stick.

“Yonder, pal!” said he.

“What, Jasper?”

“A boat, a skiff.”

“There are so many.”

“Coming athwart stream, pal, astarn o’ that string o’ barges!”

“Ah yes—I see!”

“Then, Mr. O. pal—vatch now!” Having said which, Mr. Shrig set fingers to lip and emitted a shrill, ear-splitting whistle whereat the small distant boat appeared to falter, then, altering its course, began to approach them; a sharp-nosed, narrow craft with very long oars plied by a man whose face showed now on one shoulder, now on the other, and yet who rowed very deliberately.

“Now, pal, d’ye see?”

“Yes, it’s the man Bartrum.”

“Ay, Bill it is. And he’s caught summat!”

“How d’you know?”

“He’s rowin’ so werry careful.”

The boat was so much nearer now that Oliver could see a line towing astern, a dripping cord that slacked and tautened and stretched, every now and then, with a ghastly suggestiveness of dead weight; presently Bartrum rested on his oars to turn and signal with his arm and so came on again while Mr. Shrig uttered sound very like a moan.

“Heigho! I guessed as much. Bill’s luck’s turned at last,—ah—and with a wengeance!”

“What . . . Jasper, what do you mean?”

“He’s got two on ’em, pal.”

“Good God! Is it . . . are they . . .?”

“You’ll see, purty soon now.”

Bartrum manœuvred his boat very deftly until it was immediately below them, he reached the line, made fast beside him, he hauled it in slowly and with anxious care. . . . And thus, presently, Oliver saw . . . arms that clung, hands that griped with such fierce intensity of hate that even Death might not loose or unlock, it seemed.

“Never seed the like of it!” said Bartrum. “Need a charge o’ gunpowder to part ’em, I reckon.”

Strife or action of the water had stripped off the gutta-percha mask, leaving those mutilated features bare, but, looking down on them now, Oliver saw upon their marred beauty a faint, strange smile.

“Been in the wars, this un!” nodded Bartrum.

“Yes,” answered Oliver, “but I hope, I think he has found peace at last, poor soul, and happiness . . . perhaps . . . someday.”

“He was a reg’lar bad ’un, Mr. O. pal—and t’other ditto.”

“But they are risen beyond our judgment, Jasper.”

“Ay, they’re better dead!”

“Much better, Jasper, and will become ever better, I dare to believe.”

“Then you think this ain’t their finish com-plete?”

“Only of their bodies.”

“Well, ’tis their bodies as is all as matters to The Law and me. Souls ain’t o’ no account in this here world, pal.”

“No, Jasper, not until trouble comes or death threatens,—then even the most cynical fellow is apt to think of his soul and to worry for what shall become of it.”

“And vot do you think becomes on it?”

“I believe it rises to greater and nobler life.”

“Pal, I’ve see a many die, and mostly black, bad uns,—and some takes it worry ’ard and some precious kind and easy. Some’s mortal afeard and some laughs. Hows’ever Viskers took it easy and kind by his looks. And yet, peeping down on him now, I can give ye his eppytaph in them remembered vords—‘poor trash’. . . And here, for the time being, us parts, friend and pal, dooty calls, so there’s my famble, pal Oliver, and mind you as Shrig o’ Bow Street is to you, ever and allus—Jarsper.”

“Good-bye, Jasper! Will you be good enough to let my uncle have a full report of—of—this?”

“Ay, I will so, pal.”

Then Mr. Shrig descended very nimbly into the boat and Oliver turned away not to see again the stark horror of those clutching arms and hands.

Nevertheless the horror was with him as he came in sight of the “Jolly Waterman,” it went with him as he turned into Cherry Orchard Court, it was with him even then until—banished suddenly for the time being, by a glad cry, a high-pitched squeal of joy . . . and to him ran a small shape of dainty loveliness with yearning arms outstretched to him and eyes that held a love and welcome beyond words.

“Oh, my Lia!” said he, as her arms came about him. “Dearest!” he said as he lifted and folded her to his heart.

“Ah—my Oliver, I’m glad . . . so gladly glad you’re with her again! At last—an’ so very long it’s been!”

“So am I, Sweetheart!” said he, hoarsely.

“You won’t leave me again, my Oliver?”

“No!”

“An’ you’ll take me back someday . . . back to my trees an’ woods . . . just you an’ me?”

“Yes, Darlingest . . . my dear one.”

“Then—here’s ’nother kiss. An’—soon?”

“Very soon.”

“Then here’s ten kisses! There! Now come in an’ kiss my Liz ’cause she’s cried for you sometimes, an’ so needs lots an’ lots of love an’ kisses now, my Oliver.”

CHAPTER XXXVII

CONCERNING, AMONG OTHER MATTERS, RUM

“RUM!” said Oliver, angrily. “Rum is the spirit will haunt this place and your life if you marry him! Utter folly on your part and oceans of rum on his!”

Saphronia, seated at her small but very businesslike desk, might have been weeping, for her head was bowed and she held a dainty handkerchief to her face; then again, she may have been laughing, for her plumply-attractive shoulders had an odd quiver about them, yet her voice sounded tearful when she spoke:

“You are so stern, Oliver! So short! So sharp! So—brutal!”

“Not brutal, Saphronia, stern, perhaps, as you were in the old days when I was endangering my small, impish person. Well, you are perilling yourself now, your whole future and I must protest for your own sake. I’ll not stand by and see you throw yourself away on a coarse, guzzling, fortune-hunting —”

“Hush, Oliver! Remember he fought for our England and shed his blood —”

“Though not quite enough, Saphronia!”

“Oh! Oliver!” Here, feeling the occasion demanded it, she sobbed, and so convincingly that Oliver tempered his harshness to gentle reproach.

“Of course, my dear, if you truly love this fell—captain, I’ll say no more—except to hope my judgment of him is wrong or that your sweet influence may change him, constant association with you. . . . Where is he, by the way?”

“Lying down, my dear.”

“Oh? At this time of day?”

“He . . . the poor man didn’t feel very well, so—”

“Rum!” said Oliver, more bitterly than before. “He prefers the bottle to your company, it seems. I tell you, Saphronia, your captain is simply—”

“Hush my dear! And besides he . . . isn’t my captain—yet!”

“Thank heaven!” said Oliver, fervently, turning to scowl out of the window and thus quite unaware of the kisses that were being wafted at him

so energetically. "But do you," he demanded, glancing round so suddenly he nearly caught her in the act, "do you mean him to be?"

"Well, I . . . that is, we, of course, have not decided upon the exact date, though to be sure he is very—urgent!"

"You are determined to marry him, then?"

"Why, ye-e-es, as I've told you. Oh yes, certainly! My promise, my sacred vow! So many years ago! I must! I shall—unless—he should depart suddenly, and then of course it would be impossible."

"Then the sooner he's made to depart, the better."

"No, Oliver! You shall work no violence! I forbid it—strictly!"

"Not I, Saphronia."

"Nor Tom! Nor George! Nor William!"

"Nor these either. This must be the joy and privilege of Inigo Drake."

"Inigo? Oh, Goodness Gracious!" Here she peeped over her handkerchief at Oliver's broad back with one very bright eye that sparkled and not with tears. "Oh, Merciful Goodness me! Inigo indeed! Ridiculous! He couldn't! He wouldn't! Besides he is become so cold, so distant, so infinitely remote! He never comes to see me nowadays, his visits have quite ceased."

"Can you wonder?"

"No—yes! Yes, certainly I do! To so . . . so neglect me! After all these years! Quite heartless! I even wrote asking him to dine here."

"And naturally he didn't accept."

"No! His refusal was most curt! Quite odious! You shall hear it. Now where did I toss down his very objectionable missive? See if it is upon the mantelshelf." Then, while Oliver searched obediently, she drew the note from her bosom, made a rustling of papers on her desk and exclaimed, "Ah, here is the thing! Now listen, this—this is what he writes: 'Dear Miss Saphronia, thank you but I have my snuff. Yours once most devotedly and forever, I. O. Drake.' Snuff indeed! . . . I've often wondered, and never asked him, what the O stands for, not Oliver, I know. I fear it must be—Obadiah!"

"And I'm wondering just what he means by—'yours once devotedly—and forever'?"

“Sounds quite ridiculous, doesn’t it, Noll?”

“No. But talking of Inigo—what of the Captain? Do you love him, Saphronia?”

“He has my plighted word and—”

“Nonsense, my dear! Merely to imagine him master of you and your money—sickens me! Does he love you? Can he possibly care for you—snoring in drunken slumber,—and Inigo dying for you!”

“Dying? Oh, my Gracious! How do you know? How do I? He never said so! Never told me!”

“Yet he is grieving for you, Saphronia. I’m sure as if I could see him, drooping in his chair—”

“Yes! Yes!” she exclaimed. “All snuff and sneezes!”

“But you know he loves you,—truly, nobly.”

“Oh, but why did he never say it . . .?”

“You are rich, he is poor and loves you too well, I think.”

“Poor Inigo!” she murmured.

“Well, here’s the captain lives for rum, and Inigo for you, merely to serve you, asking no recompense. Now were I to tell him the captain is making you unhappy—”

“No! You mustn’t, Noll! You shall not.”

“Say but the word, my dear, or no—a nod, a wink shall do, and I’ll to Inigo and it will be door or window for the Captain.”

“Oh, but, Noll, if he did,—if he should—if he could—?”

“There’s no if, Saphronia.”

“Then if he does—what then?”

“It remains with you, my dear.”

“What does?”

“The ‘what then.’”

“Oh-h-h!” murmured Saphronia, covering her face again.

“Yes!” said Oliver, “there would be only you—you and Inigo.”

“But I should have you and Clia.”

“Well—no,” he answered, gently, “No, my dear. We are going back to the countryside, to Dapplemere,—the smell of horses, and clean, new-turned earth, the sun and the rain and the wind, the kindly leisured folk, the grandeur and simplicity of it all! Saphronia, my dear, we are going—home!”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, forgetting her handkerchief and seeming far more woeful without it. “Then I . . . I shall be alone again!”

“You will have your Faithful Three, my dear, your great, poor ‘family,’ your thousand acts of mercy.”

“You left—him out, this time—Inigo,” she murmured, and, still forgetting her handkerchief, that small screen for duplicity, she looked at Oliver eye to eye; and slowly, from shapely throat to smooth brow crept a flush so rich and sweetly conscious that, for the moment, it made her a shy girl again and infinitely lovable, or so thought Oliver, and went to her.

“Why . . . Saphronia?” he said, and she not answering, he sank beside her on his knees. “Why, my dear, then it is Inigo! You love him?”

“Oh, I do, I do!” she whispered. “I have done all these years, but was too shyly silly to let him know and when I—tried to, he—he showered snuff at me and made me sneeze! So ridiculous but . . . oh, my dear, so real and true and . . . sweet! Yes, it’s Inigo, and always has been.”

“And the Captain?”

“I could never have really loved him—a silly girl’s fancy . . . epaulettes and cocked hat, I suppose. But . . . Inigo, so shabby and careless. Oh, Inigo—! Noll dear, I’ve loved him so dearly and kept it so deep hidden that now to speak it is such joy that I could go on and on—”

“No!” said Oliver, kissing her. “No, bless you, I’ll off to him—” She was afoot instantly, breathless and almost wild-eyed.

“Noll . . . Oh, Oliver, you won’t tell him . . . Not a word. . . . Oh, for dear mercy’s sake you won’t betray me?”

Oliver sighed heavily and looked down on her reproachfully.

“My poor child,” said he, in mournful reprobation, “it is freely admitted I am not a sprightly spark. I am not attractive to The Sex. I am slow of tongue and curt of speech, my brilliance will never blind a living soul. However I have wits—of a sort, that warn me when my heavy foot is on holy ground. Therefore I will not, wouldn’t and could not spoil a romance that is, and ever will be, sacred to—just your two selves. Trust me, Saphronia.”

“Oh, I will! I do! I ever shall, dearest Noll! Kiss me, my Oliver!”

CHAPTER XXXVIII

TELLS HOW AND WHY MR. DRAKE GAVE UP HIS SNUFF

THE somewhat grimy shop bearing the legend:

ARMS AND ARMOUR. I. O. DRAKE. ANTIQUES

this haven or rather hospital where battered weapons and damaged furniture were restored to new life and worthiness, this repository of rust and dust and cobwebs being closed for the night, Oliver applied at a certain very retiring side door which, dim with weather, seemed to shrink from notice; which door, after two or three applications of the knocker, was eventually opened by Mrs. Murcher who, perching her faded-looking cap more securely on her knob of hair, raised both mittened hands aloft calling the Lord of Hosts to witness her relief at mere sight of "Mist' Oliver."

"'Tis the master, sir, the pore master! There ain't no doin' for 'im no'ow! Talk 'e don't never an' when 'e do 'tis moan! Eat? The Gracious Providence knows as flies eats more! Drink? Ah, if 'e honly would, the pore soul,—jest, say a sup o' gin, say 'arf a quart'n, as a fillup for 'is sperrits, which none 'e ain't got,—so low 'e is as they've sank right through 'im to the very Aunty-Podes, which means through the earth's bowils."

"You are suggesting he is unhappy?"

"Like I tells you, Mist' Oliver. 'E's that low 'e can't go no lower 'cept as a pore, shrouded corpse. If 'e don't look up soon, sir, 'e'll look that down as 'e'll never look up no more, pore creetur! 'S my bleef as 'e's in a decline an' failin' rapid,—'is vi-tality, sir, is being drawed and drained away like beer in a barril when the spiggit's hout an' the tap's hon! And—snuff? The kind Father o' Mercies knows as I can't never go a-nigh 'im but I sneezes that violent there's no 'olding,—broke me stay-lace last Toosday it did! And there's them pigs' trotters, cooked 'em lovely, I did, but—no! That was Thursday,—I've took them trotters in to 'im reg'lar an' tempted 'im wiv 'em hever since, but 'e moans an' shivers at sight o' them, pore soul! His insides, Mist' Oliver, must be empty as so many drums, sir!"

"Pray, where is he?"

"A-settin' in 'is sinkum sankorum, sir, 'is study, Mist' Dale, among all them dusty books wot 'e don't never seem to read."

So Oliver went along the littered passage, up grimy stair and knocking on a certain door, opened it, stepped into this small sanctum, closed his eyes and sneezed violently. The spasm subsiding, he beheld Mr. Drake through a

snuffy haze, drooping in comfortless arm-chair above a dim, smokily-dismal fire, a figure of woeful dejection sunk to abysmal deeps of gloom; however he arose at sight of Oliver, shook his hand warmly, his own head sadly, sighed and sat down again.

“Oliver,” said he, “my dear fellow, I have decided to sell up and . . . wander.”

“Where?” Oliver enquired.

“The globe, the world—Ultima Thule.”

“Ah!” said Oliver, taking the only other chair. “When?”

“Soon! Yes, soon as possible. Before . . . it takes place, I hope.”

“It?” Oliver enquired.

“Her . . . wedding! When is it?”

“This depends on yourself, Inigo.”

Mr. I. O. Drake opened his mouth but was dumb, he stared yet speechless while Oliver, taking the poker, began to cherish the sullen fire tenderly, wooing it with touch here and tap there, until came a spark, a glow, a tongue of flame that vanished instantly.

“Me?” said Inigo, in strangled tone.

“Yes,” nodded Oliver, tickling the morose fire.

“But . . . oh, my dear fellow, what . . . what can I do? How am I concerned?”

“She needs you, Inigo.”

“How . . . ah, pray how? And—why? What for—when?”

“Desperately. To remove her captain. At once.”

“Remove . . . her captain . . .?” repeated Mr. Drake, gasping. “But she . . . she loves him . . .”

“No. She only loved his memory. She worshipped a dream but despises the reality, Inigo.”

“Despises? Are you . . . sure?”

“Certain. And yet, unless something is done, I fear she will allow him to marry her because of her age-old promise, though, as I say, he’s making her quite miserable.”

“Then . . . oh then something should be done, must be done . . . shall be done. At once! This moment! Now! Where’s my hat?”

“Here!” said Oliver, taking it from the littered mantelshelf.

“We go!” said Mr. Drake, clapping it on; then turning over a confusion of objects in dim corner, he took up a ponderous battle-axe.

“No!” said Oliver, halting at the door.

“What, my dear fellow, what?”

“That axe! You’ll manage without that.”

“Of course!” said Inigo, laughing quite joyously. “This,” he explained, wielding the heavy weapon in surprisingly potent hand, “is for the niche above her desk. A magnificent Fourteenth Century piece, Noll, beautifully inlaid, as you see, and—feel the balance,—no, come on!”

So forth they went into the evening glow, Mr. Drake quite forgetting to change his snuffy, old indoor coat and with the ponderous battle-axe tucked lightly beneath sinewy arm, his long legs striding large, lean frame more upright than usual and a look in his wide-set eyes that warmed Oliver’s heart.

“Shall we take a hackney-coach, Inigo?”

“No, ’twould stifle me. I need air, man, air. For d’ye see, Noll, since she wants him away, it—ha, it opens before this poor, starving wretch such prospect that, well—damn her money!”

“Heartily, Inigo,—as you should have done years ago!”

“I’ve been, my dear fellow, a monstrous fool!”

“Agreed, Inigo.”

“If—I tremble at the mere thought, Noll!”

“What?”

“If,” repeated Mr. Drake, striding even faster, “if when the Captain has departed, she so much as looks at me—one look, Noll, I . . . by God, I’ll kiss her . . . here on my heart, her dear, small, busy feet well off the ground, my dear fellow!”

“The higher, Inigo, the better! And, by the way, what does the letter O stand for?”

“What letter O?”

“In your name.”

“Octavian. It is an old, family name, traditional.”

“Good!”

“Why so?”

“She fears it may be ‘Obadiah’.”

He laughed again, and more gaily than Oliver ever remembered of him.

“What sort of person is this Captain, Noll?”

“Large!”

“Good!”

“And looks sufficiently formidable—despite rum!”

“Better and better! Hard to remove? Show fight, perhaps, eh, Noll? No meekness, may need urging, eh?”

“Undoubtedly!”

“My cup,” sighed Inigo, “looketh like running over!”

“You feel confident, Inigo—capable?”

“Infinitely! In such cause! Also, I used to be pretty efficient with my fists once, Noll, though to be sure I always took unfair advantage of my unfortunate antagonists.”

“You, Inigo! How so?”

“Being extremely highly strung I always trembled, Noll, shivered and shook to such degree that they, poor fellows, and everyone else, always put it down to a perfectly wrong emotion, for, once the combat was joined, I enjoyed it . . . too well, much too well! This captain now, besides large is a fairly powerful, lusty person, I hope?”

“He is, and as I say, despite rum!”

“Ah!” sighed Inigo, his mild eye kindling. “And I have eaten very little of late, this should offset his rum. . . . Her present unhappiness is not due to his any least maltreatment?”

“Oh no!”

“It is well!” sighed Inigo. “Though such would have been excuse for any, well—bodily discomfort it may please me to cause him.”

“You are sure you can?” enquired Oliver, eyeing his companion somewhat askance.

“My dear fellow, yes decidedly! In my halcyon days I never met any who could stand up to me—except two, and they were Natty Bell and John Barty, ‘Glorious John,’ champions both.”

“Lord!” exclaimed Oliver, and chuckled. “Lord bless you, Inigo, how little I dreamed it or suspected!”

“No one ever did!” sighed Inigo, plaintively. “I was never an assertive person, and the years have made me all too retiring perhaps,—yes, certainly, much too retiring, especially of late.”

The old river was yet brave with a vivid sunset when they reached “The Jolly Young Waterman” to find The Faithful Three busied with evening traffics.

“The Captain is not still asleep, I hope, Tom?”

“No, sir, I calkulate as he’s about half-way through his first evening bottle, sir—in Dragon, sir.”

So to Dragon they went, the door of which Inigo opened and thereafter stood a moment to view its instantly irate occupant; and Oliver, discreetly remote, saw his whole lean frame was shivering and shaking with an odd violence as came the Captain’s ferocious roar:

“Avast, you there! Bring up and haul off! This berth’s private, d’ye hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Inigo, mild of eye and meek of tone, “but I come most earnestly to desire your immediate withdrawal from these premises—”

“Eh? What? What’s that?”

“I’m sure you heard me, sir.”

“I know I did, but—say it again.”

“Sir, I ask your instant removal, bag and baggage.”

“Well, damn your eyes!” raged the Captain. “Ye snuffy, sniffing, lubberly swab—listen t’ me! If ye ain’t clear o’ my hawse in the twinkle of a rope’s end, I’ll be aboard ye! So bowse about,—haul off and be damned.”

“Now,” sighed Inigo, taking out his watch in tremulous hand to lay it upon the table, “if in,—let us say—two minutes you are not away, I shall do

my serious utmost, sir, to kick you forth forthwith, so do pray be warned, sir.”

The Captain rose, a looming shape of menace; he hunched broad shoulders somewhat too beefy, he thrust out large jaw, somewhat too fleshy, he reached a heavy cane very deliberately from adjacent corner and, bending it between large, hairy hands, spoke:

“Y’ lousy swab—hearkee! If you a’nt out o’ that door and lively—I heave ye through the window!”

“Ah!” sighed Inigo, plaintively. “The window,—a happy suggestion!” And slowly he stepped forward. And now, deceived by his trembling, meek and mild aspect, the Captain was so unwise as to strike, and so viciously that, missing this trembling but elusive body, the cane splintered against the panelling; then Dragon was full of sound and rapid movement,—the table spun askew, a chair went over with a crash,—someone snarled a curse,—someone laughed, and Oliver glimpsed a brief vision of the Captain’s astonished visage going violently backwards, saw his long arms whirling helplessly, saw him check momentarily at the wide-open casement,—then out and through it he went to lie gazing up fixedly into the evening sky, while Inigo, having picked up the fallen chair and set the table back exactly in its accustomed place, glanced out from the window and seeing the captain had contrived a sitting posture, bowed.

“I trust, sir,” said he, mildly, “you are not too shaken to walk, for walk you must. Your effects shall be sent on to you later if—”

The Captain’s retort was of such blistering virulence and so unashamedly blunt that Inigo recoiled, then, fumbling in pocket, leaned further through the casement and emptied the contents of his large snuff-box upon the still speechful captain whose eloquent scurrility ended suddenly in a gasp, a groan, an explosion of sneezes. . . . Thus the unhappy captain, blinded, choking, scrambled to his legs, reeled, staggered, but sneezed himself away and out of their lives.

Then, turning from the window, Inigo beheld Miss Saphronia . . . and she was looking at him, and with eyes whose tender brightness held such message that for a moment he stood mute and very still.

“Oh . . . Inigo!” she gasped, and far more breathless than he for all his recent exertions. “The snuff! To so blind and choke the . . . the poor wretch! It was cruel!”

“It was waste!” he answered. “But I shall need the stuff nevermore, because . . . Oh, Saphronia, by all that’s most holy, hereafter I’m . . . taking you instead.”

Then, and even as he had promised Oliver, he went to her, he caught her up in those unsuspectedly mighty arms, and holding her thus high against his heart, he kissed and kissed her with such fervour that Oliver, backing silently across the threshold, closed the door upon a happiness it seemed he himself was never to experience; wherefore he sighed, grieving, and went dismally up that crooked and murderous stair.

CHAPTER XXXIX

WHICH, THOUGH SHORT, IS FULL OF ACTION

OLIVER had just finished a letter to his uncle telling the tragic end of his mission and his own meditated departure from London, when he was startled by an ear-splitting yell, and glancing hastily through the window, beheld a small, wild figure—a thing of grime and tatters that stood on one leg opposite the open door of the taproom, pulled a long nose, squinted horribly and instantly transformed itself into a human cartwheel, spinning itself round the court on fingers and toes.

“Robin—Robin!”

The ragged urchin, ceasing his acrobatics, turned and stood glowering.

“ ’Ullo! ’S you is it, Squire?”

“Come here, Robin.”

“I ain’t, I’m Snod!”

“No, you’re Robin to me. Come here, Robin!” The boy came, shuffling.

“Why did you run away?”

“ ’Cos o’ Tom washin’ an’ a-scrubbin’ an’ a-barfin’ me, that’s why.”

“Where are your new clothes?”

“Sold ’em.”

“Why?”

“Well, nobody ain’t agoin’ t’ wash me an’ put onto me a lot o’ tight duds, they ain’t!”

“You look hungry.”

“I’m allus ’ungry, I am!”

“Have you eaten anything to-day?”

“No I ain’t . . . not ’ardly.”

“Then take this shilling and feed.”

“Love me lights!” exclaimed the urchin, snatching the coin and pouching it in his cheek; then he spat it out again, shook his head at it and proffered it back.

“Squire,” he sighed, “you ain’t like the rest on ’em so I gotter tell ye as I ’ave ate, I prigs me an ’ot tater off ’a Joe Betts’s stall, I did,—so I ’ave ate, I ’ave and there’s y’r cole again.”

“Keep it, Robin, and buy yourself a proper meal instead of thieving.”

“Right y’are, Squire. I only prigs when I ’as to.”

“And what are you doing hereabouts?”

“Jist for a peep at—er!”

“Miss Saphronia?”

“Bli’ me—no! The Little Un. She was kind t’me, same as you, an’ I like her, I do—prime!”

“Well, off with you and eat.”

The boy nodded his touzled head, winked his strangely luminous eyes one after the other and speeding away on soundless bare feet, very nearly cannoned into a tall and splendid gentleman who checked his hastily swinging stride to curse him peevishly and catching sight of Oliver at the window, came on at sauntering pace; he beckoned airily, he smiled. Oliver, misdoubting this smile, hesitated.

“What is it, Roland?” he demanded.

“Hop forth,” said Roland, pausing to lean gracefully upon tasselled cane, “pop out and learn.”

So, after momentary delay, Oliver vaulted through the window and stood eyeing his cousin’s pale, handsome face dubiously.

“Well?” he enquired.

“I’ve word for your private auricular,” said Roland. “So—shall we perambulate?” They strolled on together and not a word until they reached the quiet stableyard, a place well screened from observation.

“Yes,” nodded Roland, glancing about, “this will suit admirably.”

“For what?”

“To conclude the small matter we’d hardly begun when you departed so suddenly, leaving me—on the floor.”

“But in—her arms!”

“Be good enough to leave Her out of this.”

“Certainly. Well?”

“Well, I’m here to continue that discussion where we left it. I was on the floor, very careless of me! Now, however, you behold me on my pins again! Shall we remove our coats? Better so, I think.”

“More pommelling?” questioned Oliver, bitterly scornful. “You’ve troubled to seek me here for—this?”

“Exactly! And here I place my hat and coat.”

“Then you can put them on again.”

“Not so, dear Cousin Smug! It shall be to a finish this time. I say—to a finish, you understand? We go on—and on until one or both can go no further.”

“Not I!” said Oliver, grimly.

“Ah, but you will!” nodded Roland, smiling, but with a devil in his eyes. “You will though I drive you, slap you, kick you to it,—oh you will.”

Oliver’s ruddy cheek paled; Roland’s usually pale face was flushed. Roland tucked up immaculate shirt sleeves; Oliver folded his arms.

“I intend,” said Roland, advancing a threatening step, “to prove and know, once for all, which of us is the better man.”

“Fighting will never prove it!”

“Fighting shall!”

“No!” said Oliver, retreating a pace.

“Yes!” said Roland, advancing fiercely.

“Be content,” quoth Oliver, thickly, “you’ve won Deborah, maybe through my own cursed slowness,—but you’ve won her—and a rich patrimony . . . be content, man, and leave me to make the best I can of things.”

“And this,” said Roland, his delicate nostrils flaring, “this is exactly it! Only the better of us should win such inestimable prize,—she must and shall have the better one of us. Thrash me and, even though I am her choice, I . . . I’ll leave you a clear field as the better and therefore worthier man. . . . But—oh when I’ve thrashed you, why then I shall feel myself almost worthy of her. Now will you fight in such cause?”

“No!” answered Oliver, folding his arms the tighter, “Not though you strike or . . . even . . . kick me!”

Roland lowered his eager fists to stare in mute and stark amazement.

“Damme but . . . but why . . . why not?” he stuttered at last. “You’re no craven as I’m very well aware,—not afraid . . . and yet—”

“Ah,—but I am!” said Oliver, harshly. “When I see the old hate alive in you it wakes such murderous devil in me . . . urging . . . tempting. . . Ah, put on your coat, man, and go . . . back to your happiness.”

Roland laughed derisively and fell to his guard.

“Have at your devil, then!” he jeered. “Put up your hands, or—must I hit you?”

“As you will,” said Oliver and, almost as he spoke, reeled from the painful, jarring impact of his cousin’s fist.

“Will—that start you?” demanded Roland, between gnashing teeth. “Or must I strike again?”

“Again!” answered Oliver, wiping blood from his face. “And again! I shall not hit back, for if I did . . . I should go on . . . and on . . . until I . . . killed you.”

“Then, damn you, kill me—if you can. Master Cocksure!”

Oliver turned away.

“Ha—why,” cried Roland, maddened by this gesture, “why not now? You were ready and willing enough, last time!”

“And . . . She, thank God, was there . . . to save you. . . . and me from . . . murder!”

“Tush and the devil! Will you fight?”

“No!”

“Then—take it!” Roland struck again and this time so truly that, uttering a choking gasp, Oliver went down headlong and lay inert.

For a moment Roland looked down at his handiwork in wide-eyed dismay and, seeing him so dreadfully still, bent down in quick anxiety; then snatching a wisp of clean straw he set it beneath this heavy, unconscious head, donned hat and coat hastily, stooped yet again above his unconscious cousin, saw him begin to stir, nodded, and hurried away.

CHAPTER XL

TELLS OF DEMONS AND AN ANGEL

SMALL, cool hands that smoothed his brow and caressed his hair, small yet very capable hands that wiped the blood from his bruised face so tenderly; lips that kissed his eyes, his mouth; a soft voice that questioned him:

“Oh, dear Oliver, did you all fell down an’ hurted your poor self, my Oliver?”

“I . . . yes,” he murmured, blinking up into the little, motherly face bent to him with such tender solicitude. “Yes, I . . . fell down, Sweetheart, and you—God bless you—have kissed me well again!” So saying, he made shift to rise, but found his legs so uncertain that she instantly propped him with her childish strength.

“Lean you on me, my Oliver,—there now! But you are so big ’n’ strong! How could you ever all fell down?”

“I was . . . induced to, my dear one. But how did you happen to find me?”

“I bringed some sugar for Puck.”

“Oh? And who’s Puck?”

“My little, pretty horse what Auntie Saffy buyed me all for my ownself to ride, an’ William’s learning me how an’ Auntie Saffy’s buyed me an habit ’n’ hat—with a fevver. So now come ’long an’ see my Puck—do!”

She brought him into the fragrant dusk of the stables and there showed him a dapple-grey pony whose fine, glossy coat did credit to William’s care and skill.

“Splendid!” said Oliver, caressing the pretty, well-mannered creature. “Splendid!”

“What do ‘splendid’ mean?”

“Fine, grand,—everything that’s nice, my dear.”

“So he is, an’ I’ll ’member that word.”

“Someday very soon, my dear, your Puck and my old Dobbin yonder shall carry us back, Darlingest, back to our trees and green meadows. We’ll go—home!”

“When—oh, when?” she demanded, breathlessly.

Oliver touched and felt the betraying bruises of his swollen face, glanced about almost furtively, looked from the child’s eager eyes up to the grimy rows of chimney pots above and around, visioned in their stead wide green dales and uplands, white, tree-shaded roads and answered on impulse:

“To-day! Now, Darlingest—now!”

“Oh!” she sighed in an ecstasy, and instantly kissed him in the waistcoat, being unable to reach higher until he lifted her to his lips.

“Your Aunt Saphronia’s out, isn’t she, Sweetheart?”

“Yes. She’s went in the carriage an’ Uncle Inigo’s went with her. An’ d’ you know they’re going to go an’ marry each other soon, Auntie telled me. An’ so I said ‘why,’ an’ so she said ‘caused they loved each other. An’ so then I said I loved you too, lots an’ lots. So when shall us go an’ marry each other, my Oliver?”

“Why, bless your little heart!” said he, stooping this time to kiss her. “Who knows? Someday, perhaps, when you’re grown up into a very beautiful fine lady . . . if (and here he sighed very dismally) if you will have me.”

“Oh, I will! I will, o’ course! I’ll have you now, please, ’cause I heard Auntie tell Jemima to be married was a blessed state,—an’ it’s nice to be blessed like I ask God in my prayers. An’ there’s William coming to feed Puck! Oh, William, please tell my Oliver how amazin’ I’ve took to riding my Puck.”

“Which, sir, is gorspel true!” nodded William. “I’ve learned a many and never nobody like s’quick. She’s took to it amaz—“—here noticing Oliver’s damaged face he checked, coughed, stared hard up into the roof and continued,—“amazing she’s took to it, Mist’ Oliver sir, as I was a-telling the Commodore this here very morning as is. That graceful, sir! And, Lord love us, the ’and of a born rider,—firm d’ye see and jist ’ard enough to feel the bit.”

“Splendid!” said Oliver again, very conscious that William’s round eyes were now staring hard at the cobbles underfoot. “And now, William, saddle up for us, like a good fellow. Puck and Dobbin, we are going for a ride.”

“Im-mejit, sir!”

Then, while Clia sped away to get ready, Oliver sat down and wrote this:

“MY EVER DEAR SAPHRONIA,

“Your two waifs have departed leaving you to the comfort of Inigo,—to whom my heartiest good wishes. We are away for Dapplemere where we shall hope and expect to welcome you both so soon as you will. Please give these Three Pounds to my good friends your Faithful Three, the Two Pounds to your four maids. And—for all your inestimable goodness to us, Clia and myself, I am now and evermore

“Your grateful, loving,

“OLIVER.”

He was writing the superscription when the door opened and a glad voice cried:

“Look! Oh look at me now, in my hat ’n’ fevver, look, my Oliver!”

He glanced up; he dropped his pen and turned to stare amazed, so incredible was the transformation. From plumed hat coquettishly tilted upon her shining hair, to trim little boot glimpsed beneath the long folds of her habit upborne across one little arm, she stood before him all unconscious grace, a small vision of precocious yet such artless loveliness that Oliver merely stared and so silently that she grew troubled and questioned him in tremulous anxiety:

“Don’t you like me like I am now, Oliver? Anne buttoned me up an’ telled me I must carry my skirts—so! An’ Jemima put my hat on a bit sideways to be cockette. . . . So now, oh don’t you like me?”

“Yes,” he answered. “Yes, indeed I do! You look so splendid!”

“Oh! Then I’m happy again.”

“But you seem . . . so much . . . older, sweetheart!”

“ ’Course I do, ’cause I’m growing up all the time, you see, an’ getting older ’n’ older every minute, so’s I’ll soon be a fine lady an’ bee-u-tiful as I can be—an’ all for you, my Oliver. So now, let’s go!”

Thus forth they went together to the stableyard where stood The Faithful Three to see them mount; and Oliver, very conscious of his bruised face, saw them all so profoundly careful to take no least notice of it that he laughed and went to them and drew them about him, like the familiar friends they were.

“You’ll notice,” said he, “that I’ve been ramming my face pretty hard against a harder fist, and you’ve all done the same before now, I’m pretty sure?”

“Mr. Oliver,” nodded Tom, “I says to you there’s been times, I says, when I would never ha’ reckernized myself but for my voice, says I.”

“And me,” said George, “when I fought Ben Ford, o’ The Buffs, day afore Bodajos it was, I didn’t know myself for a hour, and when I come to and did, the Sergeant looks me over and says: ‘If you’re George Faraday, fall in,—if you ain’t, fall out and go sick.’ Poor Ben was killed that night, which was a pity considering!”

“There was a bargeman,” said William, “and a big ’un. We fit for over a hower. And when I’d soused him in the river till ’e give me best, ’ome I goes and me mother, not knowin’ ’twas me, takes fright to that degree she calls for me to throw meself out.”

With such kindly inspired reminiscences they sought to put Oliver at his ease, and then became three very solemn fellows indeed to learn he was leaving them.

“Going, sir?” quoth George, “now what d’ye say to that, Tom?”

“Why I says what I says is—it don’t bear speaking on, says I.”

“Not nohow!” sighed William, shaking his head.

“Except,” added Oliver, “to bid each other good-bye until we meet again,—soon, let’s hope.”

Then, having shaken their hands rather hastily, though with great heartiness, he lifted Clia to her saddle, watched the instinctively right grip of her firm little hands upon the reins, smiled, nodded and swung to the broad back of his tall Dobbin, from which eminence he looked down upon the gloomy Three.

“How about a leading-rein, William?” he inquired.

“Lor’ bless ye—no, sir! We’ve done without, ah this week an’ more. She’s took to it amazin’ smart, d’ye see, ’tis wonderful!”

“Then once more good-bye till our next meeting.” So, with flourish of whip and wave of hand, Oliver and Clia bade farewell to The Three, and “The Jolly Young Waterman.”

Amid the noise and bustle of the streets he experienced at first no small anxiety on Clia’s account, but, seeing Puck so managed and well-behaved

and the child so happily confident and serene, his thoughts began to wander:

“Now if—instead of this demurely graceful child—she had been riding beside him, The One Woman, vital and quick with eager life and love,—his woman, and for all time, his wife—riding away with him into a glad future, a world and life all their own? Then what joy inexpressible!”

His senses reeled at the mere prospect.

“Deborah and he married! Deborah his wife and riding home with him. . . .” He closed his eyes and a groan broke from him,—echoed by a shrill hoot, startled shouts and warning cries,—and glancing round he beheld the well-mannered Puck dancing sideways and a small, tattered shape turning somersaults under the frightened animal’s very nose, quite heedless of the heavy traffic, and startled foot passengers.

“Robin!” he shouted, angrily and uncoiled the lash of his whip.

“No!” cried Clia imperiously. “Ah, don’t whip him, he’s only playing, so’s my Puck,—see, now, they’re both good an’ quiet again, only Robin’s gone.”

And, sure enough this fiendly urchin had vanished sudden as he had appeared.

Now once again, as they went on, Oliver wondered to see how marvellously his small companion had developed and improved thanks to the wise and tender care of Saphronia, on whose comely head he now poured voiceless benedictions.

They rode at Dobbin’s own particular gait, a leisured amble, thus it was high noon when they reached that lofty hill whence one may behold The Great City.

And here Oliver must needs pause to look back at the vasty loom of it, dimmed in a golden haze. This greatest and richest of all cities, this place of suffering and shame, of glory and triumph,—wherein he himself had experienced so much in these fleeting weeks,—horror and death and joy of sweet companionship, warm-hearted friendship and bitter animosity, love and irreparable loss. He thought again of Deborah, and yearned with a passion nigh to tears; he thought of Roland triumphantly happy in her love, and, touching his bruised face, of the hate-glare in his cousin’s eyes, the cruel power of his fist,—and, instead of answering hate, felt such wistful sorrow for that unworthy blow as surprised himself greatly.

Thus sat Oliver looking back on mighty London Town, grieving for what was and all that might have been,—quite unaware of the bright, loving eyes that watched him so very anxiously, until, reining her pony nearer, Clia touched him and spoke:

“Aren’t you glad, very, very glad that we’re going back to our country—just you an’ me?”

“Yes,” he answered, dully. “Yes, I am.”

“Then why d’you sigh an’ sigh an’ look ’s if you was going to drop great, big tears—oh why?”

“Just—thoughts, Sweetheart.”

‘ ’Bout—Aunt Saphronia?”

“Perhaps.”

“Then please, Oliver. Oh please don’t thought so weepy ’cause you’ll make me weepy too, an’ I don’t like t’ feel weepy ’cept sometimes when I’m glad like when I am when you call me ‘Darlingest’.”

“Then, my Darlingest, I won’t!”

“An’ I like you to call me ‘sweetheart’ too. So now shall us go on again, please?”

Forward they rode through golden sunshine and leafy shadows, Oliver busied with his thoughts once more, despite her merry chatter, until Clia finding him so gloomily remote, and hearing him sigh again, became silent also.

“Tired?” he enquired, at last.

“No,” she answered, sighing also and very heavily “Oh no, I could go on an’ on with you f’everanever . . . if . . .”

“If what, child?”

“If you didn’t an’ if you did.”

“Now what d’you mean by that?”

“Didn’t sigh so an’ did look at me sometimes an’ speak.”

“Yes,” he sighed, “I fear I’m rather dismal.”

“Is it your poor, hurted face?”

“Oh no. Just . . . thoughts.”

“But it isn’t Auntie Saphronia what you’re making all so many big sighs for—an’ so I can guess an’—I know!”

“What do you know?”

“It’s another lady.”

Oliver gasped, turned to look down at her, and beheld two eyes gazing up at him, eyes large with such wistfully sad foreknowledge and intuitive feminine understanding that for the moment speech was beyond him—until these strangely compelling eyes were hidden beneath the brim of her jaunty little hat.

“Child? My dear . . . why do you look at me so?”

“ ’Cause I was trying to see right inside you.”

“With . . . a woman’s eyes!”

“Well, I’m trying to grow myself into a woman so fast an’ quick as ever I can.”

“Why?”

“ ’Cause I . . . I am.”

“And that’s no answer, my dear.”

“Well, ’cause I think ’tis time what I growed myself into a fine lady for you.”

“But, Sweetheart, that will take years and years.”

“Ah, please don’t make it so many years else I shall go making big sighs like you!”

After this, they rode silently until, noting the sun so high above them, he enquired:

“Are you hungry, child?”

“I will be if you are.”

“Then, Sweetheart, I’ll be ravenous! And down there, beyond that little bridge and the brook sparkling below,—there, among those trees is an inn that looks the very place for hungry people.”

Before this inviting hospice they alighted and while the ostler led away their animals, Clia adjusted her hat, draped the folds of her habit across her arm with a somewhat anxious care, then suffered Oliver to lead her indoors,

bearing herself with such easeful dignity that, instead of laughing, he felt an odd sense of pleased and ever-growing wonder.

During the meal and being in company, for this famous inn was thronged with custom, she was elegantly polite and extremely attentive to his wants, with gestures and turns of speech reminiscent of Saphronia; but when at last they were mounted and away, she was again the joyously vital small personage that Nature it seemed had intended and Miss Saphronia's loving care had fostered.

"Did you noticed how I 'haved at table, Oliver,—never smacked my mouth or gobbled,—an' how I tucked in my elbows so p'lte like Aunt Saffy taught me, an' my feet crossed only you couldn't see 'cause of my habit?"

"I noticed, my dear."

"Was it—sp-lendid?"

"It was magnificent."

"Does that mean the same as 'sp-lendid'?"

"Yes, only more so."

"Now," she sighed, "you make me happy all over me!"

So they rode, side by side, through a landscape mellowed by the first shy kiss of Autumn, until shadows began to lengthen and before them, set well back from the dusty road behind tall trees, Oliver glimpsed that for which he had been looking,—a small, solitary inn, a cosy place with roomy stableyard and a garden where flowers bloomed; a quiet, drowsy place, with battered sign-board above the door bearing thereon a something that might have been tree-stump or waterspout, and called itself "The Wheatsheaf. Samuel Hobbs."

Scarcely had they reined up before the open door than appeared Mr. Hobbs in person, his hair stiffly upright and eyes round as ever, his eyebrows still seeming to ask of all and sundry their never to be answered question.

"Well, Sam," said Oliver, smiling down on him, "or should it be 'Bob'—how are you?"

"Why, sir, Lor' bless me now if it aren't . . . ay, but is it? Yes, I b'leeve it is yore very own self, sir."

"It is!" nodded Oliver.

“Why then, sir—ho, Soosan! Soo, come ee now and lookee yere!” Susan came, and looked, and running forward, clasped the child in welcoming arms.

“Ah, but you be so growed up and into such fine, grand lady—will ee let Soosan kiss ee, my lamb?”

Susan was kissed instantly.

“You’ll come in, sir—doo ee now!” said she, bobbing to Oliver. “You’ll take a bite or swaller o’ summat, sir?”

“We’ll stay the night, Susan, if you can put us up.”

“That I can, sir! An’ I gotten some real Chaney tea as I don’t think never paid no dooty—and a egg or so and a rasher, if that’ll soot?”

“Sp-lendid!” said Clia, busied again with her voluminous habit.

So the meal was prepared and set forth on snowy cloth beside a window that opened upon Sam’s garden whence stole a fragrance, a flowery sweetness that troubled Oliver with memories as sadly sweet; this garden where he had once sat and talked with Her . . . had kissed her beloved hand, slender fingers and pink palm. . . . Lost in sad musing he stared out into this so haunted garden sacred to the memory of Deborah and yearning for this vanished presence, sighed forlornly quite forgetting his small companion until, rousing at last, he turned to find her watching him with eyes of wistful reproach, her small fingers twisted together.

“My dear,” said he, stifling yet another sigh, “you eat nothing. Aren’t you hungry?”

“Well . . . I am! yes!” she answered, sighing also.

“Then why don’t you eat?”

“How can I when you don’t, an’ only make more sighings, an’ you’ve not tasted your tea what I’ve poured out for you so magnif’cent!”

“Watch me!” said he and emptying his cup at a draught, passed it to be refilled. So once again her little, eager hands hastened to serve him.

“There!” she sighed. “Now eat your egg!”

Oliver obeyed meekly.

“An’ please don’t look into the garden again till you’ve finished your tea.”

“And pray, madam, why not?”

“ ’Cause when you look into the garden an’ don’t see her there, you sigh an’ forget to eat—an’ me too!”

Oliver dropped his egg-spoon and leaning back, surveyed her with startled eyes.

“How . . . on earth can you know . . . who—?”

“ ’Cause I remember how you looked at her when she was there to look at—an’ I’m glad she isn’t there now, I am!”

“Why, Clia?”

“ ’Cause if she was there you’d go out to her an’ forget all ’bout me.”

Now, well knowing this for very fact, Oliver picked up his spoon and gave all his attention to the food before him.

“Please, my Oliver, do you frown at your bread ’n’ butter ’cause you’re angry at me? Are you?”

“No, because I’m wondering over you. Saphronia says you are ten. I begin to think you are older . . . much older . . . and yet—”

“That’s only because I’m growing myself up for you so fast as ever I can. Now will I give you some more tea, please? I know you like lotsanlots!”

“Thank you, my dear.”

Once again she performed on the teapot, steadying the lid delicately with one slim finger as Saphronia had been wont to do; and Susan entering at this moment with cakes warm from the oven, watched with smile of deep approval.

“Well, dearie me! Now don’t her do it real pretty and elegant! And oh my—but ain’t she growed, sir? Quite a fine lady, I do declare!”

“A—a lady?” repeated Clia, setting down the teapot with tremulous care. “Oh, Susan, do you reely an’ truly think so?”

“Yes, that I do—mam!”

“Oh, then—then come an’ be kissed, Susan, please.”

“Pray tell me,” said Oliver, when Susan had been duly embraced, “how old should you take Miss Clia to be?”

“Well, sir,” answered Susan, smiling down upon the dignified little figure, “the way she talks and ax, the way she bears her sweet, little ’ead so proud and pretty I’d say . . . anywheres betwixt . . . nine and twelve.” At this moment, in at them through the casement came Sam’s shock head and big hand grasping a neat bouquet of his cherished flowers.

“And ’ere be a nosegay, ma’m, for your leddyship’s buzzum!” said he. “An’ arter feedin’ ee can come an’ pick ’s many as ee do want, my pretty.” Saying which, he nodded and vanished.

“And, if you please, sir,” said Susan, blushing quite prettily, “how is the other gen’leman as was so very gay an’ pleasant and so—’andsome?”

“That’s Uncle Roly, what kissed you!” said Clia.

“Yes, dearie, ’e did so and very owdacious, I’m sure, but—oh my, such a way with him as I never did! How is ’e, sir?”

“Extremely well,” answered Oliver, “and—happy!”

“I’m glad o’ that, sir, ’e deserves to be sure-ly!”

And presently forth they went into the drowsy hush of this fragrant evening, to walk among the flowers and listen to the birds in the neighbouring coppice bidding each other “Good night” and making great to-do about it,—such shrill chirping that subsided gradually to gentle twittering, to leafy rustling and silence, for thrush and blackbird piped no more.

Hand in hand they went, seldom speaking, and often Oliver glanced towards that little arbour where he had sat with Deborah, and as often checked his sighs because of the small, wistful person who went beside him.

Thus they walked in the flowery solitude until evening faded into dewy night lit by a broad moon rising in a dull, golden splendour that would presently brighten to shining silver; so they stood to watch it until came Susan, her white apron shining through the moony dusk, to say “as how the little lady’s bed was ready:—

“And I’ve put the both of ee in the same room as last time, sir, if that’ll soot?”

“Both? Oh, but Susan, I don’t think—”

“Magnif’cent!” sighed Clia, sleepily. “An’ I’ve got a nightdress this time, my Oliver, with bows onto it an’ lace! Splendid! So, let’s go to our beds an’ see it—soon, shall us?”

“Which, sir, you’ll find candles an’ tinderbox ready sir, we’ve used up all our loocifers—an’ nasty, dangerous things they be—I think! Or will ee ha’ supper an’ me take you child t’ bed. She looks main wore out.”

“No!” said Clia.

“Yes!” said Oliver.

Sighful but obedient she left him—to wander disconsolate, to stare up at the moon’s cold, pale splendour and dream of Deborah; to wander aimless to and fro until he reached the little arbour, entered and sitting in its fragrant gloom, tried to imagine her beside him and, breathing her name, stretched yearning arms to the empty darkness. Then, cursing himself for fool, he bowed head between clenched fists and, thus made aware of his bruised face, thought of Roland, the Lover Triumphant, and burned with fierce anger bred by envy and a jealous fury.

And now, to him in the dark stole the Demon of Jealousy to taunt, with the Devil of Hate to tempt him.

“Fool Oliver,” mocked Jealousy, “but for Roland she might be with you now, close upon your heart, her loving arms about you,—but for Roland!”

“Roland is your enemy!” whispered Hate, “Roland is your curse, now as ever, his triumph your grief, your loss and desolation his joy—away with him!”

“She is for—his arms!” hissed Jealousy, “his forever,—except you act, Fool Oliver!”

“Her love is his joy!” jeered Hate. “The mark of his fist is your shame! Your despair his exultation. Ride back, exact your vengeance for this felon blow, smite him from your path and she shall yet be yours.”

“Haste then,” cried Jealousy, “before it be too late, spurn your rival from your path, tread him down, claim her for your own—her joy your strength, your arms her abiding comfort. Ride back! Ride back.”

“Ha, Fool Oliver,” cried Hate, “Roland scorns and mocks at you! Shall he also win from you the dearest thing in life? Ride back and front him, put forth all your might, strike nor spare for her sake and your own. Ride back! Ride. . . .”

“Oh, my Oliver, are you here?” A gentle touch upon his bowed head, little fingers that smoothed his furrowed brow; and looking up, he beheld a small, shining vision beneath the moon,—a vision before which the devils of Jealousy and Hate quailed and shrank and fled all suddenly away.

“You . . . you aren’t angry at me for coming and finding you, my Oliver, to show you my nightdress—so magnif’cent . . . you’re not angry, are you, please?”

“No!” he answered, clasping her to his breast, “you come to me like a small angel of God.”

CHAPTER XLI

TELLS HOW OLIVER WAS BRUISED TO HIS CONTENT

CLIA was asleep at last, and Oliver, leaning from the open casement, looked out across a peaceful countryside touched to new and mysterious beauty by the sinking moon.

A windless night very hushed and still, a night of such brooding quiet as that when he had seen figures striving close-grappled in the shadows and a pistol grasped in pale hand projected from the neighbouring window, had glimpsed a hairy visage as he struck; now looking from this window to the placid moon afloat in a cloudless heaven, he wondered where now was that strange, warped soul?

He gazed down at shadowy, motionless trees and the glimmering road that was to lead him home, loveless and desolate, to peace and new endeavour, or back to London for bloody encounter with Roland and perhaps to the heaven of Deborah's loving arms . . . perhaps! On to peace and loneliness of soul or back for strife and chance of joy ineffable—which?

He went to bed at last, only to lie broad awake plagued by his thoughts until these were banished suddenly and completely by a sound nearby—the creak of a lattice stealthily opened; and knowing what lattice this was, he started to his elbow, chilled with sickening dread, glancing wide-eyed from the child's slumbering form to the cracked china dog on the mantelshelf that stared back at him with the round, surprised eyes of landlord Sam,—and all about him a profound silence, a stillness very deep and awesome. Then his heart leapt to sound of furtive movement in the adjoining chamber, such as he had heard on just such another night. . . .

Motionless he listened until, not able to endure, he rose softly, glanced desperately round for some weapon and finding none, took up his spurred riding-boot and with this in powerful right hand, crept to the door of this next room, listened, hesitated and flung it suddenly wide.

A moment of breathless stillness and then, from shadowy corner a hoarse, pleading whisper:

“Don't . . . don't 'it us . . . I ain't doin' no 'arm!”

“You!” said Oliver in whisper that was also groan of relief; then, stepping into the room he closed the door.

“Robin, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, bli’ me! Is it only you, Squire? Lor lum, ain’t I glad t’ see ye though!”

“How did you get here?”

“On me trotters. I folleyed ye, I did, you an’ The Little Un, cos ’er an’ you was the only ones as was ever kind t’ me.”

“Nonsense, boy! Miss Saphronia was very kind to you—”

“Oh—’er! But ’er’s kind t’ everybody. . . . So I folleyed ye an’ when ye come in ’ere I tries a doss under them trees. But it ain’t like Lonnon, it ain’t, —so quiet an’ nobody about . . . I gets scared, fritted I did so I shinnied up froo th’ winder and ’ere I are, Squire.”

“So I see!” said Oliver, ruefully. “Well, here you’d better stay till morning. Curl up on the bed yonder. And not a sound, mind!”

“Aw right, Gov. But I’ll kip on th’ floor. I ’ates beds, I does!”

“And no noise, remember!”

“Nary sound, Gov!”

“After breakfast to-morrow you shall have enough money to get you back—in the carrier’s cart.”

“Ay, ay, Cap’n! You’re a jool, you are! An’ I’d better ’ave that money now, I ’ad.”

“To-morrow morning, Rob. Now—go to sleep.”

“Bungoo, Squire! You’re a good ’un, you are, and I likes ye.”

Then Oliver got back to bed, and turning his back on the radiant moon, glanced at Clia’s small, lovely face amid the tumbled glory of her hair, closed his eyes and was presently asleep nor stirred until a beam of warm sunshine dazzled him to wakefulness. Then he yawned, sat up, and, remembering the urchin, he rose, despite the early hour, and, dressing hastily, came to the next room only to find it empty, the fiendly boy had vanished.

So downstairs he went and out into the early sunshine; dew sparkled everywhere, birds were carolling near and far, and all things bright and glad with new day and the hope it brings; but for once Oliver was heedless and blind to it all, his sombre gaze yearning towards those hazy distances beyond which lay the mighty City and Deborah.

But suddenly, clear and sweet as any bird-song rose a voice calling his name and making a little, three noted song of it.

“Ol-i-ver!” And there was Clia leaning out to him from casement above, rosy with sleep and in all the glory of THE NIGHTDRESS with its tucks, laces and dainty knots of blue ribbon.

“Wait!” she cried, sweetly imperious, “I’m coming to take you an’ look for—mushrooms, so wait for me!”

And very soon down she came but without her habit, that is to say in a silk undergarment so brief it left her somewhat gawky limbs extremely free; whereupon ensued heated argument as to whether she would or would not take cold,—in the midst of which discussion she demanded his opinion of her legs.

“Too thin, much!” said he, gravely.

“Yes,” she nodded, “they’re a bit knobby I know, but Auntie Saphronia says they’re straight an’ ’ll plump out by ’n’ by, an’ Jemima says they’ll be heartbreakers someday,—but they’re very good to walk with an’ they run magnif’cent,—watch me!” And away sped the child so gaily and with such unexpected fleetness that the gloomy man, fired by her example, began to run also; thus went they hand-in-hand through this joyous morning; and if the mushrooms were few, their pleasure was none the less, for the child’s pure gladness and ceaseless flow of happy talk soothed this morose man to forget himself and his grief awhile, so that back they went, cheery almost as the morning, to be met and wooed by a blended fragrance of coffee and grilling ham rashers, a noble repast whereto they did full and leisurely justice.

Yet the day was still young when they took leave of Sam and his buxom Susan.

“You’ll call in and see us sometimes, sir?”

“Be sure of it!” answered Oliver, swinging to saddle.

“There’ll be apples for y’r leddyship,” said Sam, “ah an’ pears ’n’ plums purty soon, my dearie.”

“And perhaps a chicken—stuffed?” suggested Oliver, rather wistfully.

“Whenever ee will, sir.”

And so with hearty good-byes they rode upon their way.

“This evening at dusk,” said Oliver, when the “Wheatsheaf” had vanished behind them, “yes, if we ride easily and slowly, at about evening time, sweetheart, we shall come home.”

“But I am home, Oliver, ’cause my home’s where you are, ’cause you’re my Oliver and I’m all yours. So everything’s splen-did. An’ there’s a lark—look how quick he flies up an’ up ’s if he was going to God like a prayer!” But instead of looking at the bird Oliver viewed the joyous speaker, wondering and askance.

“Aunt Saphronia telled me all prayers, ’specially if to help other people an’ not selfish, mounts dreckly up to God. D’you pray your prayers an’ never forget, Oliver?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Oh! Then I’ll ’tend to this to-night. Prayer’s a power Anne telled me, an’ I want you to be nice an’ powerful, my Oliver. An’ I’m wondering how ’normous old you must be to ha’ growed yourself so tall ’n’ big. Oh, an’ d’you s’pose I’ll be tall ’n’ big too when I’ve growed me into a fine lady or little an’ nice like Aunt Saffy, an’ which will you like me bestest?”

“I think I shall like you however you are, dear one.”

“An’ this makes me want to kiss you an’ cry too, an’ that’s so silly ’cause I’m—oh so happy and ’tented.”

“Tell me instead how you’ve been getting on with your lessons?”

“Mag-nif’cent! I can read—splen-did! All the big words, too—almost. An’ I can write only I get a bit blotty sometimes. An’ I can do sums—addition and subtraction, an’ know all my tables up to twelve times. An’ I can sew too, hemstitch, cross an’ plain, so I’ll mend you when you’re old—clothes I mean, only yours never seem old or nice an’ ragged. An’ I’ll knit you lots o’ scarfs, an’ Jemima’s learning me to cook, only we’ve left her,—but I’m very good, Oliver, oh very! Not clever, Aunt Saffy says, but ’dustrious an’ quick.”

“Wonderful!” said Oliver, watching the play of these vivid, sensitive features.

“Yes!” she nodded, “I am! An’ I want you to know how splendid I am so’s you’ll love an’ need me more ’n you think you do.”

On they rode, by ways broad and narrow, through bowery hamlet and by village green, sometimes along grassy bridle-paths and leafy glades until, with the sun now high above them, they came out upon a small heath with

shady woodlands on the one side and a wide prospect on the other, a lush-green, rolling countryside, hill and dale stretching away far as eye might compass.

“Ooh!” exclaimed Clia, and checked her gentle Puck suddenly whereupon Dobbin halted also. “There!” she cried, with glad ring in her voice. “Oh, I’m pointing! An’ Auntie Saffy says ’t isn’t a bit ladylike to point,—but I mean that pony, Oliver.”

“Well, my dear, what of him?”

“He’s Di-ogenes an’ b’longs to Jerry, so Jerry’s here somewhere an’ I’d love to see him an’—him to see my hat-an’-fevver—”

“Do you mean Jerry Jarvis, the Tinker?” enquired Oliver, glancing about rather eagerly.

“O’ course! There’s only one Jerry. An’ he was always kind to me before you took me, my Oliver. So shall us find him?”

“We will! He should be in the woods yonder, I expect.”

“Yes, an’ where there’s a brook, running water, you know,—he’ll be there.” So they turned from the road, and entered this wood by a broad ride and, following this a little way, paused to listen; and instantly became aware of a hush, a sweet and restful peace,—then of soft noises, sleepy twitter of bird, leafy stirrings, the bubbling murmur of a hidden brook, stealthy movements of tiny feet amid the undergrowth and then—the sudden ring and tap of a hammer. . . .

Mr. Jeremy Jarvis, weather-beaten old hat acock against the sun, sat perched on three-legged stool, busied with a kettle, but at their approach, glanced up sharply, peered beneath his hand then, dropping hammer and kettle, uttered a joyful exclamation, started up and came hurrying to greet them.

“Light down!” cried he. “Dinner’ll be ready pretty soon, so light down and eat with Jerry.” He shook hands with Oliver right heartily, he gazed on the bright-eyed, smiling Clia quite speechlessly, then flourishing off his weather-beaten hat, made her a profound and very stately reverence.

“Madame,” said he, “your ladyship’s most humble servant to command welcomes your sweet grace to these here fairy solitoods where every bird, ay, and leaf, finds a little voice to greet you and every twig and sprig and shoot dances for j’y!” She laughed a soft, bubbling trill of happiness, clasping her hands in very ecstasy.

“Jerry . . .! Oh, Jerry,” she cried, “how magnif’cent,—how splendid you are! Now come an’ be kissed—do!”

“But, your Highness,” said Jeremy, shaking his round head, “it can’t nowise be right for a princess to kiss a tinker,—leastways, not till he’s washed and—” But as he spoke she leaned to him so perilously that he must needs catch her in his arms—to kiss and be kissed instantly.

“Lord bless ee, my Beauty Bright!” said he, setting her down very tenderly. “Such meetings and welcomes as this is a rainbow on the sky, a sweetener o’ life! Ha, ’tis a rare, good old world, eh, friend Oliver?”

“Sometimes!” he sighed, and so despondently that the Tinker fixed him with bright, keenly enquiring stare; then, while Oliver dismounted to unbite and tether their animals, he went where Clia was peeping into a pleasingly-capacious, black pot suspended above a very small, clear-burning fire.

“Smells good, eh, my Princess? It’s a stoo!”

“Mag-nif’cent an’ makes me hungry, Jerry, very ’normously, it do!”

“Fine!” he nodded, viewing her with a grave wonder. “And I admire at how fine you talk! Bless us, you’re a-growing up into a fine lady afore my very eyes!”

“Yes!” she nodded. “Oh yes, I am an’ all for my Oliver. An’ how soon will your stoo be ready, please, an’ what makes it smell so ’licious, Jerry. What’s it all about?”

“Well, it’s a rabbit stoo, though it aren’t all rabbit, not by no manner o’ means,—there’s bones into it and a brace o’ onions cut large, and gobbets o’ pork cut medium, not to mention pepper, salt and a pinch or so o’ dried yarbs. And ’tis a stoo as has seethed,—a stoo to be a stoo must never b’ile or ’twill sp’ile,—remember that, Princess! Friend Oliver, d’ye happen to be anyways peckish too?”

“Much more than I thought, Jerry.”

“Well,” said the Tinker, prodding into the pot with enquiring fork, “it’s about ready, if you are. And,” said he, working a large, silver-watch out of himself with no small effort, “in about fif-teen minutes I’m expecting another friend o’ yourn!”

“Not Jessamy Todd?”

“Himself—unless detained, for he’s on the track of Old Nick, as usual,—a wife-beating, child-savaging brute as is gamekeeper to a like brute, Squire

Rickaby, who, being a magistrate, takes care as his gamekeeper don't get his just deserts. So Jess is in hopes of knocking some o' the devil out and punching a little good into him. . . . Well, bless her pretty loveliness, look at our Princess!" And he nodded towards where Clia had rummaged from known receptacles a clean cloth, plates, knives and forks together with butter and loaf. Therefore, with her deft though anxious assistance the Tinker dished up the stew and seated beside the shy stream that rippled to them from leafy shadow, they ate with a gusto that forbade speech a while; but when hunger was somewhat appeased, Jeremy sighed and spoke:

"So you are going back home, Oliver, you and your Princess?"

"Yes, home, Jeremy, where I hope to welcome you whenso you will. My farm is called Dapplemere and lies not so far from Abbeymead village on the highlands within sight of the sea. D'you know the Down country thereabouts?"

"Ay, I do. I know Abbeymead village and the house, and grand place it is, and belongs to Squire Matravers, a fine gen'leman as be too fine to trouble for any save himself."

"My uncle," nodded Oliver.

"Lord!" exclaimed the Tinker. "Have some more stoo!"

"Thank you, I will."

"As regards your uncle, meaning no disrespect personal, I only reports as report speaks."

"And Report spoke truly up till a few weeks ago, since when Sir Everard having been very near death came back to life a changed man."

"Ay," nodded the Tinker, fixing Oliver with his keen, enquiring gaze again, "trouble and suffering is apt to alter a man one way or t'other, better or worse. And, friend, yourself is altered."

"And not for the better!" Oliver muttered.

"When you get home do you mean to settle down and farm con-tinual?"

"No, I mean to go on with my book . . . or rather, start another, having seen and felt so much more of life and become, I hope, a little wiser and more able."

"Good!" nodded Jeremy. "I'm glad to hear it, because—why, Lord love her sweet eyes, our Princess is a-nodding her purty head that sleepy as

they'll fall out! Come, my precious ladyship, go along o' Jerry and take a bit of a nap—into my tent yonder, will ee?"

"Yes, Jerry. I'm all over sleepy, so I'll go—if my Oliver'll come an' wake me—soon."

"I will," he sighed, "I'm afraid too much riding isn't good for you, sweetheart."

"It's only a bit too much stoo inside me—but so sp-lendid!" she sighed. "So don't let me sleep too long, will you, Oliver?"

"Friend," quoth Jeremy, jerking thumb back towards the little tent where he had just left her, "yonder's a very miracle o' God! Such change from misery and fear to such pretty happiness should crown you with pride and j'y,—and yet you're a bit woeful and downcast, I think."

"Yes, Jeremy!"

"Good!" nodded the Tinker, and so vigorously that Oliver stared. "You're a-going to write a book, a nov-el, ain't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"That's why I says 'good'. Afore I axes why you grieve, I says—very good indeed! And I says so because suffering is a master key, a power as opens the door o' Human Natur' and shows us how good and bad us poor creeters be. If ye want to write a book as'll touch the hearts o' your readers, your own heart must ha' been wrung. If ye mean to comfort folks and let 'em see and feel what a good old world this is, taking it at its best, you must ha' seen summat of its worst. He understands most as is quickest to feel and suffers most,—'specially in his mind. And your trouble, Oliver, must be in your mind, for I never see a stronger, healthier body, no—not even Jessamy's own! So now, if so be you feel inclined,—let's hear."

"Well,—" began Oliver, and paused to sigh.

"Meaning the very opposite!" said Jeremy.

"Yes!"

"A woman, o' course, or should I say 'lady'—?"

"How should you guess,—is it so obvious?"

The Tinker's very sharp eyes twinkled, but with kindly light as he answered:

“Lord, friend Oliver, at your age ’tis always a woman. But there’s a man in it too, I think. Your face—”

“This?” said Oliver, touching bruised cheek, “I thought the mark had almost disappeared.”

“So it has!”

“My cousin did this.”

“What, the young nob, the dashing cove as boxed wi’ Jessamy and showed so remarkable promising?”

“Yes.”

“A fight?”

“No! Listen!” And now, once his lips were unsealed, Oliver poured out the whole tale of Roland and himself,—their boyish animosity, their youthful inveterate hate, the promise of better understanding and growing friendship so rudely shattered by their now bitter rivalry; of his own deep love that went beyond his telling; of the demons that had tempted him. . . . “So that all day, Jeremy, I have ridden forward yearning to ride back . . . with murderous desire to put matters to the final test my cousin suggested . . . to fight, ha—to hammer him out of existence and claim her for my own! . . . So there it is! Do I go back for my vengeance and . . . perhaps . . . love, —do I go back or don’t I?”

Staring into the speaker’s face now so direly transfigured—so fierce, so bitterly grim, Jeremy Jarvis took off his hat, scratched his head, took himself by the chin and finally answered:

“Don’t go back, you’ll kill him! Friend Oliver, we all have our devils, ’specially when young, and some on us are wise enough to be ware on ’em, —and the devil as peeped at me from your eyes just now is one as—if loosed will show no mercy! So, don’t ee go back.”

“No!” said Oliver, squaring his powerful shoulders. “You’re right, Jeremy! The instinct that guided me was right! Instead of back I’ll go on—forward! It doesn’t do to halt your team in middle of the furrow or—By God, Jeremy, there it is!”

“What, Oliver, what?”

“The crooked furrow! For I think—I know that if I obeyed my devil I should drive a furrow so crooked it would lead—to murder. So I’ll go home instead and—work!”

“Good!” nodded the Tinker, clapping on his hat again. “Good and more than good!”

“Though,” sighed Oliver, “between you and me, Jerry, I’ve always yearned for a finish fight with my cousin. Believing I can thrash him, I’ve yearned to prove it to his and my own complete satisfaction,—and this, of course, I shall never learn now.”

“Ay, but you can!” nodded the Tinker. “Easily, beyond all doubt and no harm to your cousin whatsoever!”

“How on earth might this be?”

“Two pair o’ muffles and Jessamy! Spar a round—no, fight three rounds wi’ Jessamy, muffles o’ course, stand up to Jess for so long as you can, and that’ll prove it and set your mind at rest.”

“Ay, but, Jerry, would he—will he?”

“Ar! If you ax him and even plead, p’raps not, but if we both do, ’specially me, and in such good cause, he will, ay he will! Stand up to Jessamy for jest one round, both hitting your hardest, and I’ll know and Jess will be sarten—sure which o’ you two cousins is the better man.”

After this though they talked of other things their minds, it seemed, were still obsessed by the one idea, as witness how frequently Jeremy tugged forth and consulted his large watch, how often Oliver paused in the middle of a sentence, listening for the stir and rustle that should tell of Jessamy’s approach.

“If the child should wake you’d keep her away,—amuse her, Jerry?”

“Ay, I will and—ha, there comes Jess at last . . . but not alone by the sound of him, con-found it!”

Sure enough Jessamy presently appeared accompanied by an elegantly attired person whose dignified appearance was somewhat marred by the bloodstained bandage beneath his modish hat; but it was not so much this bandage that drew and held Oliver’s keen glance.

“Well, Lord bless us!” exclaimed Jessamy, hurrying forward to grasp his hand, “Brother, this does me a power o’ good.”

“Ay, but what noos, Jessamy?” demanded the Tinker. “And what’s come to your head, Sir George?”

“A hunting-crop, Jeremy,” answered the battered gentleman, who now bowing gracefully to Oliver, addressed him with a certain wistfulness:

“I see you remember me, Mr. Dale; pray believe, sir, that I am now as ever most truly and gratefully at your service.”

“Ay, Sir George,” quoth the Tinker, “but, sir, what happened . . . Jessamy lad?”

“Why, Jerry, the man Wilkes hath left off beating wife and children,—leastaways for a week or so! They’ve put him to bed at ‘The Acorn’ where I per-suaded him to j’ine me in brief prayer o’ thankfulness that the Lord o’ Mercy had not suffered me to break so much as one sinful bone of him. In the doing of which, Squire Rickaby falls foul of our good friend Sir George here and gets a sight more than he gave,—eh, Sir George?”

“I’m glad to believe so, Jessamy.”

“Bide ye a minute, sir, while I gets my ‘box o’ doings’ for your damaged nob.” And Jessamy vanished amid the bushes that grew very thickly hereabout.

“Yes,” sighed Sir George, glancing after Jessamy’s shapely form, “I had the happiness to break a very good whip on Sir James Rickaby’s most unlovely person.”

“Which makes it—twice!” murmured Oliver.

“And,” answered Sir George, as softly, “finally, I hope, Mr. Dale. And, by the way, sir, when Jessamy has doctored and made me more presentable, I should greatly like the favour of a word with you.”

“Now, Sir George,” said Jessamy, reappearing with his “box of doings” beneath one arm, “if you’ll go wi’ me I’ll do summat for that cut o’ yours that aren’t so bad as it looks.”

“For cuts an’ bruises,” quoth the Tinker, when Jessamy and his patient had vanished again, “for black eyes, split lips and contoosions of all sorts, Jessamy’s got all the surgeons beat!”

“So you know that gentleman?” said Oliver, thoughtfully.

“Ay, I do, likewise his father, the Admiral, afore him, as got ruined at law, shot himself stone dead and left his son, George, noo-married and up to his eyes in debt,—though old Rastus tells me as things be better o’ late.”

“Rastus?”

“Ay, Rastus be a blackamoor as the Admiral listed on his travels,—India or Africa or whereso they black creeters is bred. . . . I’ll just steal a peep at our small Princess. . . .” So away he stole to the little tent and presently

came creeping back, a smile on his lean, sharp-featured visage. "Fast asleep, Friend Oliver, and looks like a little angel o' light. A—wonderful child, friend!"

"So wonderful, Jerry, she is my constant amazement. The merest child one moment, a woman, the next,—looking at me with a woman's eyes that see so much. She is a mystery beyond my comprehension,—like her age! How old does she seem to you now, Jerry?"

"Why, she's growed so much plumper and pretty and such finery o' clothes that she looks nowadays anywheer atwixt . . . eleven and thirteen, mebbe more. Yet by Natur' she may be less than eight or nine, or even younger. And here comes Sir George and, thanks to Jessamy, like a noo man."

"Yes," nodded Oliver, "and he wants word with me,—will you put the matter to Jessamy meanwhile?"

Jeremy nodded such vehement assent that his aged hat toppled.

"My horse," said Sir George, in his almost too gentle voice, "is tied in the glade yonder, sir,—will you be good enough to walk so far with me?"

So Oliver rose and went beside this one-time man of mystery and, beholding his courtly ease and handsome person, thought of a sinister, masked figure . . . a pale, desperate husband and father . . . a lonely house and furious tempest.

"Mr. Dale, by a turn of Fortune's wheel, I, that was once a poor, destitute, frantic wretch, am now comparatively wealthy and sane——"

"And your wife and small daughter are well, I hope. Sir George?"

"They are, thank God—and you for your kindly thought, Mr. Dale! Now in the matter of, may I say, certain forced loans, I should like you to know that most of—these victims of the highway have been fully reimbursed, as the rest shall be so soon as I can be assured of their identity—yourself and cousin also, sir. And I tell you this that you may know your merciful confidence is nowise misplaced. . . . Sir, desperate need may make a . . . felon who, given life and opportunity, may more than undo the wrong! When I think of myself and . . . others less fortunate, I become a very humble man, Mr. Dale, and feel a gratitude beyond expression." They had come where stood a horse, a splendid creature who lifted proud head to greet his master. . . . Sir George patted him, fumbled with the reins, eyed Oliver very wistfully and mounted.

“We have removed from the old Dower House, which you once visited, Mr. Dale,—back to the Manor. Perhaps . . . someday you . . . will honour us. . . .”

“Gladly, sir!” said Oliver, and, reaching up, grasped the hand Sir George had not ventured to offer.

And thus, though little was said, they parted in such understanding that Sir George must needs turn to wave farewell to the stalwart, youthful, strangely lonely-seeming figure ere his fleet animal bore him out of sight.

Then back strode Oliver apace to find Jessamy seated by the fire and at his feet the padded gloves.

“Brother,” said Jessamy, rising, “Jerry has persuaded me to do what goes agin’ one half o’ me and makes that half groan remorseful, but fills t’other half wi’ joy abounding and makes it sing wi’ gladness. . . . You’re wishful to go three rounds.”

“I wish to fight, Jessamy, to prove myself and know.”

“Then, brother, fight it is and know you shall,—and so shall I! So off wi’ coats and boots, into the muffles, and over yonder ’hind they bushes be the very place.”

Thither went they forthwith all three, to a grassy level shut in very pleasantly by dense thickets and shady trees.

“To the buff, brother,” cried Jessamy joyously, “to the buff, ’tis best so!”

Off came coats, waistcoats, shirts and boots, on went the gloves and, stripped thus to the waist, they fronted each other with Jeremy nearby, watch in hand.

“Two minutes should be enough, Jess!” said he, glancing at Oliver somewhat anxiously. “Two minutes, eh Jess?”

“Make it three!” said Oliver.

“Two!” said Jessamy, flexing sinewy arms. “Two shall be ample, brother. And you peel mighty well! You’ve fought before, by your looks.”

“Often, Jessamy.”

“Boxed, I mean.”

“Yes. I was considered fairly good.”

“Ay, you should be. I like your arms, and you’ve legs, brother, legs,—I love your pins. Though your cousin, Mr. Roland, is a sight better than good!”

“He is. This is why I want you to go your best, hit your hardest and—prove me.”

“Oh, brother,” said Jessamy, his eyes sparkling, “your words are like sweet music! And there’s so much of you,—and all so sweetly fit,—ah, ’twill be a pleasure to do all I can for ye,—a pleasure!”

“Then pray—fight, Jessamy! Hit with all your force.”

“I will, brother, oh I will,—just once or twice, say! I’ll hit where ’twill do me most good and mark you least. Now! Are we ready?”

“Yes!”

“Hold hard!” snapped Jeremy, eyes on his watch. “Stand for the word, will ye!”

So they waited, grimly purposeful, poised for swift action.

Five feet ten of prime, slim manhood stands Jessamy, all supple speed and strength from heel to head, a man of craft learned in many a close encounter; Jessamy the Unconquered Hero who, report avers, has never even been knocked down,—Jessamy Todd, the Nonpareil.

Six feet of stalwart power stands Oliver, deep of chest, wide of shoulder, long of arm—grey-eyed, square-jowled, resolute and—on his toes.

“Time!” says Jeremy.

Slither and tap of light, quick feet; heads that bob, that sway and duck,—then out shoots Jessamy’s left to be neatly avoided, across swings Oliver’s answering right to be blocked deftly, and they are away, circling lightly round each other. Then Jessamy, The Master, feints Oliver to an opening,—in he comes, whips two smacking blows to Oliver’s broad chest and is away again, followed by Oliver watchful and grim; twinkle of rapid feet, flurry of powerful arms and, lured in, Oliver reels back, gasping, and on his white skin the angry marks of two more shattering blows,—sees Jessamy close upon him, ducks in time, checks him with long left, hammers him away with powerful right and gasps with relief as Jeremy calls:

“Time!”

One minute’s respite and Oliver, blowing a little, sees Jessamy stoop to pluck and chew a blade of grass and marvels at the gentle-breathing,

unshaken might of him; and Jessamy smiles happily.

“Brother, you’re good! Better than ever I thought, and going to be more so wi’ your second wind. But go for my head, this time—do!”

“No, Jessamy, we’ll fight level.”

“Feel all right, Friend Oliver?” enquires Jeremy a little anxiously. “Feel quite up to another round?”

“Quite, Jerry.”

“You ketched one or two—”

“So did I!” says Jessamy. “Oliver’s right is—a joy—watch it, Jerry, as I must or—”

“Time!” said Jeremy.

Almost with the word Oliver leaps—to be checked for such temerity by Jessamy’s painful-stabbing left, jarred by his right and yet, boring in, answers with both hard-driving fists and so for a moment is close and desperate work ere the cool, elusive Jessamy, propping him off with potent left, is away and lightly out of reach. But now, having his second wind, Oliver is calm also and, aware that The Master is fighting more cautiously, sure sign of respect, thrills accordingly. So they circle warily, they feint, they duck and dodge nimbly with lightning shifts,—in and out again, this way and that and never a blow, until the Tinker shifts and dances in sympathy, hugging himself for joy of it all. Twice Jessamy’s unerring fists flash through Oliver’s guard shaking him from head to foot, so Oliver crouches, covers up and waits,—glimpses an opening, lets fly with his right, misses, is staggered again by Jessamy’s terrible left, gasps to the pain of it and yet—meets his rush and battering fists like a tower.

“Time!” cries Jeremy. “And Lord love us all—I never see the like o’ this—pretty, ah—pretty! Feet and hands! Time and distance! I’ve watched a many but, Oh—never the like o’ this! And still on his pins, Jessamy! And strong, Jess—strong!”

“Sir,” says Jessamy, blowing a little, now, “sit ye and rest!”

“Not . . . unless . . . you do!” gasps Oliver.

So down sits Jessamy instantly and down lies Oliver full length, his great chest heaving, his shapeliness livid with ugly blotches; perceiving which, Jeremy looks at The Master beneath raised brows, and The Master

nods. But Oliver has seen and, getting to his legs rather slowly, contrives to laugh.

“No, friends,” says he, breathing less distressfully, “if friends you are, give me no mercy of extra time, let me prove myself to—the uttermost! And Jessamy, do your best.”

“On my soul,” answers Jessamy solemnly, “I will—as I have already,—my brother!” and he speaks the word as it should be uttered.

“Time!” says Jeremy.

So, once again, they front each other, foot to foot, staring into each other’s alert eyes with looks that hold no whit of tenderness or pity; once again they circle, they duck and dodge, then, lured by The Master, Oliver leaps in, is checked by mighty fist that drives the breath from him in a groan; yet even then, summoning all his powers, he feints with his left, draws Jessamy’s guard, and drives in his right, swinging shoulder and body behind it. And now Jessamy reels back—and back, to bring up against a tree so violently that, for a moment, he leans there breathless; then he turns and pats this tree and so, looks at breathless, gasping Oliver, surveys him from wide-planted feet to ruffled, golden hair and down again; he nods,—he smiles.

“Enough, brother,” said he, “enough!” Then he laughed and taking off his gloves, turned to the round-eyed Jeremy who spoke murmurous:

“That was surely . . . a bender, Jessamy! A reg’lar rib-roaster!”

“A—leveller!” nodded Jessamy. “And ye saw how, Jerry? He ducks my lead, feints me with his left and counters with his right so sweet, so true, so powerful that—but for this tree. . .!”

“Ar! But for that tree, Jess!”

“He’s got it all by Natur’, Jerry, he shifts instinctive and times intooitive! He slips my blows or takes ’em all going—not coming. . . . Off wi’ your hat, Jerry, off wi’ your hat and saloot a man as might be champion and one o’ the greatest,—saloot him, Jerry, as I do.”

Then speechless Oliver whipped off his gloves to step forward and grasp the hands they proffered and stood for a moment speechless yet.

“Jessamy,” said he, at last, “you are too generous.”

“Brother, I speak only truth.”

“Ar!” quoth Jeremy. “There aren’t a man in all England could ha’ stood up to Jessamy Todd and fought back so strong! And this, I think, calls for tea, and my tea which is very special!”

“Good!” nodded Jessamy.

“Excellent!” sighed Oliver.

“Then,” said the Tinker, urging large watch back into fob, “go splash water on your bruises while I b’ile my kettle for ye,” and away he went.

“Sir,” said The Master, viewing Oliver’s battered torso with look of compassionate satisfaction, “how are you?”

“Sore, Jessamy, and extremely tender!”

“And, messmate, no wonder! When I hit a man that man knows it! When I mean a man to go down, down that man goes, and you—didn’t! Brother, three times I let you have it with all my power, blows as no man ever took from me afore without going to grass and staying there! But you,—Lord bless your high, bold heart,—you took ’em and fought back so game, so strong that but for yonder tree . . . ! So I’m saying—God love you for it, brother, as I do! As to feeling sore,—so am I! Oh, life’s a right sweet thing, brother, a very sweet thing! Now come wi’ me to the brook and feel the joy o’ running water.”

So down to the stream they went, to kneel side by side, to splash themselves and each other, to gasp and laugh and thereafter rub themselves vigorously with the clean towels Jessamy seemed always to have ready. Then donning their garments,—refreshed, glowing, yet still sore, back they went to find Jeremy in the act of brewing tea and demanding cups and saucers which Jessamy produced but with such clatter that the Tinker, hissing, bade him hush.

“Oh, why so, Jerry?”

“You’ll wake her.”

“Who?” enquired Jessamy, staring. But at this moment, like small radiant sprite conjured up by this rattle of crockery, came Clia, rosy with slumber, who, espying Jessamy, caught up her long habit anyhow and ran to the welcome of his arms.

“Why—bless us!” he exclaimed, viewing her loveliness in glad wonderment. “Is it—? Lord love her—it is! It’s Clia turned into a grand lady!” Here he was kissed rapturously. “Yes, Jerry, ’tis Lady Clia growed so

handsome 'tis wonderful!" Here he was kissed again. "A lady, eh Jerry,—our little lady?"

"No, Jess, our Princess as be going to pour our tea, so put her down and let her do it."

Now presently, sipping his tea—(this best of all things that ever came out of that wonder land called China, this beneficent gift to humanity, discovered by some long forgotten genius),—Oliver looked from the green peacefulness around him to the faces of his three companions each so very different yet all of them bright with a brave, frank simplicity and inherent goodness (as are all the unspoiled works of God) and knew a great and deep content.

"Ah!" sighed the Tinker, "this surely has been—a day, and one as I shall remember—with j'y! And now, Friend Oliver, I hope you're satisfied as to which o' two cousins is the better man?"

"But," said Oliver, still doubting, "what says Jessamy?"

"Well," answered Jessamy, stirring his tea round and round thoughtfully, "they're both good, these cousins, no question, ay, and better than good,—but there's one so much better still as there's no telling,—one as could beat t'other when so and howso he would and that's—yourself, brother!"

And when the teapot was empty, and old Sol beginning to peer at them over the tree-tops, Oliver rose and, having settled Clia in her saddle, turned to take leave of his two friends.

"This," said he, "is a Good-bye that truly means—until we meet again. There shall be welcome for you both, from Clia and myself wherever we are, but most especially at Dapplemere. You'll come to us there, I hope?"

"Ay, we will, Friend Oliver."

"Be sure o' that, brother."

"In this world," said Oliver, getting into his saddle rather stiffly, "friendship is a great and blessed thing, . . . perhaps the best of all."

"Ay, I think it is!" nodded the Tinker. "'Tis a solace, a comfort, a light in the dark, eh, Jessamy?"

"True enough, Jerry! There's been you and me these many years and now there's Oliver, too,—the three of us, and for many years to come, I pray the Lord."

“And here,” said Oliver, thrusting hand into pocket, “are banknotes for your ten pounds, Jessamy, and with my hearty thanks. . . . Well, there’s a coppice, ay—a wood at Dapplemere with a brook, there are beds and a glad welcome when you come. . . . And so, ’till then, once more—Good-bye!”

And so, away they rode across the heath where Diogenes, having eaten his fill, was rolling in a languid ecstasy. On they went following the sun-dappled shady highway until they could see a vague, farflung line of distant hills that was the fair Downland country; on through a rolling landscape the white road led them, climbing slowly, until before them showed a haze, a vast expanse that was the Sussex Sea. And now they followed leafy byeways with smooth, green, sloping uplands all about them to a wide dene all bowery with trees mid which peeped the thatched gables, steep-pitched roof and white walls of a goodly homestead, a trim yet cosy place whose bright lattices, catching the sunset glow, seemed to twinkle them kindly greeting; beholding which, Oliver’s grey eyes shone also, and smiling down on his small companion, he flourished his whip thitherward, saying:

“Home, Darlingest, yours and mine,—our Dapplemere.”

CHAPTER XLII

THE END OF THE FURROW

GENTLE SEPTEMBER has departed in a chastened glory and now is russet-clad October, sad and very wistful because of fading leaf and flower; and Oliver in hob-nailed boots, gaiters and corduroys is in the stables with his two sturdy henchmen, Silas and Joel, deeply concerned to choose which team of horses he shall drive to-morrow in the ploughing match for the prize of Fifty Guineas that he himself has put up, with another hundred given by Sir Everard who is to be there in person. Eight powerful animals there are and all in prime condition from lofty crests to hairy fetlocks and great, polished hoofs.

“Must’ Oliver, if you ax me,” said Joel, champing on the straw between his shaven lips, “I’d say the bays, Bob and Tom, they looks well, they goes well, so them’s y’r chice, zur, if you ax me!”

“Which ’e don’t!” quoth Silas, rubbing his bristly chin. “But me, Must’ Oliver, I would ax YOU,— wot, I’d ax, wot o’ James and ’Enery, they blacks yonder, they looks good and goes better,—wot o’ they?”

“Ha!” quoth Oliver, and was rubbing his own chin in ever-growing uncertainty when to them across the trim yard clattered Sam.

“Zur,” said he, “gotten a letter for ee, I ’ave, ’Tes letter as come some days agone and as I forgot-like, b’ reason o’ this yere ploughin’ match.”

“Oh?” said Oliver, still lost in consideration of his eight horses. “A letter?”

“Ar! Got it in me ’at, I ’ave, zur . . . and if you’ m choosin’ your team for to-morry—them dapple-greys, Willy and Joe, Must’ Oliver. There an’t no pair better matched not nowheres, nor yet can’t be beat for looks or work no’ow and no when, zur!”

“I was thinking of the sorrel and—”

“The bays, zur!” cried Joel, dropping his straw.

“The blacks, Must’ Oliver!” cried Silas, clawing his chin-stubble.

“Them dapple-greys can’t never be ekalled, zur, never none!” quoth Sam.

“Well then,” nodded Oliver, “yes, I’ll try them again and I’ll try them now. Also I’ll harness them myself, so off with you like good fellows and leave me to it. . . . Oh, Sam!”

“Zur?”

“Is Miss Clia at her lessons, d’you know?”

“Well, zur, she are, in a manner o’ speakin’, and then again, in a sorter way, she are not.”

“How can that be?”

“Why, d’ye see, Must’ Oliver, she be a-larnin’,—ah, and a-larnin’ mighty quick but—not outer no book nor yet vollum,—she’s a-larnin’ for to make ee a apple-dumplin’ wi’ ’er own two little ’ands an’ my Mary a-larnin’ of ’er ’ow so for to do, she be, zur.”

“Oh?” said Oliver, busy harnessing the greys. “I see.”

“Ar!” nodded Sam, watching with expert eye.

“Sam, I hope that none of you are risking your money on me to-morrow.”

“Why, Must’ Oliver, zur, seein’ as you’s yourself and us is we and nat’rally we bein’ ourselves, us do nat’rally—”

“So you have! How much?”

“Well, zur—” here Sam lifting hat to rub his grizzled poll,—down tumbled the forgotten letter.

“Now I’ll . . . be . . . dog and horsebit—!” he exclaimed, and picking it up gave this letter to Oliver who forthwith crammed it into his pocket and bade Joe “stand over!”

“Sam, go tell Miss Clia she’ll find me in the Five Acre.”

“Ay, zur!” answered Sam, and clumped away.

But hardly had Oliver led his greys out into the yard and their eight ponderous hoofs chattered on the cobblestones, than to him Clia came speeding on those slim legs that could bear her so fleetly; and her radiant face was patched with flour, like her arms and the large apron that enveloped her.

“Oh, my Oliver,” she cried, “I’ve made you the fattest, nicest dumplin’ what you ever saw, for your supper, an’ it’s in the oven baking itself for you now!”

“Grand!” said he, kissing her. “But, Darlingest, did you finish the lessons I set you?”

“Oh yes quite—very nearly, an’ my letter to Aunty Saffy.”

“So soon? It must be a very short letter.”

“Well, it is, ’cause I made her so many kisses there wasn’t much room for any writings. I’ve bringed it for you to see if I spelled ‘husband’ right,—did I, please?” and from the pocket of her large apron, she produced a rather woebegone sheet of paper. “ ’Fraid it’s a bit blotty an’ rumply, Oliver.”

“Sweetheart, I’m afraid it is.” Smoothing this missive he made out, surrounded by wavering lines of multitudinous crosses, these words and surprisingly well written,—or so thought Oliver:

“DERE ANTY SAFEE,—I am wel an hapi an shall be hapyer like you when I have made Oliver into my huzbant an maridged him like you an unkel Innigo did to each other an so pleas bring my liz when you com an thats all with my love again I writ soon.”

“I b’leeve you’re laughing at it!” said she reproachfully.

“No, Sweetheart, I’m only—smiling.”

“But why, please?”

“Well, it is rather blotty, as you say.”

“Oh, dearie me! Must I do it all over again?”

“No, we’ll make it do.”

“An’ have I spelled ‘husband’ right?”

“That will do quite well, also.”

“Then please up me onto Willy, like you promised when you go ploughing.”

So he swung her to the great animal’s broad back, bade her hold tight, and away they clattered towards the Five Acre. But scarcely had they reached the gate than came Mary, round-eyed and a little breathless.

“Oh, Master Oliver,” said she, shaking her very comely head, “so thin and piteous ’e do look, sir, and my Sam for turning him away ’cause of his wild looks, a little, ragged creeter, sir, all tatters and dirt, but so clammed and faint-like and crying for somebody named Squire Littleton, or some such.”

“Robin!” said Oliver, looking at Clia.

“Poor Robin!” sighed Clia, looking at Oliver.

“What’ll I do wi’ him, sir?”

“Feed him, Mary, then wash him, my dear, and keep him till I come.”

“I think,” sighed Clia, “I’d better go to him, p’raps.”

“Very well. Sweetheart, but—not too near until he’s been thoroughly washed! See to it, Mary my dear. He’s a poor, little street waif has followed us all the way from London. Look after him while I think what on earth to do with him.” So saying, he lifted Clia from her lofty perch and away she went with smiling Mary, hand-in-hand, while Oliver coming to the Five Acre hitched his team to the plough and began to work.

Jingle of harness, plod of hoof, whisper of gleaming ploughshear cutting and turning the good clean earth in long, brown furrows straight as might be.

He had laboured thus for perhaps half-an-hour and had halted to mop brow and breathe his horses when over the hedge that bordered the road a horseman came leaping, a slim, shapely young exquisite supremely elegant from modish hat to silver spurs, at sight of whom, Oliver’s brow contracted. Descending to earth this bold intruder came striding across the new-turned furrows regardless of his gleaming, immaculate boots, and halting within a yard of silent Oliver, looked him up and down and scowled.

“Well?” he demanded.

“Well, Roland?”

“Ha, sullen as ever, by heavens,—as I expected!”

“Then why seek me?”

“So the old hatred is to persist, is it,—to grow fiercer, more implacable and deadly?”

“Why should it?”

“Why shouldn’t it, Mr. Smug Hypocrite? You’ve always hated me in your heart and I’ve always shown I scorned you—and never, no damme—never more than now!”

“And why? Is it because I stood defenceless and suffered you to knock me down? However, you needn’t have struck me quite so hard.”

Roland seemed to flinch, he bit his lip and the light hunting-crop he carried snapped between his powerful, gripping hands.

“I . . . I’d better go!” said he, tossing the broken whip aside with furious gesture. “Yes, I’d better go!”

“I think you had!” nodded Oliver. “So—good-bye!” And turning away, he grasped the handles of his plough.

“Unmannerly . . . surly brute!” said Roland rather breathlessly.

“What you will,” answered Oliver serenely, and chirruped to his horses. But a furious hand seized and clutched his arm, fierce eyes glared into his and in voice thick with passion, Roland spoke:

“Now—damn you, Oliver,—stand and look at me!”

“I’d rather not—much!”

“Ha, but you shall, I say you shall!”

“Very well,” sighed Oliver, leaning back against the plough shaft, “I’m looking,—now what?”

Beholding him thus so calm and seemingly unmoved, Roland’s anger flamed the higher, he clenched his fists as if about to strike and, once again, Oliver folded his arms. Now something in this very ordinary gesture seemed to stir Roland strangely, he shrank back, his fingers unclenched themselves and from beneath the brim of his jaunty hat, moisture trickled.

“All right . . .” he muttered. “Not again! I’ll . . . go! I told her it was worse than useless her writing to you . . . but, by God, for so humiliating her, spurning her too humble petition I could—kill you—”

“Who?” demanded Oliver, forgetting to lounge. “Suppose you tell me precisely what the devil you’re talking about?”

“I mean my wife,—the pleading letter she wrote you.”

“Wife?” repeated Oliver, and leaned against the plough heavier than before. “Wife?”

“And the letter, her letter that you never had the common courtesy to even acknowledge!”

With fumbling hand Oliver groped in his pocket and drew thence Clia’s crumpled missive and the forgotten letter; fumbling still, he broke the seal, unfolded it and read:

“Oh my dear, dear Oliver, forgive my rash, mistaken judgment of you, the cruel words I uttered. Roland has explained and I am

humbled and grieving.

“So write, dear Oliver, write and tell me I am forgiven because, next to my husband, there is no man I do so love and honour as your dear, strong, gentle self. And so, dearest Oliver, pleading your forgiveness on poor, foolish me,—I beg you will take my husband’s hand (even though it struck you so cruelly as he says) I plead that you will take it in love, and a friendship shall grow stronger with the years, for his sake and the sake of his wife and your ever most loving and grateful,

“DEBORAH VERINDER.”

“You know what is in—this letter?”

“Of course!”

“Well, as you see, I never read it until this moment, never glanced at it even, never had it till an hour ago. Convey to your—wife my deepest regrets . . . and to you both I wish . . . with all my heart . . . happiness always and a love increasing. . . .”

Oliver’s voice seemed to fail him and for a long moment they stood silent, neither looking at the other. . . . Then Roland’s hand reached out, groping blindly, to be met and grasped firmly; then Roland was speaking, his voice broken and hoarse with deep emotion:

“Oliver. . . . Noll. . . . Oh, Noll, old fellow—” Roland’s arms were close about him, Roland’s eyes were looking into his through painful tears. “You so lonely . . . and I so happy except for one thing . . . that dastard blow! It’s haunted me ever since, Noll! It’s kept me awake at night. . . . I’ve heard you groan again . . . seen you fall! Oh, Noll, I’d give all that I have—everything in this world—except Deborah—never to have done it. This is why I am here. This is what I came for . . . to tell you my grief and ask you . . . beg you to have a go at this confounded head of mine and make things even—blow for blow . . . give me back my self-respect. I talked it over with Deborah and she, sweet understanding soul, heartily agrees and expects me to go back to her rejoicing in a black eye, split lip or thick ear . . . so how about it, old fellow?”

Then Oliver laughed, and hugged him in mighty arms and taking off the jaunty hat, ruffled and patted Roland’s thick, dark hair.

“Ale!” said he. “Nappy October, Roly-Poly, or glasses of Mary’s cowslip wine, or—tea! Come on!” And drawing Roland’s arm within his own, began

striding with him towards the house, then checked suddenly for over and through the hedge leapt another horse bearing Deborah's young shapeliness.

"Now, God bless you, Oliver!" she cried with laugh that was rather tearful, "you dear, great, lovely man, such love as yours is a precious thing, a power to draw and hold the three of us in a bond shall never break, I pray God! . . . I've been watching you and listening, of course! Oh, silly, silly boys, dear, foolish men that have really always loved each other and been ashamed of it till now. Roland has been breaking his heart for you, Oliver and you, I think—I know, have been grieving for him. So, kiss me, Oliver, like the dear brother you are, and—husband, go catch your 'Highflier',—then ale, cowslip wine or what you will, but a cup of tea for Clia and me!"

So they kissed each other,—rather a brief, pecking caress on Oliver's part, but, seeing how his cheek flushed and big hand trembled, Deborah felt a perverse though feminine joy.

"So you knew the child was with me, Deborah?"

"Of course. Miss Saphronia told me . . . what a sweet, capable person she is! Yes, we went to the 'Jolly Waterman'—what quaint place but dreadful streets,—Roland and I went there looking for you,—Roland was quite distraught, almost beside himself with remorse, and when we found you'd gone, I truly thought he would have wept, and I loved him for it! And Mr. Drake, what a dear quaint creature he is and yet—so courtly! And how they love you, Oliver! But then everyone does and no wonder! Especially me! And Gracious Goodness, how I talk! And—there's the child, your Clia but, oh my dear—what a perfect transformation! Hold my horse!"

With a gracious ease down leaped Deborah and catching up her long habit, hastened to meet the child who, seeing her approach, stopped instantly to stand, bright head bowed and hands twisted together in the way that ever betokened her deep distress. So Deborah checked her joyous haste and, being a woman herself, respected this smaller woman and attempting no futile endearments of kiss or touch, questioned her gently instead:

"Aren't you glad to see me, little Clia,—won't you—kiss me?"

"Well,—no," answered Clia, on the verge of tears yet extremely resolute, "no, I'm not glad an' I won't kiss you, please."

Deborah went a little nearer as did Oliver leading her horse and wondering.

"Why?" enquired Deborah, very tenderly. "What is it troubles you, my dear?"

“You . . . oh, you do!”

“Tell me how, dear one, and why?”

“Cause you’ve come for Oliver . . . I saw you kiss him . . . an’ now you’ll marriage him, an’ I . . . I—”

“Ah, my precious—no!” sighed Deborah, and sinking on her knees she reached out her arms. “Oh, my darling, I . . . I can’t marry your Oliver because . . . you see I’m married to your Uncle Roland.”

“Which,” laughed Roland, coming up at this moment, “nobody can deny!”

“Oh but . . .” gasped Clia, rubbing tearful eyes to look up at them, “I know my Oliver wants her, Uncle Roly, ’cause he was making big sighs for her all the way from London! You do want her, Oliver, don’t you?”

“Yes, Sweetheart,” he answered, gently, “so much that I’m glad, deeply, truly glad she has married such a . . . real, manly husband as your Uncle Roland. So now, Darlingest, take us all into the house . . . pour out tea for us, or anything else, and let us drink health, happiness and long life to them, shall we?”

“Oh yes—yes!” cried Clia, joyfully. “Only first,—please let me kiss you, Deb’rah—now!” So kiss they did, and if now it was Deborah’s lovely eyes that were tearful, her young husband, quick to see, loved her for them only the more.

“Noll,” said he, turning to look back at the Five Acre, “ha, Noll, you . . . you dashed, splendid old . . . ploughman, you drive a clean, straight furrow, and,—re The Nunks on furrows, may mine be as straight and true.”

And now with Clia (eager yet tremulous) to do the honours, with smiling Mary and her two neat country nymphs in attendance, they sat down to tea, —a farmhouse meal plenteous though simple,—crusty home-made bread and yellow butter that tasted as such truly good things should; a right joyous meal that was to be but one of many such in days to come.

“You’ve heard,” said Deborah, “that your Saphronia and Mr. Inigo Drake are married, Oliver, of course?”

“Yes. And if ever two sweet souls deserved happiness they do! She and Inigo are coming to stay with us soon.”

“Then,” quoth Roland, reaching for the bread and butter, “we’ll ride over then, Deborah and I. And, Mary, your butter is delicious as you look! I vow

by heavens I could live alone on such bread and butter,—no not alone of course, being a dutiful Benedick,—but solely, Mary, solely is the word.”

“Thank ee, sir, does that mean as ee can do wi’ more?”

“Mary, it does! Noll, I suppose you know the aunt and uncle are in residence at Abbeymead?”

“Yes. Clia and I are to stay the week-end with them. He’s made our Clia quite a little heiress, bless him . . . and, by George, he and aunt are to be at the ploughing match to-morrow, the latest news is that he’s put up a hundred guineas in prize money and will be there in person . . . to see me lose!”

“Then we’ll go too!” laughed Deborah. “To cheer the vanquished.”

Now when this happy meal was done, Oliver led his cousin away to the stables for expert opinion on his horses; but being there, Roland merely glanced at them in vague manner and wandered out into the trim farmyard fragrant with the blended sweetness of hayricks, herb garden and seaborne fragrance of the rolling Downs.

“Noll,” said he, appearing still vague, “it’s looking forward somewhat, and dashed previous, I know, but . . . if in the coming future I . . . we . . . Deborah and I should be so blest . . . a child, Noll, a little son and heir, old fellow, I’m going to name him . . . though I’ll admit Deborah suggested it, and though it shocked me confoundedly at first, being such a perfectly scoundrelly, dashed prick-eared, puritanical, psalm-smiting name, I’m heartily in agreement and absolutely determined on it now! So there you are, and what d’you say?”

“If you’ll be so intelligent to tell me what you mean—”

“My son, Ass, my little son and heir to be, pray God—if and when,—shall be named Oliver. And I fancy you’d make him a fairly good godfather,—if, as I say, and when! But what the deuce,—I thought you were going to show me your horses, the team for to-morrow?”

Shadows were lengthening when Oliver and Clia stood to watch their visitors mount their horses,—and then to grasp their hands, kiss and be kissed with promises of speedy reunion, and thereafter, watch them ride away side by side to their happiness, Roland’s hat gaily a-flourish, Deborah’s slim, gauntleted hand waving them farewells (as had happened once before) until they were out of sight.

Yet still they stood there in the fragrant dusk, wistful man and pensive child, very close together, watching the stars come out to look at them, with

the ever-brightening promise of a moon.

“You’re very silent, my dear one.”

“Yes,” she sighed, nestling closer against him, “I was wondering where I’d be now if I hadn’t found you an’ you hadn’t taken me an’ made yourself my home? An’ I’m wondering again if Uncle Roly hadn’t turned Auntie Deb’rah into his wife would she have married you? An’ I know she would an’ oh—what would I have done then, my Oliver,—oh what?”

“But I am your Oliver.”

“Foreveranever—always?”

“For ever and ever, Sweetheart.”

“This,” sighed Clia, leaning her cheek against the hand she clasped so firmly, “this has been a splen-did day,—oh, magnif’cent! Hasn’t it?”

“Yes, dearest,—yes, it has.”

“So,—when I go to bed, my Oliver, when I’ve prayed to God for you to always love me, I’m going to ask Him to please make me another magnif’cent day to-morrow.”

“And He surely will, Darlingest, for, you see, God Himself is in every to-morrow and with each dawn comes that bright angel we call Hope.”

“An’ when I’ve growed me into a most bee-u-tiful, grand lady you’ll marriage me into a wife for yourself, won’t you, my Oliver?”

But at this, he only laughed, rather huskily, and lifting her to his kiss, throned her upon his shoulder and strode away housewards.

THE END

MR. JEFFERY FARNOL'S READERS will be glad to know that he has written this delightful little book for children (and grown-ups, too). It is illustrated by Mr. Farnol himself and the entire book is conceived and written in his own inimitable style.

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MEN ARE SUCH FOOLS!

Faith Baldwin

New York is a magnet! It draws to itself thousands of gay, talented young men and women, each determined to make a niche for himself in one of the myriad skyscraper offices where the drama and conflict of big business is enacted. Sometimes they conquer, sometimes they fail, but always it is life lived at high pressure and played for big stakes.

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Faith Baldwin, you will remember, wrote "District Nurse," "Week-End Marriage," "The Office Wife," "Beauty," "The Moon's Our Home," and many other successes.

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Esther Vanner has for its background that most stirring episode in all feminine history, the militant suffrage campaign; but in a more exact sense it is a novel about women in general and one in particular. The horrors of hunger-striking and forcible feeding, and the daring exploits which led up to them, though these are described with meticulous detail, are of secondary importance to the issue of hearts and minds, and the impulses and vagaries which sent women into battle.

Perhaps Chris Massie has not done anything finer than the portrait of John Venables who died for love without declaring it; but there is a gallery of feminine portraits of "women in their secret hearts" which once more compels attention to the author as a brilliant psychologist.

And here is the London of the time, its very bricks and mortar, brought into being with the peculiar intimacy of touch which gives it a living reality.

A novel of political passion and strong personal emotion not easily forgotten.

Chris Massie will always be remembered for his "Hallelujah Chorus," "Portrait of a Beautiful Woman," "A Modern Calvus," "Floodlight," etc.

LOVE'S PILGRIMAGE

Henry St. John Cooper

Judy Frensham had lived for years under the guardianship of her aunt, Rachel Garton, and she had always wanted to rebel against the gloomy atmosphere of her aunt's home. Yet she was loyal, and fought against her

inclinations. Then, a breath of the past, came Peter Manning, handsome and debonair and a splendid companion.

But it was Peter who fell in love first, with the lovely Judy, who seemed to have no desire to look on him as more than a friend. Peter told himself he was a fool.

Then Jules Renauld, a mysterious friend of Rachel Garton's saw Judy and fell in love with her. Renauld was unscrupulous, and although Judy knew nothing of it, held her aunt completely in his power. But Rachel Garton, although her life was shadowed with the sin of the past, fought hard against Renauld when he demanded her niece's hand. She felt desperate, and at last she appealed to Peter Manning to woo Judy, to sweep her off her feet and force her to marry him before Renauld succeeded where he had failed.

Judy had little suspected the intrigue going on about her, but she was suddenly aware of her love for Peter. Nothing mattered, no one mattered, but Peter Manning. A whirlwind courtship, a few brief days of incredible happiness, and then Renauld began to work his cunning plot, and only misery and unhappiness seemed to face the lovers, their lives would surely be ruined by misunderstanding brought about by Renauld. But Peter Manning was a fighter. . . .

No introduction is needed to this popular writer who has well over twenty other titles to his credit.

SCANDAL'S CHILD

Richard Starr

Magda Burke appeared mysteriously in Connah's Wood with her little crippled sister, Blossom, and where they came from nobody knew. Nobody cared in the neighbouring village of Glentire; all they wanted was to get rid of them. Tramps were not welcome in the parish, especially when they were young and beautiful and rebellious of authority as Magda was. The influential ones of the village did their best to drive the undesirables away, but the owner of the wood gave them permission to stay—and stay they did, living in the wood like gipsies. And the things that were said about them over the tea tables of Glentire were plenty.

So it is not difficult to imagine the state of mind of the village, when it was learned, on the excellent authority of a prominent lady who had seen it with her own eyes—that the young vicar of the parish was paying secret visits to the wood by night. That started the storm. Whispering tongues

eagerly forsook the two waifs of the wood and fastened with enthusiasm on the vicar; and the unexpected way the Reverend John Gale dealt with this piquant situation when it came to his knowledge, made local history.

The further adventures of Magda and Blossom make a pleasant, well-told story of village life, with an absorbing plot well sustained.

By the author of "Susannah the Dauntless," "Peggy Leaves Home," "Looking After Leatrice," "Joan and Garry," and many other well-known novels.

SECRETARY TO SIR MARK

Adelaide Heriot

As girls in other days have longed for a husband or a fortune, so did Juliet Grey, twenty-four, slim, dark and creamy-skinned, long for a job. The story opens energetically with her escape from a life of repression into the world of big business. Juliet's adventures as secretary to glamorous Sir Mark Selby, owner of a chain of luxury hotels, make entertaining reading. Despite her ignorance of the sophisticated world to which he introduces her, she does her work well, and wins something more than his respect—with the result that she makes an enemy of Suzanne Lemaire, who is bound to Mark by some mysterious link, and also imperils her dawning romance with Ted Thurston, an irresistibly likeable young man whose grey eyes are "nice triangles of good humour and honesty." But Juliet, who has good sense and good principles as well as charm, manages to avoid the wide and glittering "by-pass" which life with Sir Mark represents, and makes her way back, via paths not always easy, to the arms of Ted.

Light and readable as this modern romance is, its underlying theme is serious, and the denouement, whereby Ted's clean young heroism appears in shining contrast to the dark complexities of fear-warped Sir Mark, has a dramatic strength that is satisfying.

Author of "That Sweet Passion."

SWEETS AND SINNERS

Aceituna Griffin

The situation becomes awkward when Chadland dies suddenly in a London nursing home. But this is nothing compared with the difficulties that

arise when Lucille Innes, the beautiful but irresponsible victim of Mrs. Griffin's latest murder tale, pays the penalty for her weakness for chocolates after she receives a box of poisoned sweets from an anonymous donor at Christmas time. General suspicion falls on handsome young Gerald Grant, the object of Lucille's attempts at blackmail. But his fiancée, Mary Brooke, who is also Chadland's niece, is convinced of his innocence, and she sets out to clear him.

Author of "The Punt Murder" and "Commandments Six and Eight."

THE TERROR OF THE SHAPE

Christopher Jude

Boyd Flemmyng arrives in Kijaka with an introduction to the District Commissioner, Don Cresswell.

The Cresswells invite him to the Residency and on their wedding anniversary have a dinner party, at which their guest imbibes rather too freely.

Later he is discovered with half his face blown away from a shot fired from the shot-gun in the gun-rack.

Some information, unwittingly given, sets John Molyneux on a trail leading to numerous disclosures, a startling confession and a totally unexpected denouement.

THE CASE OF ALAN COPELAND

Moray Dalton

A well-known reviewer has said that crime novels are to be distinguished from thrillers because the emphasis is on the characters and not on the action. By this standard *The Case of Alan Copeland* is a crime novel. The actors in this drama of passion and frustration are the inhabitants of a quiet English village. The schoolmistress, an artist manquée, clever and sullen, her quick brain wasted for lack of opportunity; the gross, witch-like old woman, with her soundless chuckle, gloating over her discreditable past, and bullying the silent nephew and the flighty young daughter who help her to run her wayside filling station: the vicar, fastidious and aloof, more interested in his books than in the human material at hand, and his niece, dreaming of romance and waking to deadly realities; the prim, self-satisfied

spinster who does most of the work of the parish; and the harassed poultry farmer, who, like the schoolmistress, was an artist once, driven to desperation by an elderly nagging wife.

It is not until eighteen months after the death of a member of this little circle that the word "murder," whispered at first, is uttered aloud. The evidence against one person seems conclusive, and the police make an arrest. But the trial takes an unexpected turn, and a second victim of the unknown killer is saved only just in time.

Other titles by this very popular author include "The Body in the Road," "The Belfry Murder," "Night of Fear," etc.

A WASTREL GOES WEST

James Street

Old Eustace is a widower with two children, and they in turn have various appendages. His son, Michael, has a wife: his daughter, Gwladys, not only a husband and a child but a lover as well. The lover, too, has a wife. Altogether the ramifications of the Kendrick family are fairly extensive.

Lodging as a paying guest with Gwladys, Eugene Mulcahy is at first amused and then intrigued by the series of family plots and counter-plots that take shape before his eyes. When, however, Gwladys' husband is murdered he realises that things have got beyond a joke.

Author of "Carbon Monoxide."

THE GUN RUNNERS

John Crosbie

What is the secret of Ka-Mpunda? Terrence O'Shea, of the Cape Mounted Police, while on patrol in this wild, untamed corner of Kaffirland, has various experiences which arouse his suspicions while the authorities are worried at the activity of an unknown gang of gun runners. Terrence O'Shea stumbles upon a small lake where he discovers a young girl bathing and a big bearded giant who unceremoniously orders the policeman to take his departure. Making a pretence of departure, O'Shea remains in the vicinity and falls into the hands of the gun runners, who set him adrift in an open boat. From this danger he is rescued by the young girl, Sally, who swims out

to sea to save him and thereafter O'Shea forms an alliance with Sally and her father to outwit the smugglers.

THE SUPER-CINEMA MURDER

L. A. Knight

A new cinema is to be opened in a provincial town. Before the official opening takes place, the film which is to be shown is viewed by the Watch Committee. During the showing of the film a councillor is murdered, and one of the dozen or so people present committed the murder. The author has played scrupulously fair. One of those present did actually commit the murder! You may be sure of it.

So you can indulge your powers of deduction to their utmost capacity and back your fancy.

But you will get an added thrill out of the terrific sense of strain which pervades the book.

No introduction is needed to this very popular writer of murder stories and thrillers such as "Redbeard," "The Creeping Death," "Deadman's Bay," "Man Hunt," "Death Stands Near," etc.

THE DIAMOND RACKET

Norman Anthony

The Illicit Diamond Buying racket on the diggings has developed to alarming proportions. Who controls the racket? The authorities are particularly interested in the activities of the Welgedacht Syndicate and the beautiful young girl, Joan Somers, who flashes about the fields in her blue sports car. All attempts to trap her have failed. Ned Manners, a big game hunter from the Congo, takes a hand and volunteers to assist the C.I.D. His search for adventure brings him in contact with the underworld of the diggings and the Rand, and he encounters many perilous situations in which the girl, Joan, plays a prominent part.

DESERT REPRIEVE

Francis A. Waterhouse

Here is one of the few original stories of the Foreign Legion. It starts with a dawn flight after the pilot has left his best friend with a bullet hole in the back and his life blood slowly ebbing away. A broken man, whose wife has been unfaithful to him and who has been betrayed by his best friend is fleeing from justice. He flies blind through fog and ultimately crashes, but escapes with his life. The news of his crash spreads: he is dead to the world and dead in his mind too. Furtively he makes his way to Marseilles and enlists in the Legion of the Damned. A highly-sensitive man of good family he suffers torture in his early months of campaigning in the Atlas Mountains and the sun-baked sands of the Desert, he finds himself again and is re-born a new man. The author of this book, who has himself served in the Legion, gives an unusual twist to the plot which makes the book stand out as something new in Legion novels.

By the author of "Desert Destiny," "Oasis," "Cafard," etc.

BAD END VALLEY

W. B. Bannerman

What is the secret of Bad End Valley, and its strange inhabitants locked away from the outer world by the Arizona mountains? What fate has overtaken those who have gone to the valley to find that secret—and never come back? Danny Seaton, living in the place itself, had no more than an inkling as to the truth, but even that inkling is enough to spell danger for him. The valley is a place of horror, dominated by the iron personality of its ruthless overlord, "King" Carrick.

With the murder of Danny's grandfather, matters come to a head, and the aid of Domingo Santos is enlisted to clear up more than one mystery and to save an innocent man from hanging. How he does so, in the course of which he has to match his wits brilliantly against those of "King," and the even more dangerous Cal Barker, the professional gambler, makes a narrative that bristles with lightning movement, suspense and vitality.

From the moment when the reader sets eyes on the sinister valley, until the terrible pursuit across the desert that resolves the ultimate mystery, he will find it hard to lay this book aside; and the reappearance of Domingo Santos, the humorous and surprising Mexican detective, who made his bow in W. B. Bannerman's *The Whispering Riders*, is in itself enough to ensure that the entertainment will not flag.

WEST OF THE SUNSET

Dan James

Beset by a mysterious rustling syndicate which ran off herds of cattle without leaving a trace, menaced by persistent murder guns in the dark, distracted by indecision between two beautiful girls of widely different characters, Ben Boston fought his battles as you like to see a man fight. This is a story of the real West as it still is over in that far land of incredible grandeur 'midst the mountains, high mesas and sun-filled valleys, and it is written by one who was himself a cowpuncher and later a peace officer in that country of which he writes.

KNIGHT OF THE NEVER-NEVER

Peter Renwick

The title of Peter Renwick's latest novel is a singularly appropriate one. Those who know Australia will visualise the "Never-Never" as that vast expanse "outback" where the early pioneers struggled against drought, floods, bushfires, and other tribulations; this book will bring back memories to them. Those who do not know Australia have a rare treat in store. Again we meet Leatherface Lonergan, that incorrigible, and yet whimsical rogue.

Peter Renwick is in his most care-free vein, and those who have enjoyed the earlier adventures of Leatherface Lonergan will find that as "Knight of the Never-Never," the redoubtable bushman is more entertaining than ever.

Another novel about the hero of "Leatherface Lonergan Stakes a Claim," and "Black Hogan Strikes Again."

MURDER AT MULBERRY TREE COTTAGE

George Norsworthy

When William Littlejohn first opened the wicket-gate of Mulberry Tree Cottage, one peaceful, summer's evening, he little thought that a murder would be committed there within a few hours, and that he would take an important part in solving the mystery.

In *Murder at Mulberry Tree Cottage* George Norsworthy has written a story which will stir the reader's imagination from the first pages, and his interest will be held until he finally closes the book. Littlejohn who, of his own volition, has led the life of a tramp for the last five years, is a

philosopher in his own, unassuming way. As he hoes the borders and paths—in the absence of the indisposed gardener—he turns his attention to the psychological aspect of the case while the professional sleuths are building up alternative cases against two suspects.

*By the author of "Casino," "The House-Party Mystery,"
"Crime at the Villa Gloria," "The Hartness Millions," etc.*

THE WOMAN IN WHITEHALL

Rowland Walker

This, the author's latest novel, tells how, embittered by the war deaths of her three brothers, Fraulein von Bahn became a secret agent. And towards the end of 1917, her daring and resource, her fierce patriotism, her pre-war residence in England, coupled with her easy command of our language, made her for a while, a very dangerous enemy to the Allied cause.

Her landing from a U Boat on the East Coast one dark night, slipping through the lines of defence in the guise of a British War nurse, even nursing wounded Tommies in this country, dining with a brigade staff, posing as a young lady aristocrat, and even using a British staff car to further her nefarious designs, read like a fairy tale.

Her best work was done in London.

Absolutely fearless in enemy territory, hourly expecting the same tragic fate as that of Mata Hari, Sir Roger Casement, and Carl Lody, she sold matches in Whitehall, posed alternately as a British nurse or a Salvation Army lassie, changing both her guise and her personality when hotly pressed. But she was never taken though she was present when one German cipher was arrested.

Her escape from England, after collecting from the German key men the information required by the High Command, was little less than a miracle.

Author of "Death Flies High."

I KNEW MRS. LANG

Glyn Barnett

There were watching eyes in Braxley—curious eyes, venomous eyes, searching, probing, whilst all the time, underlying passions were spreading a

deepening shadow.

Here is the inside story of the case that ruffled the imperturbable Chief Inspector Gramport and wrecked certain romantic illusions of his handsome young assistant. Detective Sergeant Landers. Here is something that will grip your imagination—maybe even disturb your conscience. Did *you* know Mrs. Lang. . .?

Do you remember "The Call-Box Murder," "Death Calls Three Times," and "Murder on Monday"? Well, here is something better still.

SPANISH ADVENTURE

Jackson Budd

Jackson Budd's new book is the story of a man who through an infatuation for a woman, entangles himself in a Continental political intrigue. He goes to Spain, blunders into a net of suspicion, is hunted by both sides, is caught, imprisoned and eventually finds himself facing a firing squad.

It is a fine, gripping tale, competently told, leading steadfastly and inevitably to its climax. Not the least attractive feature of it is the picture it paints of Spain as she was on the threshold of the war, and of those grim weeks when the sword was first unsheathed.

Author of "The Princely Quartet," "Three Jolly Vagabonds," etc.

SAMPSON LOW

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Crooked Furrow* by John Jeffery Farnol]