

"Not yet. Why should I?"

"You are my only boy," said William Halfday.

"You have kept away for sixteen years—my mother flung herself into the river in despair of human kindness; your son and daughter have grown up without a thought from you; your father has died without seeing you. There has been much misery amongst the Halfdays, and you have kept away from it."

"Yes, yes, don't torture me, please," replied the father; "all this is very true, but what good could I have done? I have been unlucky all my life—I have not had one gleam of sunshine on my path from the beginning to the end."

"You did not deserve it," was the sharp reply.

"Oh! Brian," exclaimed the other, bursting suddenly into tears, and rocking himself to and fro upon the chair, with his hands before his face, "this is cruel of you. Your own father, too! My God, what will become of me, now you turn against me?"

Brian Halfday was not prepared for this outburst of emotion; he sat back in his chair, with one clenched hand on the table, surprised in his turn. He was a suspicious man, as he had owned that evening to Mabel Westbrook, but he was naturally observant, and he read no affectation of grief in the emotion of this castaway before him. Here at least was no sham; the man was weak and childish, but there was real life in his despair.

"I have come back," William Halfday continued, "to the workhouse or the gaol. I have come back without a penny in my pocket. I have not tasted food or drink since it was given me in charity this morning. I have been a careless, useless wretch, with as little thought for others as myself, but I did not look for this reception from my child. Let me go back to the inn at Datchet Bridge, and ask where Dorcas Halfday lives—there may be some grain of feeling in that girl's heart for me, when I tell her who I am."

He rose to go; he tottered slowly towards the door, until Brian stood by his side and led him back to his seat.

"There is no hurry, father," he said in a deeper voice; "sit down again, and let us understand each other clearly, if we can. A man cannot disappear for long years from his kindred, and expect to find them full of love for him on his return—cannot neglect them

utterly, and yet hope that they will hold him in affectionate remembrance."

"Quite right," whispered the father, "but don't reproach me any more. I deserve all you say of me."

"I will give you some bread and cheese and beer," said Brian. "You are hungry?"

"By Heaven, Brian, I am starving."

"I am sorry to hear it."

It was starvation that had brought him to Pentonshire, and not his natural affections, but Brian did not say so. He opened a cupboard, spread a white napkin on the table, set bread and cheese and a bottle of ale before his father, pushed the table to his side, and then sat and watched him consume his food with a ravenous eagerness, that was as devoid of acting as his grief had been. William Halfday did not speak again for several minutes; he seemed to forget his position and his sorrow in his appetite, and it was Brian who broke silence at last.

"Why did you not write to us?" he asked curiously; "if you were poor, and wanted money, it might have been worth the experiment of a letter."

"I did not know where to write."

"The address of 'Halfday, Penton,' would have found your father or your son."

"I thought of it," he said without looking at Brian, and pinching the corner of the napkin with his fingers nervously; "I thought of it, and put it off, time after time, till I was ashamed of letting any one know anything about me. I thought it better to die on the quiet somewhere!"

"And you altered your mind—for what reason?"

"I couldn't die," was the response; "I tried, Brian, and failed!"

"Do you feel better now?" was the next inquiry.

"Thank you—much better. I must compliment you, Brian, on a very excellent cheese," he said, with his old airiness of manner suddenly predominant.

"You are stronger now?"

"Yes. Altogether stronger."

"Then I have a few more words to say," Brian remarked. "Don't look alarmed, sir, there are no more reproaches for you to-night."

"Thank Heaven—I mean, thank you, very much, my son."