

stabled his steed at that ancient hostellerie, he strolled off to keep an appointment with his sweetheart.

Yes, he had a sweetheart—the daughter of a petty shop-keeper from Lancashire, who had settled at Barnsley some years previously. This shopkeeper, whose name was Jeremiah Mawson, was a Dissenter, and belonged to a sect the adherents whereof were called Jebusites. I shall have occasion to give some account of this sect further on.

The young man unburdened himself to Miss Mawson, and sought her advice. She was only a few days younger than himself, and—owing, in some measure, no doubt, to the eminently practical school in which she had been trained—was possessed of a goodly stock of a certain commodity, a single ounce of which, as times go, is worth a hundredweight of genius: I mean common-sense. The present emergency, however, was one in which she did not choose to rely entirely upon her own judgment; and, as she was motherless, the old shop-keeper was called in, and the case submitted to his arbitration.

After about two minutes' grave deliberation the referee pronounced his decision. And these were the words of Jeremiah Mawson the Practical:

"Misthur Robbut, to tell yo' th' t'reath, ah niver woor mooch i' faavur o' yo' cooartin' mey girl; an' nah, as yo've esked mey advice, ah mun speak reeat aht. Ah mek nowt o' gentlefook weddin' anneath 'em. If yo' wed Mary, belaike yo'r fooak'll ahl leak dawn on 'er; an' happen yo'r feyther'll tooarn yo' aht o' th' dooar, an' coot yo' off wi' a shillin'! Ah waant me dowtther to entther naw fam'ly agen th' wishes o' th' eead on't; an' sooa ah think it'll happen be th' best for yo' to dthrop it at yance."

Against this decision both parties appealed.

"Well, then, aw'll tell yo' whaat. Yo', Robbut, mek up yo'r maind, as yo'r feyther sez, whaat yo'll deea to mek a livin' for yersen; an' when yo' see him this day week, do yo' tell him 'at yo' waant to wed mey lass. Yo'll hear whaat a sez, an' can coom ower an' let's knooa. It'll be taine enow then to settle't for good an' ahl."

I think it must have needed all my father's love for his betrothed to reconcile him to the idea of making this vulgar old man his father-in-law, whose manner was far from possessing that repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere. Still, boorish and offensive as his manner might be, there could be no doubt that his words were the words of wisdom.

After some discussion, the course indicated by Jeremiah was unanimously agreed upon.

Precisely at two o'clock in the afternoon of the twenty-sixth, Robert Wilford again found himself face to face with his father.

The young man stated his case simply and straightforwardly. He felt satisfied, he said, of his unfitness for a profession. He had neither taste nor capacity for professional pursuits, and was above all things desirous of settling upon a farm. There was a good holding of two hundred acres to be had over in Lancashire, in the neighbourhood of Pendle Forest; and to a suitable tenant exceptional advantages would be afforded. With a less sum than would be required to fit him for, and establish him in a profession, he could take this farm, have it stocked, and be regularly set up in business as a Lancashire yeoman. He would then be able to make his way without further assistance from anyone; of that he had no doubt whatever. He then began to speak with considerable diffidence of his attachment to Miss Mawson. As he went on, finding that his communication produced no mark of disapprobation, he gained more confidence, and enlarged upon the theme until his affectionate parent yawned in his face thrice; each successive yawn being more distinctly ejaculated than its predecessor. This, though far from encouraging, was better than positive and avowed disapproval; and Juvenis floundered on until he had delivered what was probably the longest speech he had ever made in his life up to that moment. And then he paused for a reply.

The Squire pronounced his decision without deliberating three seconds. His only anxiety was to get the matter off his hands, and return to his books.

And to this effect were the words of Horace Wilford, Esquire, the Indifferent.

"As you tell me that you have fully made up what you are pleased to call your 'mind,' and are resolved to marry this—this young person—that subject may be considered as at an end between us. If you insist upon taking this Lancashire farm, I suppose there is no more to be said on that subject either. You are not of age, and would probably not be accepted as a tenant upon your own responsibility; but that difficulty, I imagine, may easily be got over by the intervention of a third party. It will take fully all I have to give you to carry out the project; and I consider it my duty to advise you beforehand that under no possible contingency of circumstances are you to expect another farthing from me, either during my life or afterwards. I further consider it my duty to warn you that in less than five years from the day you take possession of the farm (beyond which time I must decline to become answerable for the rent) you will be an inmate of the workhouse. That, understand, will be wholly your own affair; at least it will certainly be none of mine. As you make your bed, so must you lie. After your marriage, it will of course be desirable that you never visit at this house, or attempt to associate or correspond with any of its inmates. Have you taken all these matters into consideration? Very well; then it will be useless for us to prolong this interview. All arrangements will be carried out by Ryeerofts, with whom you will confer about this farm, and—and, in short, about any other matters which it may be necessary to discuss. Now, shake hands, for I have lost a precious hour with you. What on earth is the boy crying for? I am not in the least angry, I give you my word of honour as a gentleman. On the contrary I wish you well, and trust that you may be happy in your new relations. Good bye—good bye!"

And Robert Wilford once more went out from the presence of his father; and the two never met again on this side the grave.

I wonder if they have ever met on the other

Within three months my father and mother were married and settled down on the farm in Lancashire; where, in fulness of time—that is to say, in rather less than three years—two children were born to them. My sister Sarah was the first to make her appearance. Next came my brother Norman. These, however, were almost the only additions which my father had been able to make to his possessions since the commencement of his tenancy. The last few seasons had been unpropitious for the farming interest. He had not much more knowledge of practical farming than of practical cotton-spinning, and his youth and inexperience had told sadly against him. He was going down hill every day; and he knew it. He saw ruin stealthily advancing towards him with slow but certain steps. England was evidently no place for him. About this time he received a visit from his father-in-law, who was not long in discovering how the land lay.

"Belaike, mey lad, yo'r feyther'll tooarn aht a true prophet eftther ahl. Two years mooar, an' then—th' workus."

This was inspiring. For a genuine consoler in affliction, such as it has fallen to the lot of most of us to encounter at least once in our lives, here was your customer. As has been well said, "When a fellow gets to going down hill, it does seem as though everything had been greased for the occasion." What happy man of mature age is there among my readers who cannot confirm this aphorism from his own experience of human nature? When the woes of life press most sorely upon a man: when his cup of affliction is full to overflowing: when the clouds impending over him are all alike sombre, and no silver lining is apparent in any one of them: when he stands most in need of words of cheer: when the future seems one mass of unrelieved blackness, and no ray of hope is visible, even at the end of the journey—under such gloomy conditions as these, is not the one suggestion most repellant to the soul of the afflicted one certain to emanate from some officious, coarse-grained egotist who administers his potion under the guise of friendship? And has it not been ever thus? Have not these Job's comforters existed from time immemorial? I have no manner of doubt that if work-houses existed in the time of the Man of Uz, that much-enduring individual was counselled by his friends Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite, to betake himself to the one belonging to the parish in which he had obtained a settlement.

(Continued next week.)