

"Ay," said Jake, "that was the end of it. That was what came of nine years of happy married life. Good to her! She might well say that, Barbey, and more to the back of it. Good to her! I loved the ground she trod on—the thing she touched. I'd ha' put my hand in the fire to save her from the finger-ache. And she loved me too—till he came."

"He?" repeated Barbara.

"Ay, the man she bolted with." He lay looking at the ceiling with the same unwinking stare, and then said, softly, but with an indescribable intonation of hate and loathing, "Damn him!"

Barbara sat silent for a while, rocking her body quietly to and fro, till suddenly she broke into loud weeping.

"Ay, lass," said Jake, with the same evil-sounding quiet in his voice, "I've done that too, but it didn't fetch her back."

Barbara wept unrestrainedly for some minutes.

"Tell me," she said, at last, "how it came about."

"It was in California, at a place called Jackson's Gulch. I was mining there, and doing well, for the place was rich. I'd been doing pretty well much all along, after I married Jess, for when a man loves a gal as I loved her, it put the starch into his back. I'd done a lot of things, and tried a lot of trades and places, for there might ha' been gipsy blood in her veins, she was that fond of change. We had no children, thank God! Though, perhaps," he added, "if we had, it might ha' kept her straight."

"Well, we got to Jackson's Gulch, and it was there we met Mordaunt. That was the name he gave himself, though most likely it wasn't his own. He was a gentleman, born and bred, and a scholar, and I took it as a good deal of honour as he should have took to me directly a'most as he saw me. Jess liked him, I could see, and I was glad to see her make a friend, for the place was full of rough people as she didn't care to mix with. I was away at work all day long, and I thought no harm even when I knew he was always with her. I'd have trusted her across the world, after the nine years we'd lived together, and him with her, for I believed he was my friend, and was proud to be in his company. He never did any work, and always seemed to have plenty of money, somehow. Everybody liked him, and gave way to him, he was a sort of king among them rough chaps, and every woman in the camp was after him. There was nothing as he couldn't do. He could talk to the Frenchmen and the Germans in their own lingo, and he could play the fiddle better than any other chap in the place, and he could draw peoples pictures so as they seemed to speak to you out of the paper a'most. He did a picture of Jess, as used to hang in the cabin of the Gulch. I burned it after—after that happened, for I couldn't stand seeing the eyes follow me about. I found out afterwards as there'd been a lot of talk in the camp about her and Mordaunt being so much together, but nobody said anything to me at the time. P'raps that was lucky for 'em, for I was so mad about the wench, and so took up with Mordaunt, that as likely as not I should have stuck a knife into 'em for their pains. Well, the end came at last. I went home one night, and the cabin was empty. I waited till one o'clock in the morning, and then I went to the bar, beginning to be afeard as something might have happened, and I thought I might get news of her there. Nobody had seen her. Then I asked where Mordaunt was, and the man as kept the bar said he'd borrowed a horse from him and rode out that morning, and hadn't come back yet. I went back to the cabin, and waited all night. No news came, and no news all next day. I was well nigh mad with fright, and I went to the chief of the Vigilance Committee, and asked him to give me a search party to look for her. 'It's no use, my lad,' he said, 'they've got six-and-thirty hours start of us, and God knows where they are by now.' 'Zhey!' I said. 'What dy'e mean?' And he told me, sh'd been seen with Mordaunt, thirty miles away, at six o'clock the day before."

He paused in his story, panting a little with the exertion of so much speech. Barbara sat waiting, with clasped hands and tear-stained cheeks, for

him to continue. Outside, the pleasant homely sounds of farm life came floating up to the window of the room on the still June air, the clamping of the horses in the stall below, the cluck of poultry, the rattle of the big mastiff's chain as he snapped at the flies, the call of the wagoner to his horses fifty yards away on the high-road, the distant clatter of a sheep bell, the drowsy music of the trees. Presently Jake's voice rose again, monotonous and hollow, like a ghost's.

"I was that mazed I couldn't think for an hour or two. Then I went to the claim where my partner was working. I didn't need to tell him what had happened. He knew already, and he saw it in my face as I knew too. I asked him to buy my share and he took it, and paid for it more than it was worth, I remembered afterwards, though I didn't notice at the time. He offered to come along with me, but I said I didn't want him. It was my work and I meant to go through with it alone. I meant to find 'em, and to kill 'em both, and what was to happen afterwards, I didn't know, and I didn't care. I hunted 'em for a long time, nearly all across America, getting word of 'em here and there, but never coming up with them, till at last I got to New York. They had been there together, and Mordaunt had sailed to England a day or two before, alone. I went all over the city looking for Jess, and at last I found her. She was in the hospital, for she'd been fever struck, and he'd took advantage of it to run away, and leave her to die, or to starve, or to go upon the streets. I'd meant to kill her, even when I heard she was in the hospital; I went there with murder in my heart, and my knife was open in my pocket when the doctor took me to her bed. But oh, lass, when I saw her poor white face, with the mark of death on it, plain for a child to read, my heart broke, and I fell crying by the bedside. For I loved her in spite of all."

Barbara took his hand and kissed it, and wept upon it, in a helpless passion of pity.

"She died," Jake continued. "Thank God, she died in my arms, and knew as I'd forgiven her. I was raving mad for days after, and knew nothing as happened. When my brain cleared, I was standing by her grave, and there, with the rain beating down on me like my own heart's blood, I swore to find the man as had done it all—as had killed her and ruined my life."

"And did you find him?" asked Barbara, involuntarily shrinking from the bed, though she still clung to Jake's hand.

"No," said Jake, "or I wouldn't be raving here, like an old hen-wife as has lost half-a-dozen chickens. If I'd found him, I'd be quiet, lying in the grave with Jess. That's what's brought me here. That's what's kept me alive through the fever, and the trouble and the hunger. It's fed my mouth like bread, the thought of meeting him face to face. It's all I ask of God Almighty, just to let me stand before that man for one minute."

The simple peasant woman had never seen passion like to this. It frightened her to silence. Then she began to stammer religious commonplaces about the wickedness of revenge. Jake lay staring at the ceiling, and made no answer; it was doubtful if he heard her.

"I'm tired lass," he said, quietly, a minute after her voice had ceased; "leave me to myself—I'll sleep a while."

CHAPTER IX.—MR. EZRA STOKES.

Mr. Ezra Stokes, the landlord of the Pig and Whistle, one of the two houses of public entertainment in the village of Crouchford, was a new comer in these parts. Crouchford was slow to accept new people, and Stokes had been a member of its community only for the last two years.

He was a dry and withered man of late middle age, whose skin had been burned to an equal blackish brown by stronger suns than that which shone on Essex. He was gnarled and warped and knotted all over like a wind-blown tree—with a halting leg, a wry neck, a humped shoulder, a peculiarly ghastly squint, a crooked mouth, furnished with huge discoloured teeth, no two of which stood at the same angle, and a twisted nose with three distinct bridges.

His antecedents were dark; except that he had

been a traveller, and had as, despite the time-honoured proverb to the contrary, rolling stones sometimes do, gathered some financial moss in his wanderings, nothing was known of him by his neighbours. He had dropped down into the little place from—Heaven knows where, and had taken the lease of the Pig and Whistle, paying solid cash for the privilege, and lived reputably in the village, owing no man anything.

There was a certain likeness between his home and himself, both had been newer and smarter once upon a time, but the battering which makes a man ugly makes a house picturesque, and such stray connoisseurs of the beautiful as came to Crouchford found the Pig and Whistle a prettier spectacle than its landlord. It was a tumble-down, weather-stained, roadside house of two storeys, with bulging walls shored up by heavy baulks of timber. Its low, browed door was covered with a heavy lintel of oak beams, and furnished with two settles, where, on fine nights, Mr. Stokes might be seen reading the newspaper or drinking affably with his rustic customers. The latter voted him 'mazin' good company, for he could, when he chose, talk of moving adventures by flood and field, in places whose names sounded strange and barbaric in rustic ears, and had, besides, a sly, hard humour, which sometimes took a practical form.

Mr. Bream, rapidly covering all the ground—social and geographical—of Crouchford with his usual energy, knew every soul in the parish in a week, and among them, the landlord of the Pig and Whistle. Their acquaintance made quick progress. There was not many people of sufficient native shrewdness or acquired experience in Crouchford greatly to interest a man of culture, except with the interest, grown commonplace to Mr. Bream, of individual traits of character, or of such special worries and troubles, bodily and spiritual, as it was his duty to attend to.

A man who had travelled, and would talk more or less intelligently of what he had seen, was an acquaintance to be cultivated in a village of whose inhabitants not one per cent. had ever wandered twenty miles from the church spire. Then, the Pig and Whistle was the sitting place of the local parliament, where the ancients and young men of the place came together to unbend in social dissipation after the labours of the day, and he who would know men should meet them at such moments.

Crouchford came to think well of its new curate. In the first week of his sojourn amongst them, the annual cricket match with the neighbouring village of Hilton had been played, and for the first time in five years had resulted in a victory for Crouchford, mainly through his batting and bowling. That alone would have conquered the affections of the villagers, but when, after the match, Mr. Bream stood the two elevens a supper at the Pig and Whistle, and after due justice had been done to beef and ale, sang "Tom Bowling" from his place at the head of the table, Crouchford, old and young, male and female, swore by him.

This access of popularity rather disturbed the mind of Mr. Herbert, who belonged to an altogether different type of clergymen, and whose aristocratic instincts were not so tempered by his Christianity as to permit him so large a familiarity with the humbler members of his flock.

A week or two after Bream's arrival his vicar was shocked to see his curate at the door of Stokes' hostelry, holding forth to the assembled yokels with a glass of beer in his hand, and obviously, to judge by the broad grins of his audience, not on a doctrinal subject. When the two clerics next came together, the senior took the curate to task about his undue familiarity.

"Understand me, Bream," he said, "I would not willingly be taken for one of those—ah—false shepherds, who think that the delivery of a weekly sermon and the discharge of bare parochial work, completes a pastor's work. By no means. I have endeavoured during my whole time here, to—ah—to institute a friendly feeling between myself and every member of the church congregation. There are—ah—limits, Bream."

"So you think I have over-stepped the limit, sir?"