

# The Young Man With the Red Hair

(Concluded from page 12.)

remarks about my hair, and I said she was an old hippofagus or something like that."

Uncle Bill was lost in thought for a moment. Then he said with a smile: "I thought I had learned the English language fairly well, but it seems I have been mistaken. What is a hippofagus?"

Josiah laughed a little nervously. "It isn't anything that I know," he said. "The word came into my head, and I just flung it at her. I don't suppose there is such a word."

"I see," said Uncle Bill. "And what was it you wanted me to do?"

"WELL, I thought perhaps you'd advise me a bit, Uncle Bill," replied Josiah. "I don't care what Mrs. Tegg says or what old Wilkins says, or any of them for the matter of that. I'm going to marry Mary if we have to run away to London to do it. Wouldn't you?"

"What is Mrs. Tegg's objection to you?" asked the old man looking up dreamily at a cloud of smoke that had just left his cigarette.

"Well," said Josiah, turning rather red, "now, I daresay I've done it, calling her what I did. But I wouldn't say but what that might be got over. What she wants most, however, is for Mary to marry old Wilkins because he's got a good bit of money, and it'll be a fine thing for the Teggs as far as that goes. And she knows, of course, that up at the farm, we're not doing any more than we'd like to be doing."

"In fact," said Uncle Bill, "she doesn't think you're in a position to give her daughter a comfortable home, eh? I always thought you and your mother were doing well."

"Oh, we make a living," replied Josiah growing confidential under the influence of the old man's sympathy. "But, of course, I've got to make a pretty hard fight to pay off the mortgages, even suppose I can do it. But I'm not afraid. No more's Mary. We'll get straight in time, together, I'm pretty sure."

"Mary Tegg is a good girl," said Uncle Bill, by way of comment.

"She is that," agreed Josiah warmly. "And I'm not going to give her up for anybody breathing. You wouldn't advise me to, would you?"

"No," said Uncle Bill. "I would not advise you to give her up."

"I knew you wouldn't," said Josiah. "I thought at first it was a bit like my cheek coming and asking you about it, because after all you don't bother about what goes on in the village, and, of course, there's no reason why you should. But if you haven't seen much of me, you've known me ever since I was born, and everybody says your advice is worth following."

Uncle Bill was silent for a few moments and then he said quietly:

"I came to live here five years before you were born, Josiah, and Barngate has been a very good friend to me. In my own country, Poland, there were political troubles, and by way of settling them, some five or six hundred of us were shut up in a Russian prison. Some died there; some escaped. It took me fifteen years before I found a way of escaping, and when I was out in the air again I found I was alone in the world. All my friends were dead. I came here to die in peace; but, as you see, I have managed somehow to live on. It is the air of your village no doubt. I have never spoken of these things before to anyone, but I say them to you now because I want you to understand my position. I do not want to leave the little cottage where I have lived so long. It is all my world now."

"Why should you leave it, Uncle Bill?" stammered Josiah, a little dazed by the old man's strange story.

"If you could not pay off your mortgages, and someone else took the farm, the cottage might be wanted, and I might have to go. That is why I want to encourage you to marry Mary Tegg and settle down here and

pay off all your debts. You see my interest is quite selfish. Old men like myself dislike changes of any kind. In youth we may be wild and revolutionary, but age makes conservatives of us all."

Josiah looked thoughtful. He was trying dimly to understand the purport of Uncle Bill's remarks. It seemed to him that Uncle Bill had said a good deal without arriving at any particular point. He did not realize that it was part of the old man's method, born no doubt of his early political experiences, to use words in order to disguise his thoughts, in the hope of provoking a direct question which would reveal the attitude of the other side. Finally Josiah said:

"Well, it comes to this then, Uncle Bill. You think I ought not to give Mary up. That's what I think, too. But how am I going to make peace with the old woman? Mary sent me a note last night asking me to call and apologize. But I don't feel like apologizing. The old woman was very saucy to me about my hair."

"If you will let me interfere in the matter," said Uncle Bill, "I might be able to straighten things out. I shall be going past Mrs. Tegg's cottage for my walk to-morrow or the day after, and I propose that you should undertake not to go near the place for, say, three days from now. Do you agree?"

"If you think you can do anything, I shall be much obliged," said Josiah.

DURING the next few days Uncle Bill spent more time than usual on his daily walks. In one of them he happened to meet Mrs. Dreece, and although he knew the lady by sight only, he contrived to find an excuse for stopping to discuss the weather at some length. He was also seen in Mr. Wilkins' shop chatting with that gentleman about the advantages of beet sugar over the other kinds, and, as usual, he came away with a good deal more information than he had imparted, although he had frequently appeared to be monopolizing the conversation in both instances. From which it would appear that the advantages of an early education in diplomacy are not entirely wasted even in a remote English village.

Some three days after his conversation with Uncle Bill, Josiah was walking down the road when he saw Mrs. Tegg approaching him on the other side of the road. He made up his mind that he would not look at her, so that if hostilities should be renewed, she would have herself to blame for commencing them. To his intense surprise, she crossed over to him, and there was a quite unusual smile hovering over her hard mouth.

"Why, Josiah Mellick," she said, "you're quite a stranger. I hope you haven't been taking to heart what I said about your hair, because that was only my fun. I'm sure if I'd thought it was goin' to hurt your feelings I shouldn't have dreamt of saying it."

Josiah could hardly believe his ears for the moment, and he hesitated as to whether these overtures of friendship were genuine, or whether they merely indicated Mrs. Tegg's subtle methods of renewing personalities.

"I daresay I did cut up a bit rough," the lady continued, "about your calling me a hip—what you said the other day—but that was only because I didn't understand. I was having a chat with Uncle Bill about it, and he says it's a Polish word, and quite a pretty compliment. He thinks you must have picked it up from him. Of course, I didn't know at the time or I shouldn't have spoken so sharp about it."

He scarcely knew what to say, and as a non-committal question he asked: "How's Mary?"

"Oh, she's quite well, thank you," replied Mrs. Tegg with quite unusual politeness. "She's been wondering why you haven't been to see her."

"Oh!" said Josiah. He did not feel equal at the moment to saying more than that. And when Mrs. Tegg suggested that he should come along

and have tea with them, Josiah assented as one in a dream who is in momentary expectation of a very rude awakening. He could not understand Mrs. Tegg's new attitude.

Presently Mrs. Tegg smiling at the sight of the happiness about her, observed:

"And I'm so glad to hear that you've paid off all the mortgages on your farm, Josiah Mellick. You must—"

"What's that?" asked Josiah abruptly, as he took his arm away from Mary's, where it had become locked, in the enthusiasm of the moment.

"You have paid off the mortgages haven't you?" asked Mrs. Tegg, in a tone of obvious alarm.

"No, I haven't," said Josiah, in a decided tone as he turned very red and looked first at Mrs. Tegg, and then at Mary. "Who's been playing the silly—"

"I certainly understood Uncle Bill to say—" stammered Mrs. Tegg, turning red in her turn as if she regretted the warmth of her welcome.

"Well, mother," said Mary, putting her arm through Josiah's, "if anybody ought to know, Jo ought to. I told you at the time it was all a mistake, because Jo and I have promised each other to work and pay the mortgages off, together. Haven't we, Jo?"

"Y-yes," stammered Josiah. "It seems to me that Uncle Bill's gone a bit too far. The old chap means well, but he ought to ha' stuck to the truth."

"So I think," said Mrs. Tegg, sharply. "And the next time I see him I shall tell him so. It was all along of his talk to me yesterday that I packed Mr. Wilkins off about his business, and—well I declare if there isn't Mr. Wilkins going past now."

MRS. TEGG ran to the window, Josiah and Mary following more slowly. Mr. Wilkins certainly was there. He was shuffling along with a dejected air by the side of Mrs. Dreece, who looked radiant and smiling, as if she could not help exulting over the victory that had finally attended her efforts to secure the well-to-do widower. Mrs. Tegg learned a few days later that having been disappointed in his courtship of Mary, Mr. Wilkins had gone off and proposed to Mrs. Dreece on the spot, and apparently had spent every moment since regretting his rash act. For the moment, however, Mrs. Tegg could do no more than watch the elderly couple till they were out of sight, and then she turned with as good a grace as might be and said she supposed young Josiah Mellick had better sit down to tea.

After tea, when Jo proposed that Mary should come with him to receive his mother's congratulations, Mrs. Tegg had no word to say. The arrangement was clearly not to her taste, but she could find no reasonable objection to make. And the young people set out accordingly.

Mrs. Mellick came to the farmhouse door as she saw the two walking down the path. After the first greeting of Mary, and before there had been time for any explanation, she handed her son a long blue envelope.

"Jo," she said. "You'd better have a look at this, in case it wants answering. I didn't open it because it's addressed to you. But it looks like another of those worrying letters from the lawyers. I don't know why; for everything's paid up to date."

Josiah tore the envelope open impatiently, and took out two or three deeds. Then he read a letter accompanying them, and looked at his mother in amazement.

"I don't understand, mother," he said at length. "The lawyers say they're much obliged for cheque in settlement, and enclose all the papers necessary to clear our title to the farm. What—"

At that moment Uncle Bill, passing the farmhouse on his way to his cottage, stopped at the door.

"My dears," he said, speaking more familiarly than he had ever been known to do before, "there are some things that it isn't necessary for our happiness to understand, and this is one of them. All you young people have to do is to look forward. Leave it to us old ones to look back. Good-night all."

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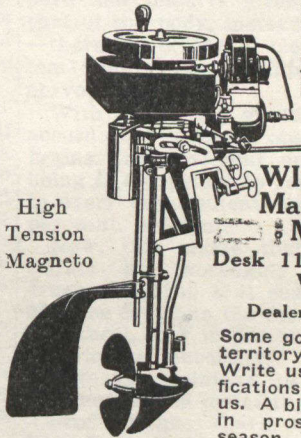
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