

## A MAN OF HIS WORD.

(Continued.)

"I quite understand what you mean, and I am sure you would never think of exacting the outrageous terms that these harpies insist upon. It is much more agreeable to owe money to a—a—" Lord Grinstead was going to say "a gentleman," but the word somehow stuck in his throat, and he substituted "an honest and upright man, like yourself, than to some rascally Jew. Now what should you say to five per cent? It's a deuce of a lot of money, but I think I can manage to raise it, and pay you back half yearly, if I have anything like decent luck."

Mr. Hobday jingled the half-crowns which he always kept for that purpose in his trousers' pockets, and laughed. "I shouldn't consider that a very profitable investment, Lord Grinstead," he said. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I can't come to terms. Fifty per cent. wouldn't tempt me."

"That seems a pity," observed Lord Grinstead. "No doubt you are the best judge of your own course of action; but what it is to be is a mystery to me, I confess. I have a few horses in training—not one of them worth his keep—and there are some odds and ends in my rooms in town; you will hardly see your money back out of that. Besides, I am afraid you will not find yourself the sole creditor."

"It would be the same thing to me if there were a hundred thousand creditors," said Mr. Hobday.

"Well, there are not quite so many as that, but supposing that you were the only one, you would still be a heavy loser if you sold me up. I don't understand what you are driving at. You think, perhaps, that my father would pay my debts rather than have a public scandal, and that he is the kind of a man to do it, even if it cost him his last farthing. I agree with you; he is all that. But, unfortunately, it is doubtful whether he could by any possibility pay. Between ourselves, he is pretty hard up."

"I am aware of it," replied Mr. Hobday.

"Oh, you are? I fancied you must be. Then I presume you wish to make some—some—"

"Bargain," said Mr. Hobday. "Don't be afraid of calling things by their names."

"And what is this bargain, if I may ask?"

"Ah, that's another thing," answered Mr. Hobday, who was now enjoying himself very much. "I didn't say I had any special proposal to make. Indeed, I think the first proposal ought to come from you. Come, let's hear your side of the case. What are you prepared to offer me in exchange for twenty thousand pounds' worth of your promises to pay?"

Lord Grinstead smiled amiably. "Well," he said, "I've been thinking about it, and I am ready to offer you the only possession of any value that remains to me—myself. I have heard all about your charming daughter and my brother Egbert, Mr. Hobday, and I quite understand your conduct with regard to that affair. Good fellow, Egbert; but not good enough. Only a younger son, and no prospects whatever. I think you were perfectly right in refusing him. But I need hardly point out to you that my position is very different from his. I can make your daughter a viscountess at once, and a countess eventually, I can take her into the best society, and all that sort of thing; and though I am rather short of cash just now, I shall have large estates one of these days. Therefore, I think I may say without vanity that I am well worth the price at which I put myself up."

"Oh," said Mr. Hobday, "that's your offer, oh? You'll consent to take my daughter and her fortune without having so much as seen her?"

Lord Grinstead nodded. "My not having been fortunate enough to see the young lady is a matter of no consequence," he answered. "I don't want to marry at all. For many reasons, with which I need not trouble you, marriage will be a horrid bore to me; but I would just as soon marry Miss Hobday as anybody else. Needs must, you know, when the devil drives."

"Lord Grinstead," said Mr. Hobday, "the devil may drive you to his own home if he likes; but he won't drive you into mine. There are several ways in which you can leave this room. You can walk out of the door, you can be chucked out of the window, or you can climb up the chimney. Take your choice. Only don't be too long about it, because I'm a powerful man for my years, and you don't look as if you could show fight."

Thus a second member of the Denne family was ignominiously ejected from Sheldon Park, whose owner must now feel that he had sufficiently asserted his independence. Yet it was in no triumphant mood that Mr. Hobday set out, shortly afterwards, to call on his friend Staveley, and to report what had occurred. The calm impudence of Lord Grinstead did not make him as indignant as he wished to be. He tried to work himself up into a rage, and failed. After all, he had no right to resent an insult—if it ought to be considered as such—which he had brought upon himself, and which had been only the response to his own invitation. The sense of having the Denne in his power was beginning to lose its charm for him. He did not really wish to ruin them, and indeed had no definite intention with regard to them at all. Perhaps it was in some measure to supply this want that he decided to pay a visit to his neighbor. Staveley might possibly help him by suggesting some line of conduct, and thus providing him with a reason for adopting its opposite.

"You see," he explained, when he had been admitted into the comfortable library at the Grange, and had made his state of mind much clearer to his host than he imagined—"you see, I haven't any particular grudge against these people. I don't know that I want to do 'em an injury—rather the other way, if anything. But what am I to do? I hold these acceptances—"

"Which nothing in the world compelled you to purchase," observed Staveley, parenthetically.

"Eh?—no; I wasn't obliged to buy them certainly, but I had my reasons. When I first came down here I had some little rubs with Lord Rye's agent, and I saw that there'd be no peace and comfort for me if I allowed his lordship to ride over me roughshod. So I got those papers into my hands. I haven't made any use of 'em, though. I said to myself, 'I owe this Denne family a good turn, and I'll pay my debt; but I'm a man of business, and I don't see that I'm to hand 'em over £20,000. My debt ain't quite up to that figure.' Well; you know what I did. I went to Lord Rye and made overtures to him, which he chose to throw back in my teeth. 'Do your worst,' says he. Lord Rye's an old fool, and if I took him at his word he'd be rightly served. But then, don't you see—" Here Mr. Hobday paused and rubbed his large red ear violently.

"I think I understand," said Staveley. "You are not supposed to show much generosity to the Denne—"

"Why the dickens should I?" interpolated Mr. Hobday.

"I know of no reason why you should. But although you don't want to be generous, you would like to be just, and to discharge what you consider to be a debt; and you can't see any other way of doing that than to tear up Lord Grinstead's acceptances. Only as £20,000 is more than they have any right to expect of you, you think think you ought to exact some sort of equivalent for the balance."

Mr. Hobday nodded. "That's about it. Now what should you do in my place?"

"It is so difficult to say what one would do in a position which one would never have created for one's self. There is a way out of the dilemma which would at once suggest itself to me; but then my ways are not your ways, and I doubt whether it's worth mentioning. However, since you ask me, I may say that what I should do would be to try and get Lord Rye's consent to a marriage between Egbert Denne and my daughter. If I couldn't get it—and most likely I shouldn't—I should do without it, and let the young people marry, giving them those troublesome bits of paper as a wedding-present. I should then feel that I had done my duty both to my daughter and to her husband's family, and I should have a very good hope of an amicable termination of the whole business; for, although Lord Rye may be prejudiced, he is kind-hearted, and I feel sure that Miss Josephine would very soon make a conquest of him."

"That's a first-rate notion, I must say!" exclaimed Mr. Hobday. "I'm to begin by eating my words, and marrying my daughter to a man whom I said she shouldn't marry; then I'm to pay a small fortune for the privilege; and finally I'm to go to Lord Rye and beg him to forgive me. And perhaps he will forgive me, because he's so kind-hearted. Really, Mr. Staveley, I should have thought you might have known me better than to offer me such advice as that!"

"I was not offering you advice, you know," answered Staveley, imperitably. "You asked me what I should do in your place, and I told you."

"Now look here," continued Mr. Hobday, who was too angry to notice this disclaimer, "when I say a thing, I mean it; and I've said over and over again that my daughter shan't marry Egbert Denne. If the whole lot of 'em came and begged me on their bended knees to consent, I wouldn't."

"I think I can promise you that they won't do that," observed Staveley, smiling. "Let us try to hit upon some other plan."

But Mr. Hobday was thoroughly out of temper, and declined to discuss the subject further. With a gruff "Good night to you," he cut his visit short, and left, muttering objurgations to himself as he groped his way down the dark carriage-drive.

The carriage drive was very dark, for it was now past sunset, and the twilight had deepened into night by the time that Mr. Hobday emerged upon the open country. He made for his own house by a series of short cuts which were known to him; but having at the best of times a poor instinct for locality, and being just now bewildered by the darkness, he soon lost his bearings, and found himself struggling in a ploughed field from which no means of exit was discoverable. After searching in vain for a gate, he determined to climb over the fence and hedge which barred his progress, and set about this operation with the stiff movements natural to a man of his age. He had no great difficulty in reaching the summit of the fence; but, having done this, he perceived that he could only get to the other side of the hedge by jumping. Now the one thing essential to the success of a leap in the dark is that it should be taken with boldness, and perhaps it was due to some access of timidity at the last moment that Mr. Hobday, instead of landing safely upon firm ground, caught his heel on the topmost rail, and plunged headlong into unknown depths.

Then upon the silence of the night there arose a howl and a splash, followed by curses loud and deep. But the unheeding wind bore these away, and it was not until nearly two hours afterwards that a belated laborer, blundering homewards from the public-house, was startled by the sound of moans and imprecations, proceeding apparently from the bowels of the earth, as from some invisible Tophet. Investigation resulted in the discovery at the bottom of a ditch of Mr. Hobday, who said he had broken his leg and dislocated his shoulder, and who further promised a reward of twenty pounds to any person or persons who should carry him safely home. This offer was at once closed with by the delighted rustic, who summoned others to his assistance, and, having transported Mr. Hobday to Sheldon Park on a hurdle, received a sum of money larger than he had ever held in his hands before.

Josephine was greatly distressed at the sight of her father in such a plight; but her anxiety was relieved when the doctor, who had been summoned in all haste, pronounced his injuries to be confined to a sprained ankle and various abrasions. Mr. Hobday, who was rather disappointed at finding himself less seriously hurt than he had supposed, told the doctor