

Casting impatient glances right and left, the stranger desisted Adam, and halting, leaned upon the piling.

"Ho, there, old Adam!"

"Thou knowest my name?" said the old man, in some surprise.

"I see your occupation, which was Adam's," replied the stranger, with a sneer. "Is there never a forge at hand? See how my good horse is lamed by your cursed roads."

"Exercitation will little mend tæm, friend, and may do tæcself very grievous hurt," said Adam.

The stranger uttered a short hollow laugh.

Adam noticed that his face was very thin and pale, and his eye somewhat sunken. The features, however, were cast in a refined mould and but for their expression, which, when it was not one of profound melancholy, smacked of disdain, he might have been esteemed a sufficiently personable man, of about thirty. His hair fell in jetty ringlets over the collar and cape of his riding-coat, which, like the rest of his dress, was of fine material. His horse was a magnificent roadster—one of those for which, in days when this manly mode of travel was in vogue, no price was considered too high. Pistols in the holsters, and a small valise strapped to the back of the saddle, completed the ordinary equipment of a well-to-do traveller of the time.

"Good morrow to thee, John the less," said old Purslet to a Quaker youth, who passed and smiled to him.

"Are ye all 'ducks in this neighbourhood?' inquired the stranger.

"If by 'ducks' thee meanest Friends, hadst thee not better say so," returned Adam Purslet, "seeing that the term hath not obtained among us?"

The traveller repeated his sepulchral laugh, and again inquired, with some impatience, whether a forge existed in the neighbourhood.

Adam replied that there was none nearer than Thankerton, at which the stranger croaked a laugh.

And John the less, who had lingered near, regretted that Nin Small was not just then at hand, as he that restored Dorcas Hodgkin's boiler to a condition rather better than new, could surely construct a horse's temporary shoe.

"When would this Tubal Cain return?" inquired the traveller.

"If thee hast studied thy Bible only to devise ill-fitting names, I have fear of thy condition, friend," said Adam.

"When, I ask you, will this fellow be back hither?" repeated the stranger, with a raised voice.

"We look for him very shortly," said the lesser John.

"To-day?"

"In four months," said John, cheerfully.

The traveller turned his sunken eyes upon them, for a moment, in silence. Then, as suddenly resolved, he said:

"Good. I'll wait for him."

"Thou hast more patience than I should have believed of thee," remarked the plain-spoken Adam. "Wait four months to have thy poor beast shod, rather than put him to pain? I stand rebuked before thee."

"The place seems quiet as the grave," the stranger remarked, looking up and down the little street, in which no sign of life was visible. "I need repose and stillness. Is there any house of entertainment or lodging in this—what d'ye call it?—Holyton?"

Inn there was none. As for lodging—Adam hesitated, for he knew that Dorcas Hodgkin had conceived the idea of accepting an inmate, could such be found, in preference to abandoning her much-cherished home. Yet something seemed to whisper him that the strange, pale pilgrim, who wanted repose and stillness, would not prove an eligible tenant. Nevertheless, the conscientious Adam could not deny that the prettiest cottage in the place stood in need of a lodger; and, as the stranger, noticing his hesitation, pressed him on the subject, but a few minutes elapsed before Mrs. Hodgkin had to descend and give audience to an unexpected visitor.

No record of the dialogue was preserved, excepting that the stranger, on learning the proposed rent, produced a bundle of notes, and was with difficulty prevented from paying two years in advance. With regard to references, he had observed that, though he was not in the habit of carrying about his character in his pocket, he would obtain one, by an early post from the metropolis, of such a nature as to occasion the most poignant regret to the Friends among whom he hoped henceforth to sojourn, that he did not actually belong to their fraternity.

Gentle Dorcas Hodgkin thought little of the scarcely covert sneer, for, strange to say, the face and manner that had so unfavourably impressed neighbour Purslet, had, upon her, the precisely opposite effect. She saw, in her intending lodger, a man aged before his time by mental and bodily ills of no common kind. His soft voice and most melancholy smile conveyed, she thought, an appeal for that sympathy only the more precious to haughty natures because it is not sought in words. Even his curious hollow laugh exacted pity, for it told something about the chest and lungs which might require more than repose and solitude to set it right.

Thus it came to pass that the stranger, who announced that his name was Lopré, took up his abode at Tabernacle Lodge, and began, without delay, to reap opinions of the most audacious nature from all sorts of men. His merit, it must be admitted, was of a negative character. He bore himself like a man of breeding, and he did no harm. Some baggage, including sundry huge brown books secured with brazen clasps, arrived from southwards, and the bringer took back Monsieur Lopré's horse, to be sold, for what he would fetch, at a neighbouring fair.

Monsieur Lopré, who was French in nothing but his name, turned out, in fact, the pearl of lodgers. He gave so little trouble, that Dorcas felt almost dissatisfied. There was no channel of approach by which she and little Ruth—her mother's active and interested ally—could make known to the solitary man the sympathy they felt for his evidently failing health and broken spirits. He ate little, and drank less. A slice of brown bread and a cup of cream for breakfast, an omelette or a couple of rashers of farm-bacon for dinner, appeared to be the objects of his choice; but if, for these, a dish of tom-tits or a stewed squirrel had been substituted, Dorcas felt, with a heavy heart, that her lodger would have accomplished his meal with unchanged indifference. His time seemed to be about equally divided between eager study of his mighty books and meditative wanderings—sometimes protracted far into the night—among the dense neglected woods that, beginning just without the village, clothed the adjacent slopes for miles around.

Some weeks had elapsed in this fashion, when Dorcas's interest in her singular guest was increased by hearing, as she fancied, sounds of deep distress issuing from his chamber. This occurred more and more frequently; and, though it was manifest to the listener that every effort was being made by the unhappy man to suppress these tokens of suffering, it was equally clear that his anguish, whatever its nature, could not be tamed to silence. At such times he would move about the room for an hour together, until, apparently exhausted, he would sink heavily upon the couch, when choking sobs and half-articulate ejaculations bore testimony to the tempest that continued to rage within.

On one of these occasions—it was about noon—Dorcas was passing his door, when an exclamation struck her ear, having so much the tone of actual corporal suffering, that, acting upon womanly impulse, she opened the door and went in.

Lopré was seated at the table, reading. He had one of his great books open before him, over which, as she entered, he spread his handkerchief, and he gazed at Dorcas with an air of indifferent question, so well and hastily assumed, that, but for his still quivering lip and the drops that stood upon his brow, she might have fancied her ears had been deceived. As it was, murmuring an apology, she withdrew.

Ruth could not scold her mother; but she did hazard the undutiful remark that, had she been in that mother's place, she would have ventured more.

Ruth was a very pretty little damsel of ten, beyond her years in intelligence, and the most precise of little puritans. She dressed, and endeavoured to demean herself, exactly like her mother. She had the self-possession of middle age, and her remarks were often more in harmony with that period of life than with her own. She was, perhaps, the only creature in the village who had never experienced that mysterious feeling, not absolutely mingled with fear with which Monsieur Lopré, with his eccentric habits, haughty demeanour, and unspoken griefs, was beginning to be viewed. But the child's heart was sorry for the lonely man, and the wistful expression of her soft blue eyes, as she occasionally ministered to his wants, had attracted the notice of the recluse, and perhaps induced him to break his habitual silence, and exchange a word or two with his little attendant.

One morning they met upon the stairs:

"Here's a letter for thee, Augustus," said Ruth, and put it in his hand.

"You have learned my name, my little maid?"

"'Augustus' is on thy letter," observed Ruth, in a tone of gentle reversion. "If that be thy baptismal name, thou shouldst have told us sooner, Augustus. Thou needs not to hide what is fit and true."

"Are you not a marvellous little atom, to lecture an elder thus?" said Lopré, much amused.

"I have more to say to thee still," said Ruth, calmly.

"Say on, little grandmother. I hear," replied the lodger, opening his letter with an agitated hand.

"I do not like thy ways."

"What?" exclaimed Lopré, in a tone so fierce, that poor little Ruth turned pale, and began to lose heart. But she made an effort, and added:

"It—it—is—for thy own sake, Augustus. Thou art not happy, and I fear thou art not in the way to be so. Thou hast not once attended thy steeple-house—and—"

"Steeple-house! Walk ten miles to hear some droning booby misquote other idiots' dreams?"

"I would not counsel thee to go for such a purpose," said Ruth, "but that thou mightest, peradventure, be stirred to prayer. Augustus, thou neglectest that exercise. Canst thou say thy catechism?"

"My catechism and thine are different, my pretty little saint," said Lopré, with a grin that made his cadaverous face more ghastly still. "But, see, you must scold me no more to-day. We are going to be busy, for once. Say to your mother that I look for a friend to dine with me. This letter warns me he will be here at six, evening. He is young, and rich, and self-indulgent, and will look for a delicate repast. Spare no cost. Here's money." He put a purse of guineas in her hand. "For the wine, I will take care of that."

"Doth the stranger rest here?" inquired Ruth. "He—rests—yes—no—that is, he will depart late to-night," replied Lopré, with some confusion of manner.

But Ruth's hospitable thoughts were now in the ascendant, and, after another word or two of necessary directions from Lopré, she tripped away to her mother.

According to the accounts subsequently collected, it was near dusk when the expected guest cantered up the village street, and dismounting at Tabernacle Lodge, threw his rein to John the less, who, as the least employed member of the community, was often made of use when help was needed.

The age of the new comer seemed hardly to exceed eighteen. He was a very handsome youth, but pale and dissipated-looking, and a somewhat heavy eye and languid gait told too plainly of the inevitable tax that debauchery and excess had begun to levy upon a frame and constitution intended by nature for long and vigorous life.

The friends greeted each other with great cor-