

THE YOUNG SQUIRE'S RETURN.

(Continued.)

He had been gone nearly three years when Mr. George, the heir, died, after only a short illness, and much speculation was indulged in as to whom the estates would now descend. The news of to-day had settled that question, and the presumption was that Roderick's offence, if any, had been so far condoned or compromised that it was no longer unsafe for him to return.

The discussion of these topics occupied all the evening, and when Wilfrid bade his friends good-night Mabel went with him to the outer gate—a custom by no means peculiar to Longhill. Here, after a few whispered words, Wilfrid kissed her, repeated his good-night in tender tones and turned to go. His last glance showed her looking so pale in the moonlight that he could scarcely refrain from rejoining her.

Ere noon the next day everyone in Longhill knew that Mr. Roderick Warstone had come home. There was no doubt about this now, for one or two of those who had been out late over night had seen the dogcart from the Manor flash past them, and by the light of its lamps could see that the driver was no other than Mr. Roderick himself. It did not take long for this news to circulate through so small a community, and Mr. Roderick's return formed the staple of conversation at pretty nearly every dinner-table in the village.

It was a different subject, however, which had sufficient interest to draw together the group of yeomen who clustered in the open space fronting The Ring of Bells, the only hostel in the village, and which space was popularly known as "The Bells' Knoll."

The second subject was the selling off of Farmer Chines's old hay, which had taken place that morning, and some twelve or fifteen residents and strangers were gathered together under the great oak which occupied the centre of the knoll, and chatting over the sale, but with frequent allusions to Mr. Roderick cropping up, when lo! suddenly emerging from the footpath, which ran directly to the Manor, Mr. Roderick himself appeared, and with him the old Squire, his father.

A murmur of recognition ran through the group, and every hat was lifted in respect, although some of the sturdy old yeomen then present dwelt an hour's fast trotting beyond the boundary of the Warstone land, and were as independent of the old Squire as they were of the Great Cham of Tartary; but Squire Warstone was popular as a kindly man and liberal landlord with all who knew his name.

The old gentleman, who was now somewhat feeble, and whose walking-stick was carried for use, not for show, returned the salutations, and spoke to one or two of those nearest him, while Mr. Roderick, in the frank, hearty style which was natural, or was, at least, usual with him, plunged into the little group, and addressing first one and then another by name, shook hands with them quickly, with some slight remark showing his familiarity with each, until he paused abruptly before the last one and said:

"Aha! Here is a stranger, after all. Without knowing who you are I am sure we shall be friends, so I will introduce myself as Roderick Warstone, of Longhill Manor."

The stranger, who was about his own age and build, smiled in return, and, slightly lifting his low felt hat, took the offered hand and said:

"I am happy to welcome you home, sir. My name is Wilfrid Burn. My father, I believe, you knew."

"Knew your father! Knew the best man on our land, or away from it!" exclaimed the other. "I should think I did! I might well say I knew we should be friends, if your name is Burn."

After a further brief colloquy Roderick rejoined his father, and probably spoke to him in reference to Wilfrid, for the old gentleman glanced quickly round in the direction of the young man, and then, with a smile, said something to his son. Whatever it was it startled Roderick, who, in his turn, glanced swiftly at Wilfrid, and although he returned his father's smile, it was after a little interval, and a red spot came in his cheek which was hardly a pleasant accompaniment to the smile.

The old Squire no doubt had his own reasons for thus speedily and prominently parading his son through the village, which ceremony he continued until the young man had traversed its limited boundaries, and as their purpose was quickly noised about, they were met by nearly every resident of high or low degree.

Tired by his unaccustomed walk, but exultant at its effect, the Squire with his son entered the Manor gates. A couple of laborers who were employed in trimming a hedge hard by paused in their work to touch their caps, receiving in return a nod from Mr. Warstone and a cheerful word from Mr. Roderick, who knew them as old hands. The gate closed after father and son, and one laborer addressing his mate said:

"Master Roderick be just the same as ever, Eddard, just his old cheerful smile like."

"Ah, Tummas," returned the other, who was a grizzled, gaunt old fellow of sixty, "I do believe he be the same as ever. It wunt do to say it, thee knowst, but there beant no good in Measter Roderick, if ever there wor, he ha' gotten rid of it long ago."

The other man grinned assent, and they resumed their work.

In the cosy square parlor of Copse Mead farmhouse, which was the residence of Mr. Rayford, the farmer was sitting enjoying his evening pipe. He was seated on one side of the window, the sill of which was filled by a host of sweet-smelling flowers, while Mabel was on the other side engaged in needlework.

"I am mortal vexed, surely, that I was not at home this morning," said the farmer, in pursuance of a conversation on the subject, "when Master

Roderick came into the village. Egad! I should like to have seen him; should not you, Mabel?"

"Everyone, I believe, was glad to see him," replied his daughter in a low voice.

"I will answer for that!" cried the farmer, too fully satisfied with the tone of Mabel's reply to observe that she entirely evaded his question. "I don't credit half the stories about racehorses and betting."

Then came a long reflective pause, during which Mr. Rayford smoked, while Mabel bent her head closely over her work.

"Archy S one, the steward, was to be at The Ring of Bells this afternoon to meet the tenants from Moughton about the new drainage," resumed the farmer at length, "so I will step over and ask him if young Mr. Roderick is likely to be at the Manor to-morrow morning; if so, I shall go over and see him. Givo me my hat, Mabel. I shall be back in ten minutes."

Mabel looked after him for a little space, but from the expression of her eyes it was evident that she was not thinking of her father. Rousing herself with a slight sigh, she was about to resume her seat when a tap at the door of the room was heard. The apartment had two doors; one, by which her father had left, led to the front of the house, and the main street of the village; the other opened on a narrow paved way which was only separated by a wooden railing from the farmyard. The door opened and Roderick Warstone entered.

Mabel turned in astonishment, and leant on the table at which she had been working as though she feared to fall. Roderick, with a confident smile on his lips, stepped swiftly towards her, and extended his hand. The girl drew back, and still without a vestige of color in her features said:

"Mr. Warstone! This is an unexpected visit for—"

"Mr. Warstone!" echoed the other, "and 'an unexpected visit!' Come, Mabel, do not let us pretend to be strange and formal. I can never forget the happy past, and surely you cannot."

"I do not forget the past—which you call the happy past," said the girl; "although such a child as I was when last you saw me might have been excused for doing so. Your recollection of it comes very late, Mr. Warstone."

"Mr. Warstone' again!" exclaimed Roderick. "Do you intend to be as unjust as I have found nearly everyone else, Mabel? I came to this house the moment I was at liberty to pay my visit to the village—to see you, Mabel. When you have heard what I have to say in my defence, you will forgive my silence."

"I do not ask you for your defence," said Mabel; "I have no right or wish—"

"You will not be so unfair, Mabel," interrupted the young man. "Time may have changed all here; new faces may have banished remembrance of the old; I may have returned to find many of those I most valued cold to me; but you will not be unjust or unkind—that I know."

As he spoke the young Squire took her hand. Mabel passively allowed him to do this. The color was now rising in her cheeks, while on her lashes hung a tear. Mr. Roderick deemed these the signs of a favorable impression, and, speaking hurriedly, said:

"Fortune has been more propitious than I dared hope in granting me this brief interview. You will give me an opportunity—only one—'tis all I ask—when I may urge what I have to say in my behalf." He paused. The hand he held trembled, but Mabel did not reply. "I could not live happily, Mabel, no matter how the world might smile on me," continued Warstone. "If I thought you did not forgive me, or deemed that of my own will I had remained silent. I will make the opportunity I crave."

"There is my father!" exclaimed Mabel; and truly, as she spoke, the stalwart figure of Mr. Rayford was seen to pass the front window.

"Then in this last moment," said Roderick, "I repeat that I will—I must—find the opportunity to clear myself."

The sound of the farmer's tread rang in the stone passage, and prevented further speech; but Mabel had not actually forbidden the promised attempt, and that was something.

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Rayford would indeed have been astonished could he have heard the appeal from Roderick to Mabel; but fathers are proverbially shortsighted in their management of their daughters, and he was no exception to the rule. The intimacy between Roderick Warstone and Mabel Rayford had been conducted so guardedly that few even suspected its existence. Yet vows had passed between them, and if words could bind a man, Roderick Warstone was pledged to the farmer's daughter, and, as the senior by some seven years, he at least knew his own mind, while Mabel was scarcely more than a child.

Although she might feel in her inmost heart that such secrecy was wrong and dangerous, yet how could she refuse to keep the secret for a little while—only a little while, when her handsome, rich, accomplished lover assured her it was necessary? How the courtship would have ended there is no telling, but the forced departure of Roderick abruptly terminated the intimacy. The girl was so confident in her lover's truth, that his silence at first gave her no uneasiness; she pined and longed with the anxious longing of the heart for a letter—yet incessantly invented excuses for his silence.

At last it became impossible for even her mind to account for his neglect. It was known that he had written home, and to more than one of his old associates, but to her came no line, not even to say where he was.

Her hopes fading, the girl for some months drooped, but when Roderick had been gone about a year and a half, came Wilfrid Burn. Even after this prolonged interval, the first advances of the young farmer made her