

POWER LOT

A Story of "Down East."

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CHAPTER IX.

An Egg for a Stamp.

Alas for the tawny-haired hero of the ring! With the morning light, the thrill of the combat and the glory of the amphitheater had dwindled down to a smarting consciousness of a bruised body; down to a sordid summons to rise and toil, conveyed through the cackling of geese and the bleating of calves; down, in fact, to ax and saw, and spade and hoe, and other things that are but dull accompaniments to the picture of an aspiring champion.

Mary was afraid to embitter Bate, and do Rob actual harm in consequence, by engaging in any lively tone of pleasantry or showing even a frankly natural politeness to their guest; so the same studied courtesy as usual prevailed between her and Rob at the breakfast table.

"Did Mrs. Byjo—I mean, Stafford—call last evening?" Rob inquired cursorily, with great lightness and cheerfulness of manner.

"Yes," Mary laughed; "she came in a mysterious way the dishes to perform. When I came out from mother's room, everything had been done for me; and it is not the first time," she added, "that Virginia has done me so kind a turn."

"She's a brick," said Rob, heartily.

Bate sniffed. The world seemed ever to be drawing upon the well of Marah within him, and he, most uncannily, seemed always to know what was going on in all the small affairs of life.

"Byjo never done your dishes last night," he declared.

"Who, then?" said Mary, regarding him hopefully; "did you, Bate?"

"Me? No."

"Well, then—who?"

"The prize-fighter, thar'; and I wouldn't thank him for his impudence, either."

Mary blushed. Rob reveled in her look; but at that point he lost her. He did not follow her purpose to shield and save him, but saw only the cool and quiet smile which hovered about her lips.

"Ah, now I understand," she said—"though it must seem ungrateful—the great rim of grease left around the inside of the dishpan."

Bate cast so sharp and triumphant a glance of warning at him that Rob almost felt, in washing the dishes, though he could still vividly recall the impulses of hopeless love and holy kindness which had abounded in him at the time, that he had given serious ground for offense. There are rites of conduct for human observation in Power Lot, as elsewhere, and possibly he had arrogated to himself too much of the privilege of the domestic and familiar. Anyway, Bate had exposed him, and brought contempt upon him; and now he did not leave the table as usual, but sat regarding Mary and Rob in an insultingly watchful manner.

Rob excused himself, and sighed deeply as he stepped outside the door. His clothes on the line! Alas, for the strain and rigor of immortal combat—it had fallen to this; Rob must take down his own clothes. And, that Bate, watching from some source, would devour with delight this savory morsel of his discomfiture, he felt sure.

Rob filled his pipe—he had only one drawing of molasses-and-ginger tobacco left, by the way—sauntered up with his hands in his pockets, and attacked the line. But how white they were! Water and the stern drubbing of the board, and the winds of adversity which had blown all night upon them, had made them how wondrous sweet. Rob condescended to take a little pride in

them at last, in his own heart; outwardly his ears were suffused with blushes as he folded them on the grass preparatory to carrying them in and packing them away.

Hereafter, a flannel shirt or two, with a few adjuncts by way of handkerchiefs and stockings, would represent his labors at the washtub and his soldiery of the line.

He wanted very much to have a little interview with Mary; in the first place, for the sake of the painful and pleasurable excitement of being near her, and in the second place, because his finances had reached an ebb—as witness the one pipe-drawing of tobacco remaining to him—where it was imperatively necessary for him to propound a frank business proposition to her. Just as he was making his return passage through the kitchen, having put away his linen, Bate suddenly appeared with an affected preoccupation of haste, and began fumbling among the bric-a-brac on the kitchen shelf in search of something, no one knew what.

Rob, disregarding his presence, stood in the center of the floor, and spoke with dignity and self-possession:

"Miss Stingaree, do you mind my getting you a mess of clams, instead of your hiring Joey Becher to do it?"

"Why, of course not, Robert; but don't you need the time for your own work?"

"I will explain," said Robert, the flower of his courtliest drawing-room grace shining full upon him; "I have written to New York for funds, but Captain James Turbine's boat is not yet in with the mails, and my present financial condition, to tell you the truth, Miss Stingaree, is one of absolute penury; in fact, if penury means anything like penny, I haven't even that. I vow to you it would give me the proudest pleasure to dig the clams for you for nothing; and if you will permit me to have that pleasure, I will regard the ten cents, which you usually pay Joey Becher for digging a peck, as only a temporary loan, and shall feel grateful and very honored to reimburse you when I receive my funds."

Bate, from an expression of dumb wonderment, chuckled, as he renewed his frantic pawing over the kitchen shelf.

"He's out o' terbacker."

Between the two of them, Mary was hard put to it to keep her countenance. She knew that no funds would be forthcoming to Rob from New York; it was in the strict letter of the physician's bond that Rob should be brought face to face with the utter realities of life, and either prove his crass weakness or struggle up and stand on his own feet, morally erect.

It seemed hard to her. He was so good-natured. It had touched her in a way that he did not dream of—his washing the dishes for her. Bate made her friendly relations with her big ward more difficult still through his insane jealousy and moodiness. But Rob's present elegance of manner cast a glamour over all things, made them appear hopeful, even joyful. It was not so sure but that, in some sense, in place of her bewitching him, he was bewitching her, her life-training had been so practical and severe, and he was, at present, at least, even with his appeal for money, the very soul of chivalrous romance.

Mary could not help smiling when he brought his request to a peroration.

"Very well," she answered, "we will not consider it as a loan, but I shall be very glad to pay you ten cents if you will dig some clams."

Rob bowed. He had devoutly hoped that she would understand and offer payment in advance; then he could stop at the River on his way back from the flats and purchase some tobacco; it would save him another long trip up and down hill. To do Mary justice, she did not fully diagnose his predicament. He said nothing more. Ceaseless physical exertion was becoming second nature to him, and he had observed that the

strange mechanism of his body, after a few moments of quiet, if strenuously put to labor and plentifully bedewed with sweat, limbered up again to the tune of untiring action. Occasionally he reflected in blank astonishment on his health and vigor, and still the latent purpose of his untrained pleasure-loving nature was to go rollicking back to New York as soon as opportunity offered, and expend his accrued treasures of deep-breathing lungs and toughening muscles in having a tremendously, a superlatively, "good time."

And now he took up clam rake and basket, descended by the steep road, which was shorter, and had ceased, some time ago, to thrill him with afright; walked sturdily to the flats, dug up the clams, tramped back and delivered his spoils to Mary, and received his ten cents. Mrs. Byjo was with her, and hilariously, with an air of goodfellowship, as he retreated threw several bad clams after him as a reminder to be more particular in future in his selection of those bivalves.

So homesick for company was Rob, it seemed nice even to have things thrown at him, and at a safe distance, he tossed a loud, though expressly tender, kiss back at Virginia, and proceeded cheerfully on his way down the hill again.

At the River store he purchased his usual ten-cent plug of tobacco and filled his pipe, standing outside in the center of activity created by a confused street scene, consisting of one yoke of oxen and two men, and—yes, that was Cuby coming. Cuby knew the proprieties and the tenets of choice society; she did not look at Rob as she stepped lightly past, her head well up, and her look communicating with the far edge of the horizon.

Rob flattered himself with the happy thought that she expected him to follow. There, at least, he felt, as he watched her trim, smart figure disappearing, was something tangibly human to get hold of, and he was lonely beyond utterance for genial companionship.

"You do loaf," she suddenly admonished him with motherly displeasure, when his footsteps pounded too plainly at her side to be ignored any longer. "You work not, you make to loaf by the store."

"Now, see here, Cuby, I don't loaf. It just happened. I haven't stopped to breathe before in a dog's age."

Rob puffed at his pipe choicely, cautiously; even this despised quality of the weed had grown to be of precious savor to him.

"Just look," he continued, at what I've been through with to get a plug of this nasty tobacco. Twice up and down that eternal hill to earn ten cents for such a luxury as this. Me—!—that they used to call 'the Hilton heir' at home. Say, this is a great world, Cuby, and has got lots of entertaining stuff in it. I mean to make other folks laugh out of the wrong sides of their mouth, sometime. Ha! ha! Ho! ho! ho!"

Do his best, Rob could not muster up a malicious laugh. It might have been the wealth of ozone in the atmosphere, but his wild cackinnation had a distinctly joyous tone.

"My father says," replied Cuby, significantly, "I shall never marry any man w'at is lezzy."

"Quite right. For that very reason you'd be mighty lucky if you could catch me. I'm the goods all right. Sweat! Don't say a word. All the arrears on my board bill paid up! Square with the world! The Stingaree potatoes are ahead of mine, so I put in extra time at the usual wages helping hoe them. I haven't ironed yet, but I've done a big washing. Sawin' wood, choppin' wood, diggin', hoein', clammin'—and, say, I've laid Bate flat."

This revelation was unwise, and it had occurred to Rob as only a remarkable item among his various toils.

Cuby's manner changed.

"No. You have lick' Bate? You have?" she cried, eagerly.

Rob expanded with the momentum of her excitement, and asserted, furthermore, with reckless high-mindedness:

"Ask Miss Stingaree; ask Captain Byjo—she saw him on the ground, and me over him telling him to beg for mercy."

"Oh, Rob!" Cuby sighed an ecstatic long breath and put a hand on his shoulder, and her brown eyes looked into his.

Rob was electrified, and he felt of a size that matched, not unfavorably, with the surrounding mountains. Ozone is as treacherous as whisky to the blood of any gay reveler who has not learned how to hold himself in hand.

"If it is hones' an' true that you have lick' Bate," said Cuby, solemnly, "then they shall not any more call you 'Daisy,' no. And my father, he will show you to box with the gloves. He has it well learn'. He shall make a laugh at them, an' show you."

"Will he?" cried Rob, his hands twitching to begin lessons.

"Sure. Yes. But, Rober', you make yourself foolish to work so har-rd for so little pay. Why do you not mek them that is rich off you, send you the money? Why not?"

"That is just where your dear little head is level, my sweet girl. But don't you see they've got me in a trap. I couldn't buy a foot of standing room, even on one of those old rotten wood-packets; and they're so connivin' mean together—and I believe Captain Jim Turbine's at the bottom of it—they wouldn't send me a berth, even if I had the money. Besides, they never sail, anyway, and the vessels that do come in sneak in and out like thieves. Don't you see where I am? I'm going to put it in the geography? What is 'Robert Hilton'? (Answer) He's a poor cuss surrounded by water."

Cuby laughed. There was no question but that Rob was growing witty as well as valiant. She laughed so admiringly that Rob, reflecting a bit on his own brilliancy, followed suit:

"Ho! ho! Ha! ha!"

"Yes. Me—I remember," gurgled Cuby through her merriment; "I mek study of the geography at the Baptist school. But now there is come a new par-rt to it: 'What is Rober' Hilton?' The pupils make to answer: 'He is one poor cuss all surround' with water.' Yes."

Then her face grew very serious.

"You shall not go away. My father will kill you if you go away. You make promise to me we are engage' to each other. If you go away—though I said not much that I love you, they make such a laugh at me—you shall take me with you. That is sure. Yes. No, you shall not go. But write them the letters. See? Make the big thr-r-reat at them. Scar-r-re them."

The asperity of Cuby's lovely glowing face was enough to send fits of dismay through any corporate body of malefactors.

Rob's heart sank a bit at the information that he was indissolubly bound to Cuby; not but that she was perfectly entrancing, but the marriage tie seemed a knotty problem altogether out of his province at present. With an embarrassed laugh he relegated it to either the dark forward or backward abysses of time, just wherever it might happen to light, making only the mental reservation that he would be rather more careful hereafter in his attitude toward the smart, tempestuous little maiden at his side.

"Letters, Cuby," he declared gravely; "why, I've written letters enough, but I never get any answer. I know this about Captain Jim Turbine—mean as he is, he's honest. He would bring my letters over from Waldeck if any came. No, they won't answer me; however, I've got a missive here in my pocket that I've been carrying about with me, that I'm going to send first boat. I reckon it'll make 'em sit up. It's a hair-raiser."

So prominently did this intention now absorb Rob's mind, he sought