

the higher ground, which rose at once from the churchyard wall, but she was walking slowly in the direction of the inn, and did not turn again in his direction.

"Poor woman!" he muttered, as he had done before that night, under the ivied porch; and then he set his face homewards, and went at a fair steady pace up the big sweep of grass land, where a man less observant than he might have been easily lost till day-break.

One man was lost on the Downs that night it was shortly evident. He had left the track, and was wandering towards a steep series of hillocks, which were said by the wise men of this world to be the graves of dead Romans, when a cough of Brian Halfday's assured him of human life in his vicinity. He called out at once, and Brian, coming to a full stop, called back in answer. Here was a man lost on Penton Downs, and Brian might be of service in putting him in the right path again. Every turn of the country was known to Brian, and this was probably a stranger wandering helplessly along in the night. The man called again, and once more Brian answered, and the echoes of their voices reverberated amongst the dark and solemn hills around them. Thus these two approached each other, and Brian became aware at last of a tall, thin individual standing before him with his hands in his pockets. The stranger was smoking a short clay pipe, and the sparks from the bowl were caught by the wind, and drifted past his face. It was a thin and haggard face, Brian could perceive, and there were two sharp eyes glaring towards him, as if doubtful whether friend or foe had been encountered on the Downs that night. This was not a man well-to-do in the world, Brian thought, and therefore a suspicious character to be lurking on the hills. The outline of his hat was evidently crooked and bent, as though rough hands had "bashed" it at an earlier period of its career, and there was the fluttering of much ragged fringe in the breeze that had met him on the higher ground.

"I beg your pardon," said the stranger politely, and in a wiry tone of voice, "but will you oblige me by some information as to my whereabouts? I am new to these parts."

"You are on Penton Downs, and within half a mile or three-quarters of the village of

Datchet Bridge, which lies yonder, and as straight as you can go."

"Thank you very much—but I have just come from Datchet Bridge."

"Where do you wish to go?"

"I am anxious to find the cottage of Mr. Brian Halfday, which is somewhere on the Downs, I think."

"I will take you to it. I am going in that direction," said Brian, looking hard through the shadows at the inquirer.

"Thank you very much indeed," said the man again, as he turned and kept step with his companion, until Brian's rate of progression fairly "winded" him.

"One moment, if you please," he said, coming to a full stop, "you are a younger man than I, and more accustomed to hill work."

"Probably," said Brian, pausing also.

"Well acquainted with this part of the world also?"

"Thoroughly acquainted with it," was the reply. "Most of my leisure has been spent in exploring the country."

"A native of Penton?"

"Yes."

"A man should study his own land before he ventures to another," remarked the seedy stranger. "Do you know Mr. Halfday?"

"Very well indeed."

The man took his pipe from his mouth to cough feebly behind his hand, and then said—

"He bears an excellent character in Penton, I hear."

"Have you come from Penton?" asked Brian, as they went on again.

"I have walked every step of the way—being too poor a man, I must humbly confess, sir, to afford to ride."

"You have important business with Mr. Halfday to take you to him at this hour of the night?"

"It is important business to me. How it will be received by him, it is impossible to say. But," he said again, "I hear he is an excellent young man."

"Who told you Mr. Halfday was at the cottage to-night?"

"A flippant youth at the Museum, in Market-street, said he would be there this evening. I am glad to hear of Mr. Brian Halfday's prosperity. I rejoice in it, with all my heart."