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By HENRY SETON MERRIMAN
Author of "The Sowers," "Roderic's Career," "From One Generation to Another," Etc.

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Thus it came about that the dawn found Jocelyn moving softly in the room, with Nestorius asleep in her arms. A pink light came creeping through the trees, presently turning to a golden yellow, and, behold, it was light! It was a little cooler, for the sea breeze had set in. The cool air from the surface of the water was rushing inland to supply the place of the heated atmosphere rising toward the sun. With the breeze came the increased murmur of the distant surf. The dull continuous sound seemed to live amid the summits of the trees far above the low built house. It rose and fell with a long drawn rhythmic swing. Already the sounds of life were mingling with it—the low of a cow, the crowing of the cocks, the hum of the noisier daylight insect life.

Jocelyn moved to the window, and her heart suddenly leaped to her throat.

On the brown turf in front of the house were two men stretched side by side as if other hands had laid them there dead. One man was much bigger than the other. He was of exceptional stature. Jocelyn recognized them almost immediately—Guy Oscar and Joseph. They had arrived during the night and, not wishing to disturb the sleeping household, had lain them down in the front garden to sleep with a quiet conscience beneath the stars. The action was so startlingly characteristic, so suggestive of the primeval, simple man whom Oscar represented as one born out of time, that Jocelyn laughed suddenly.

While she was still at the window Marie rose and came to her side. Nestorius was still sleeping. Following the direction of her mistress's eyes, Marie saw the two men. Joseph was sleeping on his face, after the manner of Thomas Atkins all the world over. Guy Oscar lay on his side, with his head on his arm.

"That is so like Guy Oscar," said Marie, with her patient smile; "so like, so like. It could be no other man—do a thing like that."

Jocelyn gave Nestorius back to his mother, and the two women stood for a moment looking out at the sleepers. Little knowing what the advent of these two men brought with it for one of them. Then the Englishwoman went to change her dress, awaking her brother as she passed his room.

It was not long before Maurice Gordon had hospitably awakened the travelers and brought them in to change their torn and ragged clothes for something more presentable. It would appear that Nestorius was not particular. He did not mind dying on the kitchen table if need were. His mother deposited him on this table on a pillow, while she prepared the breakfast with that patient resignation which seemed to emanate from having tasted of the worst that the world has to give.

Joseph was ready the first, and he promptly repaired to the kitchen, where he set to work to help Marie with his customary energy.

It was Marie who first perceived a difference in Nestorius. His dusky little face was shining with a sudden, weakening perspiration, his limbs lay lifelessly, with a lack of their usual comfortable looking grace.

"Go!" she said quickly. "Fetch Miss Gordon!"

Jocelyn came, and Maurice and Guy Oscar; for they had been together in the dining room when Joseph delivered Marie's message.

Nestorius was wide awake now. When he saw Oscar his small face suddenly expanded into a brilliant grin. "Bad case!" he said.

It was rather startling, until Marie spoke. "He thinks you are Mr. Meredith," she said. "Mr. Meredith taught him to say 'bad case.'"

Nestorius looked from one to the other with gravely speculative eyes, which presently cleared.

"He is dying—yes!" said the mother, looking at Jocelyn.

Marie raised her shoulders with a pathetic gesture of resignation. "The sleeping sickness," she said, "what will you? There is no remedy. He always said he would die of that. He feared it."

In the greater sorrow she seemed to have forgotten her child, who was staring open eyed at the ceiling. The two others, the boy and girl, were playing on the doorstep with some unconsidered trifles from the dust heap, after the manner of children all the world over.

"He was not a good man," said Marie, turning to Jocelyn, as if she alone of all present would understand. "He was not a good husband, but—he shrugged her shoulders with one of her patient, shadowy smiles. "It makes so little difference—yes?"

Jocelyn said nothing. None of them had ought to say to her, for each in that room could lay a separate sin at Victor Durvov's door. He was gone beyond reach of human justice to the higher court where the extenuating circumstance is fully understood. The generosity of that silence was infectious, and they told her nothing. Had they spoken she would perhaps have believed them, but then, as she herself said, it would have made so little difference. So Victor Durvov leaves these pages, and all we can do to remember the writing on the ground. Who among us dares to withhold the extenuating circumstance? Who is ready to leave this world without that clutch to lean upon? Give us a mixed blood—evil black with evil white—and what can the result be but evil? Given the climate of western Africa and the mental irritation thereof, added to a lack of education and the natural vice inherent in man, and you have—Victor Durvov.

Nestorius—the shameless—stretched out his little bare limbs and turned half over on his side. He looked from one face to the other with the grave wonder that was his. He had never been taken much notice of. His short walk in life had been very near the ground, where trifles look very large, and from whence those larger stumbling blocks which occupy our attention are quite invisible. He had been the third—the solitary third child who usually makes his own interest in life, and is left by or leaves the rest of his family.

It was not quite clear to him why he was the center of so much attention. His mind did not run to the comprehension of the fact that he was the wearer of borrowed plumes—the sable plumage of King Death.

He had always wanted to get on to the kitchen table. There was much there that interested him and supplied him with food for thought. He had risked his life on more than one occasion in attempts to scale that height with the assistance of a sauceman that turned over and poured culinary delicacies on his toes, or perhaps a sleeping cat that got up and walked away much annoyed. And now that he was at last at this dizzy height he was sorry to find that he had to crawl about and explore the vast possibilities of it. He was rather too tired to convey his forefinger to his mouth, and was forced to work out mental problems without that aid to thought.

Presently his eyes fell on Guy Oscar's face, and again his own small features expanded into a smile.

"Bad case!" he said, and, turning over, he nestled down into the pillow, and he had the answer to the many questions that puzzled his small brain.

As through an opera runs the rhythm of one dominant air, so through men's lives there rings a dominant note, soft in youth, strong in manhood and soft again in old age. But it is always there, and whether soft in the gentler periods or strong amid the noise and clang of the perihelion, it dominates the life and gives its tone to the whole life.

The dominant tone of Sir John Meredith's existence had been the high, clear note of battle. He had always found something or some one to fight from the very beginning, and now, in his old age, he was fighting still. His had never been the din and crash of warfare by sword and cannon, but the subtler, deeper combat of the pen. In his active days he had got through a vast amount of work; that unchronicled agent of the foreign office, the man who comes through the cheap newspapers to the voracious maw of a chattering public. His name was better known on the banks of the Neva, the Seine, the Tyne, or the swift rolling leet, than by the Thames, and grim Sir John was content to have it so.

His face had never been public property; the comic papers had never used his personality as a peg upon which to hang their ever changing political principles. But he had always been "there," as he himself vaguely put it. That is to say, he had always been at the back—some of those invisible powers of the stage by whose command the scene is shifted, the lights are lowered for the tragedy, or the gay music plays on the buffoon.

Sir John had no sympathy with a generation of men and women who would rather be laughed at and despised than unnoticed. He belonged to an age wherein it was held better to be a gentleman than the object of a cheap and evanescent notoriety, and he was at once the despair and the dread of newspaper interviewers, enterprising publishers and tuft hunters.

He was so little known out of his own select circle that the porters in Euston station asked each other in vain who the old swell waiting for the 4 o'clock "up" from Liverpool could be. The 4 o'clock was, moreover, not the first express which Sir John had met that day. His stately carriage and pair had pushed its way into the crowd of smaller and humbler vehicular fry earlier in the afternoon, and on that occasion also the old gentleman had indulged in a grave promenade upon the platform.

He was walking up and down there now, with his hand in the small of his back, where of late he had been aware of a constant aching pain. He was very upright, however, and supremely unconscious of the curiosity aroused by his presence in the mind of the station "canaille." His lips were rather more troublesome than usual, and his keen eyes twinkled with a suppressed excitement.

In former days there had been no one equal to him in certain diplomatic crises, where it was a question of brooding and sniveling up a representative of some foreign state. No man could then rival him in the insolently aristocratic school of diplomacy which England has made her own. But in his most dangerous crisis he had never been restless, apprehensive, pessimistic, as he was at this moment. It was a very simple matter that had brought him here. It was merely the question of meeting a man as if by accident, and then afterward making that man do certain things required of him. Moreover, the man was only Guy Oscar, learned, if you will, in forest craft, but a mere child in the hands of so old a diplomatist as Sir John Meredith.

That which made Sir John so uneasy was the abiding knowledge that Jack's wedding day would dawn in twelve hours. The margin was much too small, through, however, no fault of Sir John's. The west African steamer had been delayed, unaccountably, two days. A third day lost in the Atlantic would have overthrown Sir John Meredith's plan. He had often cut things fine before, but somehow now—not that he was getting old, oh, no!—but somehow the suspense was too much, for his nerves. He soon became irritated and distrustful. Besides, the pain in his back wearied him and interfered with the clear sequence of his thoughts.

The owners of the west African steamer had telegraphed that the passengers had left for London in two separate trains. Guy Oscar was not in the first—there was no positive reason why he should be in the second. More depended upon his being in this second express than Sir John cared to contemplate.

The course of his peregrinations brought him into the vicinity of an inspector whose attitude betokened respect while his presence raised hope. "Is there any reason to suppose that your train is coming?" he inquired of the official.

"Signaled now, my lord," replied the inspector, touching his cap. "And what does that mean?" unconpromisingly ignorant of technical parlance.

"It will be in in one minute, my lord."

Sir John's hand was over his lips as he walked back to the carriage, casting as it were the commander's eye over the field.

"When the crowd is round the train you come and look for me," he said to the footman, who touched his cocked hat in silence.

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(To be continued.)

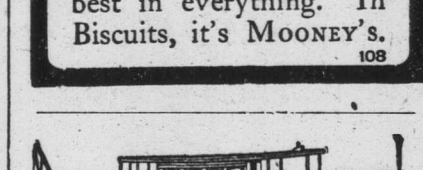
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