

IN AN EVIL MOMENT.

BY HARRY BLYTH.

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CHAPTER II.

OLD FRIENDS.

As Rhode Axon sat with agonised brain, maturing her terrible scheme, a horseman, whose saddle bags appeared to be unusually heavy, galloped from Christchurch towards her homestead. Some fifteen miles from the town he pulled up before a rough, wooden building that stood by the roadside. The erection was low-pitched. Its clumsily-constructed, overhanging roof, and its irregular walls, formed with logs, no two of which were of the same length or thickness, gave it a reckless, defiant air, in strong contrast with the severe order of most of the other houses the traveller had passed.

Over the clumsy door the name "STIVEY BLEND" had been scrawled in grotesque characters. Looking at the reeling, crooked letters, you could not help thinking that there was a curious affinity between the quaint appellation and the eccentric cabin. None but a Stivey could have possibly constructed that wall and the roof suggested that Mr. Blend was a gentleman of much airiness of demeanour, whose spirits were volatile, and whose soul revolted against conventionality.

These thoughts did not occur to our traveller, for he only glanced hastily at the building. Without noticing the name, he concluded that it was a roadside inn, or, as it would be called here, "accommodation house."

He dismounted, but before he reached the ground the door opened, and Mr. Stivey Blend stood in the entrance. He looked as much like an English outster as possible. His legs were long and thin, and tightly encased in riding trousers. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and his hands were thrust deeply into his pockets. A whisk of straw was between his lips. His face was clean shaven, and long and thin; and his red, spiky hair stood erect from his queerly-shaped head.

Mr. Blend regarded the stranger's movements with considerable nonchalance, at the same time gravely chewing, with infinite relish, the straw dangling from his mouth.

No sooner did the rider turn his face towards him, and advance to where he was standing, than Mr. Blend's composure disappeared. The straw dropped to the ground, and his hair glowed with a richer hue.

"Mr. Walter!" he cried, "Mr. Walter Barr! Who'd have thought of seeing you here? Why, it beats 'Batawing pulling off the double event, and cockfighting isn't in it."

The one addressed as Walter Barr was a slightly built young gentleman of some twenty-two years of age. His hair was almost white; he wore spectacles, and he had that subdued nervous manner so frequently observed in short-sighted people.

A little startled at Mr. Blend's abrupt exclamation, he looked inquiringly into his face.

"Dear me," he said, incredulously; "surely it cannot be Stivey Blend."

"If there's another," said Stivey, sententiously, "I'm sorry for him. A man with such a name is pretty heavily handicapped, I can tell you, sir."

"But what on earth has brought you out here?" demanded Walter, still with the same look of wonder upon his face.

"Double events," replied Mr. Blend, gloomily. Then with an air of profound mystery he added, "and double events 'll perhaps take me back again."

Mr. Blend led the horse under cover and secured it, and Walter Barr, as he stood watching him, rubbed his hands together with great satisfaction. He smiled in a soft pleasant way as a child might smile when it met with some unexpected treat.

"And what may a 'double event' be?" he asked cheerily, as he followed his host into the rude hut.

Stivey turned and regarded his questioner with an air of supreme pity.

"I allus knew that you was tenderly reared, sir, but I did think they'd taught you that."

The innkeeper's visage grew so long and solemn that Mr. Barr became nervous lest he had seriously hurt his feelings, and he begged to assure him that he had no intention whatever of offending his sensibilities.

"A double event, sir," said Stivey, with the air of a sage, and not heeding the apology, "is when you backs one horse to win two races."

"Oh, it's betting, is it?" said Walter, easily, still washing his hands in "invisible water."

"No, sir," cried Blend, with the most pronounced contempt, waving his gaunt arm in the air, "it is not what you would call common vulgar betting." He spoke as though the words nauseated him. "Double events, Mr. Walter, is a science, and the greatest achievement of which the human mind is capable is to bring one off; the man who spots one is a honour to his country. There ain't nothing in the whole range of learning to be compared with a double event."

"I'm afraid," said Walter, with a propitiatory smile, "that I am sadly ignorant. Have you got anything good here?" he continued, looking round the bare apartment. "I suppose you don't call fifteen miles any distance in this country? But I'm not very strong you know; the ride has made me terribly thirsty."

"I'll tell you what I've got here, Mr. Barr," said Stivey, with the air of a man unfolding a ghastly secret. "I've some of the best stout in the whole island."

"Open a bottle, there's a good fellow, and then you shall tell me how you came to venture out here."

While Stivey was procuring the refreshment, Walter observed that the internal arrangements were as primitive as the outer aspect was rough and unfinished. The only seats in the place were unpainted cumbersome boxes, bristling in unexpected places with rusty nails. The corners were jagged, and designed apparently for the sole purpose of gashing an unwary hand, of ripping any cloth of merely ordinary strength. These cracked and splintered cases served also as tables, and Stivey, with a good deal of solemnity, placed the beer and some cold mutton on one of them by the side of his visitor, and then dropped upon the other end of the chest himself.

After watching Walter for a little time as he sat there eating and drinking with considerable relish, Mr. Blend thrust that monstrously large hand of his into a deep pocket cunningly-made inside his waistcoat, and brought from it an ancient, dropical-looking pocket-book.

One of the compartments of this book was filled with cards of various colours. One card, more thumbed and dogeared than the others, he took out and threw upon Walter's plate.

"That's what brought me here," he said defiantly. "If it hadn't a' been for that I should a' been in England now."

His visitor picked the card up and examined it with considerable curiosity.

Stivey watched him with a contemptuous curl of his lips: Walter could make nothing of it.

"That there," said Stivey, pecking with his long bony finger at a spot more dirty than the rest of the card, "is eleven hundred and fifty pound; that there," moving a little to the right, "is two pound, and these here," travelling down the card, "is the name of a horse, and the name of two races."

Walter peered at the card very intently; but though he assumed a very wise expression, he could decipher nothing. Mr. Blend's constant pecking had effectually destroyed all trace of the original writing.

"Now," Mr. Blend continued, with an air of triumph, "if that there horse had won them there two races, I should have had eleven hundred and fifty pound. Eleven—hundred—and—fifty—pound," he repeated slowly, dwelling with greatunction upon each word.

When he thought he had given his guest sufficient time to grasp the immensity of his statement, he continued in a low whisper—"And all for two pound."

"Dear me," said Walter, munching the mutton; "you don't say so! All for two pounds?"

"All for two pound—" that's the beauty of it. All for two pound.

"And didn't you get it? By George, this is capital stout of yours, Stivey."

"I did not get it, Mr. Walter (here the speaker struck the box with his clenched fist, and sent one of the bottles rolling on to the floor); I lost that fortune by a fluke—the merest fluke in the world, and that's how I come out here."

It was very evident that Mr. Blend, just at this moment, wished to monopolise the conversation. When he paused Walter Barr waited silently, and with some humility, for him to proceed.

"I was never so sure of a double event before in my life," he continued presently. "I looked upon it as a 'moral.' There, I made that sure of it that I commenced to spend my winnings before the second race came off. The first was as right as the mail, said I didn't fear a little bit. I borrowed every bit of money I could, and me and the missis had a fine high old time of it, I can tell you."

The recollection of this "fine high old time," brings a placid smile to the speaker's face and he picks up the greasy ticket and fondles it affectionately.

"Well, sir," he went on, the smile slowly fading from his lengthening face, "for the whole week afore the second event it rained pitiful. My horse was no good on heavy ground—of course he wasn't." Mr. Blend, by his manner, evidently wished his listener to understand that no well-constituted animal, with a proper respect for itself, would have the smallest connection with heavy ground—"and—well the long and short of it was the double event didn't come off, and I was in a pretty deep hole."

Mr. Barr expressed his sympathy. "Oh it wasn't the first disappointment of the kind by many a score, but I'd never made such a fool of myself before. I was what you may call properly boxed up, sir."

"Why did you not ask my father to help you? I am sure he would not have refused you."

"That's just it, and that's why I would rather have cut my hand off than have gone to him. It was quite enough for him to do to put me in a snug little public-house after a few years' service—it wasn't likely I was going to him for money. When I got rid of the public-house I couldn't have looked him in the face to have saved my life. How is the old gentleman, sir?"

"Dead," Walter answered in a low voice; "he has been dead now more than two years."

"Poor old gentleman! he was a good sort if ever there was one."

There was a trace of emotion in Blend's voice, and Mr. Barr, anxious not dwell upon the unpleasant theme, roused him saying—"Well, what did you do at last?"

"I'll tell you, sir. When my missis knew the truth, she just took the reins, sir, and I had to be satisfied with a back seat. 'Stivey,' she says, 'these double events will be the ruin of you. You've have lost all your own money, and you've got very heavily into debt. I can see it all before me,' she says, 'like a book. You'll never rest satisfied until you've spent my bit of money too. But it shan't be, Stivey,' she says. 'I'm going to pack up all my belongings, and draw my money out of the bank, and off I'll be to my brother in New Zealand.' Then she softened a bit, and looking kinder coaxing like she said, 'if you like, Stivey, you can come too. But stay with you here I will not. Them double events is just worritting my life out.' It didn't take me long to decide. 'You don't think we're going to part, do you, old lady?' I says. 'It ain't likely. I'll go with you, and that's a double event you can bet your last halfpenny upon.'"

"It was the best thing for you to do."

"Well, I don't know, sir. The climate somehow didn't suit the poor old soul, and six months after being here she gave me her last kiss, and went away for ever."

"Death, death!" murmured Walter.

"Wherever I go hear of nothing but death."

After a pause he continued—

"Have you done well here, Stivey?"

"I was doing great things up at the town, sir, but them d—double events got hold of me again, and—Well, sir, you see me here, and can guess how I came down to it. However I'm safe. There's no papers here, and no one to bet with, and so, Mr. Walter, unless something very queer turns up, I've done with double events for ever."

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CHAPTER III.

DEMOUCED.

With a brisk whistle Mr. Blend set about removing the empty bottles, and the mutton and the bread that Walter had left.

"I suppose," said the latter, "that I must now let you into the secret of my appearance here?"

"Aye, sir. Bless if you couldn't have knocked me down with a feather when I first recognized who you were."

"My story is no brighter than your own," was the reply, given with a faint sigh. "I have already told you that my father is dead—"

"One of the best—one of the best," Stivey broke in.

"Just before his unexpected decease I had married, and within a year of his death my little baby girl was born."

"Good."

"Unhappily for me my darling wife died in giving it birth—"

"You've had a double event, sir, to make your life wretched, just like me."

"And I was left a widower. The loss of my father, followed so closely by that of my wife, completely prostrated me. For a little time it was thought that I should join the m. However, I recovered, but my system was so shattered that I was compelled to seek health and distraction in travel. I found a kind home for my little pet, and set off for New Zealand."

"It's queer you should have pitched upon this spot."

"Not at all. I have some old friends not very far from here."

Stivey opened his eyes inquiringly.

"Don't you know the Axons?"

"There's nobody about this part of the country that does not know Gregory Axon," was the reply. "Like your father, sir, one of the best—one of the very best."

"Gregory and I were friends as boys, and, what is more curious, I was at one time engaged to be married to his present wife."

Stivey Blend started, and regarded Walter with a queer, frightened look.

"And you are going there?" he asked.

"Why not?" Walter rejoined, observing, with much amusement, his companion's astonished expression. "Gregory and I never quarrelled over the affair, and, to confess the truth, my loss did not occasion me much unhappiness. It was a boyish fancy, and that was all. Surely, Stivey, you don't think that we're likely to fight a duel about the lady?"

The mere suggestion of such an encounter made Walter laugh with more heartiness than he had hitherto exhibited.

"I assure you," he added seriously, seeing that Stivey was in no way disposed to treat the matter humorously, "that we are the best of friends."

"Oh, he's right enough," said Stivey, in a dogged tone.

"Of course he's right enough. Gregory Axon is one of the best fellows in the world."

"Still, for all that, Master Walter, if you'd take my advice you wouldn't go."

Stivey spoke earnestly and with great decision.

Walter, Barr, being naturally of a nervous disposition, was, notwithstanding all self-efforts to conceal it, considerably discomposed by Mr. Blend's persistence.

"If you have any real reason for giving me such advice, Stivey, you should tell me what it is."

"Perhaps I haven't got any reason," said Stivey, sapiently, nodding his head, "and perhaps I have; but I'll let you, Mr. Walter, husband and lover in the same house is one of them double events to be carefully avoided."

Walter looked relieved, and again laughed. "But I am not her lover," he objected.

"He's all right," said Stivey, his voice sinking to a mysterious whisper; "but she's as hard as a nail."

"Impossible! She had one of the sweetest dispositions I ever met."

"Then she left it behind her when she came out here. She is as cold as marble and as heartless as a rock. There's not a man or woman for miles around that does not pity Gregory Axon. He got his double event when he married, and you were well out of it, sir."

"You amaze me!" cried Walter. "In England we all thought them the happiest couple in the world. Rhode was beloved by every one, and Gregory—well, you can guess how popular he was."

"It's queer," said Stivey, gravely shaking his head; "but the kinder Gregory is the worse she gets. He can't do anything to satisfy her, and that's a fact."

"Poor Rhode!" Walter sighed. "Something very strange must have happened to change her so. But it can't be Gregory's fault, I'm sure of that."