LORNA DOONE

R. D. BLACKMORE.

CHAPTER LVI—CONTINUED

"I will tell you by-and-by," I answered, misliking this satire upon us, "but I might begin with a quart of ale, to enable me to speak, madam."

"Very well. One quevart of be-or," she called out to a little maid, who was her eldest child, no doubt. It is to be expected, sir. Bo-oi, be-or, all day long, with you Englishmen!

"Nay," I replied; "not all day long, if madam will excuse me. Only a pint at breakfast-time, and a pint and a half at 11 o'clock, and a quart or so at dinner. And then no more till the afternoon; and half a gallon at supper-time. No one can object to that."

"Well, I suppose it is right," she said, with an air of resignation; "God knows. But I do not understand it. It is 'good for business,' as you say, to preclude every thing."

"And it is good for us, madam," I answered with indignation, for beer is my favorite beverage; "and I am a credit to beer, madam; and so are all who trust to it."

"At any rate you are, young man. If beer has made you grow so large, I will put my children upon it; it is too late for me to begin. The smell to me is hateful."

Now I only set down that to show how perverse those foreign people are. They will drink their wretched, heartless stuff, such as they call claret, or wine of Medoc, or Bordeaux, or what not, with no more meaning than sour rennet, stirred with the pulp from the cider-press, and strained through the cap of our Betty. This is very well for them, and as good as they deserve, no doubt, and meant, perhaps, by the will of God for those unhappy natives. But to bring it over to England and set it against our home-brewed ale (not to speak of wines from Portugal), and sell it at ten times the price, as a cure for British bile, and a great enlightenment, this, I say, is the vilest feature of the age we live in.

Madam Benita Odam—for the name of the man who turned the wheel proved to be John Odam—showed me into a little room containing two chairs and a fir-wood table, and sat down on a three-legged seat and studied me very steadfastly. This she had a right to do; and I, having all my clothes on now, was not disconcerted. It would not become me to repeat her judgment upon my appearance, which she delivered as calmly as if I were a pig at market, and as proudly as if her own pig. And she asked me whether I had ever got rid of the black marks on my breast.

Not wanting to talk about myself (though very fond of doing so, when time and season favor), I led her back to that fearful night of the day when first I had seen her. She was not so desirous to speak of it, because of her own little children; however, I drew her gradually to recollection of Lorna, and then of the little boy who died, and the poor mother buried with him. And her strong, hot nature kindled, as she dwelt upon these things; and my wrath-waxed within me; and we forgot reserve and prudence under the sense of so vile a wrong. She told me (as nearly as might be) the very same story which she had told to Master Jeremy Stickles; only she dwelt upon it more, because of my knowing the outset. And being a woman, with an inkling of my situation, she enlarged upon the little maid, more than to dry Jeremy.

"Would you know her again?" I asked, being stirred by these accounts of Lorna when she was five years old; "would you know her as a full-grown maiden?"

"I think I should," she answered; "it is not possible to say until one sees the person; but from the eyes of the little girl, I think that I must know her. Oh, the poor young creature! Is it to be believed that the cannibals devoured her! What a people you are in this country! Meat, meat, meat!"

As she raised her hands and eyes in horror at our carnivorous propensities, to which she clearly attributed the disappearance of Lorna, I could scarce help laughing, even after that sad story. For though it is said at the present day, and will doubtless be said hereafter, that the Doones had devoured a baby once, as they came up Porlock hill, after fighting hard in the market-place. I knew that the tale was utterly false; for, cruel and brutal as they were, their taste was very correct and choice, and indeed one might say fastidious. Nevertheless, I could not stop to argue that matter with her.

"The little maid has not been devoured," I said to Mistress Odam; "and now she is a tall young lady, and as beautiful as can be. If I sleep in your good hostel to-night, after going to Watchett town, will you come with me to Oare to-morrow, and see your little maiden?"

"I would like—and yet I fear. This country is so barbarous. And I am good to eat—my God, there is much picking on my bones!"

She surveyed herself with a glance so mingled of pity and admiration, and the truth of her words were so apparent (only that it would have taken a week to get at the bones before picking), that I nearly lost good manners; for she really seemed to suspect even me of cannibal inclinations. However, at last I made her promise to come with me on the morrow, presuming that Master Odam could by any means be persuaded to keep her company in the cart, as propriety demanded. Having little doubt that Master Odam was entirely at his wife's command, I looked upon that matter as settled, and set off for Watchett, to see the grave of Lorna's poor mother, and to hire a cart for the morrow.

And here (as so often happens with men) I succeeded without any trouble or hinderance, where I had looked for both of them, namely, in finding a suitable cart; whereas the other matter, in which I could have expected no difficulty, came very near to defeat me. For when, I heard that Lorna's father was the Earl of Dugal—as Benita impressed upon me with a strong enforcement, as much as to say, "Who are you, young man, to come even asking about her?"—then I never thought but that everybody in Wachett town must know all about the tombstone of the Countess of Dugal.

This, however, proved otherwise. For Lord Dugal had never lived at Watchett Grange, as their place was called, neither had his name become familiar as its owner. Because the Grange had only devolved to him by will, at the end of a long entail, when the last of the Fitz-Pains died out; and though he liked the idea of it, he had gone abroad without taking seisin. And upon news of his death, John Jones, a rich gentleman from Landaff, had taken possession, as next of right, and hushed up all the story. And though, even at the worst of times, a lady of high rank and wealth could not be robbed, and as bad as murdered, and then buried in a little place, without moving some excitement, yet it had been given out, on purpose and with diligence, that this was only a foreign lady traveling for her health and pleasure along the sea-coast of England. And as the poor thing never spoke, and several of her servants and baggage looked so foreign, and she herself died in a collar of lace unlike any made in England, all Watchett, without hesitation, pronounced her to be a foreigner. And the English serving-man and maid, who might have cleared up everything, either were bribed by Master Jones, or else decamped of their own accord with the relics of the baggage. So the poor Countess of Dugal, almost in sight of her own grand house, was buried in an unknown grave, with her pair of infants, without a plate, without a tombstone (worse than all), without a tear, except from the hired Italian woman. Surely my poor Lorna came of an ill-stared family.

Now, in spite of all this, if I had only taken Benita with me, or even told her what I wished, and craved her directions, there could have been no trouble. But I do assure you that among the stupid people at Watchett (compared with whom our folk of Oare, exceeding dense though being, are as Hamlet against Dogberry), what with one of them and another, and the firm conviction of all the town that I could be come only to wrestle, I do assure you (as I said before) that my wits almost went out to me. And what vexed me yet more about it was, that I saw my own mistake in coming myself to seek out the matter, instead of sending some unknown person. For my face and form were known at that time (and still are so) to nine people out of every ten living in forty miles of me. Not through any excellence, or anything of good desert in either the one or the other, but simply because folks will be fools on the rivalry of wrestling. The art is a fine one in itself, and demands a little wit of brain, as well as strength of body: it binds the man who studies it to temperance and chastity, to self-respect, and most of all to an even and sweet temper, for I have thrown stronger men than myself (when I was a mere sapling, and before my strength grew hard on me) through their loss of temper. But though the art is an honest one, surely they who excel therein have a right (like all the rest of mankind) to their own private life.

Be that either way—and I will not speak too strongly, for fear of indulging my own annoyance—anyhow, all Watchett town cared ten times as much to see John Ridd as to show him what he wanted. I was led to every public-house instead of to the church-yard; and twenty tables were ready for me, in lieu of a single grave-stone. "Zummerzett thou bee's, Jan Ridd, and Jummerzett thou shalt be. Thee carl thee zell a Davonsheer man! Whoy, thee lives in Zummerzett; and in Zummerzett thee wast barn, lad." And so it went on till I was weary, though very much obliged to them.

Dull and solid as I am, and with a wild duck waiting for me at good Mistress Odam's, I saw that there was nothing for it but to yield to these good people, and prove me a man of Somerset by eating a dinner at their expense. As for the church-yard, none would hear of it, and I grieved for broaching the matter.

But how was I to meet Lorna again, without having done the thing of all things which I had promised to see to? It would never do to tell her that so great was my popularity, and so strong the desire to feed me, that I could not attend to her mother. Least of all could I say that every one in Watchett knew John Ridd, while none had heard of the Countess of Dugal. And yet that was about the truth, as I hinted very delicately to Mistress Odam that evening. But she (being vexed about her wild duck, and not having English ideas on the matter of sports, and so on) made a poor unwitting face at me. Nevertheless, Master Odam restored me to my self-respect; for he stared at me till I went to bed, and he broke his hose with excitement. For, being in the leg-line myself, I wanted to know what the muscles were of a man who turned a wheel all day. I had never seen a treadmill (though they have one now at Exeter), and it touched me much to learn whether it were good exercise. And herein, from what I saw of Odam, I incline to think that it does great harm; as moving the muscles too much in a line, and without variety.

CHAPTER LVII

LORNA KNOWS HER NURSE

Having obtained from Benita Odam a very close and full description of the place where her poor mistress lay, and the marks whereby to know it, I hastened to Watchett the following morning before the sun was up or any people were about. And so, without interruption, I was in the church-yard at sunrise.

In the furthest and darkest nook, overgrown with grass, and overhung by a weep tree, a little bank of earth betokened the rounding off of a hapless life. There was nothing to tell of rank or wealth, of love, or even pity: nameless as a peasant lay the last (as supposed) of a mighty race. Only some unskillful hand, probably Master Odam's under his wife's teaching, had carved a rude L., and a ruder D., upon a large pebble from the beach, and set it up as a headstone.

I gathered a little grass from Lorna, and a sprig of the weeping tree, and then returned to the "Forest Cat," as Benita's lonely inn was called. For the way is long from Watchett to Oare; and though you may ride it rapidly, as the Doones had done on that fatal night, to travel on wheels, with one horse only, is a matter of time and of prudence. Therefore we set out pretty early, three of us, and a baby, who could not well be left behind. The wife of the man who owned the cart had undertaken to mind the business, and the other babies upon condition of having the keys of all the taps left with her.

As the manner of journeying over the moor has been described oft enough already, I will say no more, except that we all arrived, before dusk of the summer's day, safe at Plovers Barrows. Mistress Benita was delighted with the change from her dull hard life; and she made many excellent observations, such as seem natural to a foreigner looking at our country.

As luck would have it, the first who came to meet us at the gate was Lorna, with nothing whatever upon her head (the weather being so summerly) but her beautiful hair shed round her, and wearing a sweet white frock tucked in, and showing her figure perfectly. In her joy she ran straight up to the cart, and then stopped and gazed at Benita. At one glance her old nurse knew her: "Oh the eyes, the eyes!" she cried, and was over the rail of the cart in a moment, in spite of all her substance. Lorna, on the other hand, looked at her with some doubt and wonder, as though having right to know much about her, and yet unable to do so. But when the foreign woman said something in Roman language, and flung new hay from the cart upon her, as if in a romp of childhood, the young maid cried, "Oh, Nita, Nita!" and fell upon her breast and wept, and after that looked round at us.

This being so, there could be no doubt as to the power of proving Lady's Lorna's birth and rights, both by evidence and token. For though we had not the necklace now—thanks to Annie's wisdom—we had the ring of heavy gold, a very ancient relic, with which my maid (in her simple way) had pledged herself to me. And Benita knew this ring as well as she knew her own fingers, having heard a long history about it; and the effigy on it of the wild-cat was the bearing of the house of Lorne.

For though Lorna's father was a nobleman of high and goodly lineage, her mother was of yet more ancient and renowned decent, being the last in line direct from the great and kingly chiefs of Lorne. A wild and headstrong race they were, and must have everything their own way. Hot blood was ever among them, even of one household; and their sovereignity (which more than once had defied the King of Scotland) waned and fell among themselves by continual quarreling. And it was of a piece with this, that the Doones (who were an offset by the mother's side, holding in co-partnership some large property, which had come by the spindle, as we say) should fall out with the Earle of Lorne, the last but one of that title.

The daughter of this nobleman had married Sir Ensor Doone; but this, instead of healing matters, led to fiercer conflict. I never could quite understand all the ins and outs of it, which none but a lawyer may go through, and keep his head at the end of it. The motives of mankind are plainer than the motions they produce. Especially when charity (such as found among us) sits to judge the former, and is never weary of it: while reason does not care to trace the latter complications, except for fee or title.

Therefore it is enough to say that, knowing Lorna to be direct in heirship to vast property, and bearing especial spite against the house of which she was the last, the Doones had brought her up with full intention of lawful marriage, and had carefully secluded her from the wildest of their young gallants. Of course, if they had been next in succession, the child would have gone down the waterfall, to save any further trouble; but there was an intercepting branch of some honest family; and they being outlaws, would have a poor chance (though the law loves outlaws) against them. Only Lorna was of the stock, and Lorna they must marry. And what a triumph against the old Earl for a cursed Doone to succeed him!

As for their outlawry, great robberies, and grand murders, the veriest child nowadays must know that money heals the whole of that. Even if they had murdered people of a good position, it would only cost about twice as much to prove their motives loyal. But they had never slain any man above the rank of yeoman; and folk even said that my father was the highest of their victims; for the death of Lorna's mother and brother was never set to their account.

Pure pleasure it is to any man to reflect upon all these things. How truly we discern clear justice, and how well we deal it. If any poor man steals a sheep, having ten children starving, and regarding it as mountain game (as a rich man does a hare), to the gallows with him.

While we were full of all these things, and wondering what would happen next, or what we ought ourselves to do, another very important matter called for our attention. This was no less than Annie's marriage to the Squire Faggus. We had tried to put it off again; for in spite of all advantages, neither my mother nor myself had any real heart for it. Not that we dwelt upon Tom's shortcomings, or rather, perhaps, his going too far at the time when he worked the road so. All that was covered by the King's pardon, and universal respect of the neighborhood. But our scruple was this—and the more we talked the more it grew upon us—that we both had great misgivings as to his future steadiness.

For it would be a thousand pities, we said, for a fine, well-grown and pretty maiden (such as our Annie was), useful, too, in so many ways, and lively, and warm-hearted, and mistress of £500, to throw herself away on a man with a kind of a turn for drinking. If that last were even hinted, Annie would be most indignant, and ask, with cheeks as red as roses, who had ever seen Master Faggus any the worse for liquor indeed? Her own opinion was, in truth, that he took a great deal too little, after all his hard work, and hard riding, and coming over the hills to be insulted! And if ever it lay in her power, and with no one to grudge him his trumpery glass, she would see that poor Tom had the nourishment which his cough and his lungs required.

His lungs being quite as sound as mine, this matter was out of all argument: so mother and I looked at one another, as much as to say, "let her go upstairs; she will cry, and come down more reasonable." And while she was gone, we used to say the same thing over and over again, but without perceiving a cure for it. And we almost always finished up with the following reflection, which sometimes came from mother's lips, and sometimes from my own: "Well, well, there is no telling. None can say how a man may alter when he takes to matrimony. But if we could only make Annie promise to be a little firm with him!"

I fear that all this talk on our part only hurried matters forward, Annie being more determined every time we pitied her. And at last Tom Faggus came, and spoke as if he were on the King's road, with a pistol at my head, and one at mother's. "No more fast and loose," he cried; "either one thing or the other. I love the maid and she loves me; and we will have one another, either with your leave, or without it. How many more times am I to dance over these vile hills, and leave my business, and get nothing more than a sigh or a kiss, and Tom, I must wait for mother? You are famous for being straightforward, you Ridds. Just treat me as I would treat you, now."

I looked at my mother; for a glance from her would have sent Tom out of the window; but she checked me with her hand, and said, "You have some ground of complaint, sir, I will not deny it. Now I will be as straightforward with you as even a Ridd is supposed to be. My son and myself have all along disliked your marriage with Annie. Not for what you have been so much, as for what we fear you will be. Have patience one moment, if you please. We do not fear your taking to the highway life again; for that you are too clever; no doubt, now that you have property. But we fear that you will take to drinking, and to squandering money. There are many examples of this around us, and we know what the fate of the wife is. It has been hard to tell you this, under our own roof, and with our own ——" Here mother hesitated.

"Spirits, and cider, and beer," I broke in; "out with it, like a Ridd, mother; as he will have all of it."

"Spirits, and cider, and beer," said mother, very firmly, after me; and then she gave way and said, "You know, Tom, you are welcome to every drop, and more of it."

Now, Tom, must have had a far sweeter temper than ever I could claim; for I should have thrust my glass away, and never taken another drop in the house where such a check had met me. But instead of that, Master Faggus replied, with a pleasant smile:

"I know that I am welcome, good mother; and to prove it, I will have some more."

And thereupon he mixed himself another glass of hollands, with lemon and hot water, yet pouring it very delicately.

"Oh, I have been so miserable—take a little more, Tom," said mother, handing the bottle.

"Yes, take a little more," I said; "you have mixed it overweak, Tom."

"If ever there was a sober man," cried Tom, complying with our request, "if ever there was in Christendom a man of perfect sobriety, that man is now before you. Shall we say to-morrow week, mother? It will suit your washing-day."

"How very thoughtful you are, Tom! Now, John would never have thought of that in spite of all his steadiness."

"Certainly not," I answered, proudly; "when my time comes for Lorna, I shall not study Betty Muxworthy."

In this way the Squire got over us; and Farmer Nicholas Snowe was sent for, to counsel with mother about the matter, and to set his two daughters sewing.

When the time for the wedding came, there was such a stir and commotion as had never been known in the parish of Oare since my father's marriage. For Annie's beauty and kindliness had made her the pride of the neighborhood, and the presents sent her from all around were enough to stock a shop with. Master Stickles, who now could walk, and who certainly owed his recovery, with the blessing of God, to Annie, presented her with a mighty Bible, silver-clasped, and very handsome, beating the parson's out and out, and for which he had sent to Taunton. Even the common troopers, having tasted her cookery many times (to help out their poor rations), clubbed together and must have given at least a week's pay apiece, to have turned out what they did for her. This was no less than a silver pot, well designed, but suited surely rather to the bridegroom's taste than bride's. In a word, everybody gave her things.

And now my Lorna came to me, with a spring of tears in appealing eyes—for she was still somewhat childish, or rather, I should say, more childish now than when she lived in misery—and she placed her little hand in mine, and she was half afraid to speak, and dropped her eyes for me to ask.

"What is it, little darling?" I asked, as I saw her breath come fast; for the smallest emotion moved her form.

"You don't think John, you don't think, dear, that you could lend me any money?"

"All I have got," I answered; "how much do you want, dear heart?"

"I have been calculating; and I fear that I cannot do any good with less than ten pounds, John."

Here she looked up at me with horror at the grandeur of the sum, and not knowing what I could think of it. But I kept my eyes from hers. "Ten pounds!" I said, in my deepest voice, on purpose to have it out in comfort, when she should be frightened: "what can you want with ten pounds, child?"

"That is my concern," said Lorna, plucking up her spirit at this: "when a lady asks for a loan, no gentleman pries into the cause of her asking it."

"That may be, as may be," I answered, in a judicial manner: "ten pounds, or twenty, you shall have. But I must know the purport."

"Then that you never shall know, John. I am very sorry for asking you. It is not of the smallest consequence. Oh dear, no." Herewith she was running away.

"Oh dear, yes," I replied; "it is of very great consequence; and I understand the whole of it. You want to give that stupid Annie, who has lost you a hundred thousand pounds, and who is going to be married before us, dear—God only can tell why, being my younger sister—you want to give her a wedding present. And you shall do it, darling, because it is so good of you. Don't you know your title, love? How humble you are with us humble folk. You are Lady Lorna something, so far as I can make out yet, and you ought not even to speak to us. You will go away, and disdain us."

"If you please, talk not like that, John. I will have nothing to do with it, if it comes between you and me, John."

"You cannot help yourself," said I. And then she vowed that she could and would. And rank and birth were banished from between our lips in no time.

"What can I get her good enough? I am sure I do not know," she asked: "she has been so good and kind to me, and she is such a darling. How I shall miss her, to be sure! By-the-by, you seem to think, John, that I shall be rich some day."

"Of course you will. As rich as the French king who keeps ours. Would the Lord Chancellor trouble himself about you, if you were poor?"

"Then if I am rich, perhaps you would lend me twenty pounds, dear John. Ten pounds would be very mean for a wealthy person to give her."

To this I agreed, upon condition that I should make the purchase myself, whatever it might be—for nothing could be easier than to cheat Lorna about the cost—until time should come for her paying me. And this was better than to cheat her for the benefit of our family. For this end, and for many others, I set off to Dulverton, bearing more commissions, more messages, and more questions, than a man of thrice my memory might carry so far as the corner where the saw-pit is. And to make things worse, one girl or other would keep on running up to me, or even after me (when started), with something or other she had just thought of, which she could not possibly do without, and which I must be sure to remember, as the most important of the whole.

To my dear mother, who had partly outlived the exceeding value of trifles, the most important matter seemed to insure uncle Reuben's countenance and presence at the marriage. And if I succeeded in this, I might well forget all the maidens' trumpery. This she would have been wiser to tell me when they were out of hearing, for I left her to fight her own battle with them; and laughing at her predicament, promised to do the best I could for all, so far as my wits would do.

Uncle Reuben was not at home; but Ruth, who received me very kindly, although without any expression of joy was sure of his return in the afternoon, and persuaded me to wait for him. And by the time that I had finished all I could recollect of my orders, even with paper to help me, the old gentleman rode into the yard, and was more surprised than pleased to see me. But if he was surprised, I was more than that—I was utterly astonished at the change in his appearance since the last time I had seen him. From a hale, and rather heavy man, gray-haired, but plump and ruddy, he was altered to a shrunken, wizened, trembling, and almost decrepit figure. Instead of curly and comely locks, grizzled indeed, but plentiful, he had only a few lank white hairs scattered and flattened upon his forehead. But the greatest change of all was in the expression of his eyes, which had been so keen, and restless, and bright, and a little sarcastic. Bright, indeed, they still were, but with a slow, unhealthy lustre; their keenness was turned to perpetual outlook, their restleness to a haggard want. As for the humor which once gleamed there (which people who fear it call sarcasm,) it had been succeeded by stares of terror, and then mistrust and shrinking. There was none of the interest in mankind which is needful even for satire.

"Now what can this be?" thought I to myself; "has the old man lost all his property, or taken too much to strong waters?"

"Come inside, John Ridd," he said: "I will have a talk with you. It is cold out here, and it is too light. Come inside, John Ridd, boy."

I followed him into a little dark room, quite different from Ruth Huckaback's. It was closed from the shop by an old division of boarding, hung with tanned canvas, and the smell was very close and faint. Here there was a ledger-desk, and a couple of chairs and a long-legged stool.

"Take the stool," said uncle Reuben, showing me in very quietly, "it is fitter for your height, John. Wait a moment; there is no hurry."

Then he slipped out by another door, and closing it quickly after him, told the foreman and waiting-men that the business of the day was done. They had better all go home at once, and he would see to the fastenings. Of course they were only too glad to go; but I wondered at his sending them, with at least two hours of daylight left.

However, that was no business of mine, and I waited and pondered whether fair Ruth ever came into this dirty room, and if so, how she kept her hands from it. For Annie would have had it upside down in about two minutes, and scrubbed and brushed, and dusted, until it looked quite another place; and yet all this done without scolding and crossness, which are the curse of clean women, and ten times worse than the dustiest dust.

Uncle Ben came reeling in, not from any power of liquor, but because he was stiff from horseback, and weak from work and worry.

"Let me be, John, let me be," he said, as I went to help him; "this is an unked, dreary place; but many a hundred of good gold Carolus has been turned in this place, John."

"Not a doubt about it, sir," I answered, in my loud and cheerful manner; "and many another hundred, sir; and may you long enjoy them!"

"My boy, do you wish me to die?" he asked, coming up close to my stool, and regarding me with a shrewd though blear-eyed gaze; "many do. Do you, John?"

"Come," said I, "don't ask such nonsense. You know better than that, uncle Ben. Or else I am sorry for you. I want you to live as long as possible, for the sake of——" Here I stopped.

"For the sake of what, John? I know it is not for my own sake. For the sake of what, my boy?"

"For the sake of Ruth," I answered; "if you must have the truth. Who is to mind her when you are gone?"

"But if you knew that I had gold, or a manner of getting gold far more than ever the sailors got out of the Spanish galleons—far more than ever was heard of; and the secret was to be yours, John; after me, and no other soul's—then you would wish me dead, John." Here he eyed me as if a speck of dust in my eyes should not escape him.

"You are wrong, uncle Ben; altogether wrong. For all the gold ever heard or dreamed of! not a wish would cross my heart to rob you of one day of life."

At last he moved his eyes from mine, but without any word or sign to show whether he believed or disbelieved. Then he went to a chair, and sat with his chin upon the ledger desk; as if the effort of probing me had been too much for his weary brain. "Dreamed of! All the gold ever dreamed of! As if it were but a dream!" he muttered; and then he closed his eyes to think.

"Good uncle Reuben," I said to him, "you have been a long way to-day, sir. Let me go and get you a glass of good wine. Cousin Ruth knows where to find it."

"How do you know how far I have been?" he asked, with a vicious look at me. "And cousin Ruth! You are very pat with my granddaughter's name, young man."

"It would be hard upon me, sir, not to know my own cousin's name."

"Very well. Let that go by. You have behaved very badly to Ruth. She loves you, and you love her not."

At this I was so wholly amazed—not at the thing itself, I mean, but at his knowledge of it—that I could not say a single word, but looked, no doubt, very foolish.

"You may well be ashamed, young man," he cried, with some triumph over me; "you are the biggest of all fools, as well as a conceited coxcomb. What can you want more than Ruth? She is a little damsel truly; but finer men than you, John Ridd, with all your boasted strength and wrestling, have wedded smaller maidens. And as for quality and value—bots! one inch of Ruth is worth all your seven feet put together.

Now I am not seven feet high, nor ever was six feet eight inches, in my very prime of life; and nothing vexes me so much as to make me out a giant, and above human sympathy, and human scale of weakness. It cost me hard to hold my tongue, which, luckily, is not in proportion to my stature. And only for Ruth's sake I held it. But Uncle Ben (being old and worn) was vexed by not having any answer, almost as much as a woman is.

"You want me to go on," he continued, with a look of spite at me, "about my poor Ruth's love for you, to feed your cursed vanity. Because a set of asses call you the finest man in England, there is no maid (I suppose) who is not in love with you. I believe you are as deep as you are long, John Ridd. Shall I ever get to the bottom of your character?"

This was a little too much for me. Any insult I could take (with good-will) from a white-haired man, and one who was my relative, unless it touched my love for Lorna, or my conscious modesty. Now both of these were touched to the quick by the sentences of the old gentleman. Therefore, without a word, I went; only making a bow to him.

But women, who are (beyond all doubt) the mothers of all mischief, also nurse that babe to sleep when he is too noisy. And there was Ruth, as I took my horse (with a trunk of frippery on him), poor little Ruth was at the bridle, and rusting all the knops of our town-going harness with tears.

"Good-bye, dear," I said, as she bent her head away from me; "shall I put you up on the saddle, dear?"

"Cousin Ridd, you may take it lightly," said Ruth, turning full upon me, "and very likely you are right, according to your nature"—this was the only cutting thing the little soul ever said to me—"but oh, Cousin Ridd, you have no idea of the pain you will leave behind you."

"How can that be so, Ruth, when I am as good as ordered to be off the premises?"

"In the first place, Cousin Ridd, grandfather will be angry with himself for having so ill-used you. And now he is so weak and poorly that he is always repenting. In the next place, I shall scold him first, until he admits his sorrow; and when he has admitted it, I shall scold myself for scolding him. And then he will come round again, and think that I was hard on him, and end perhaps by hating you—for he is like a woman now, John."

That last little touch of self-knowledge in Ruth, which she delivered with a gleam of some secret pleasantry, made me stop and look closely at her, but she pretended not to know it. "There is something in this child," I thought, "very different from other girls. What it is I cannot tell; for one very seldom gets at it."

At any rate, the upshot was that the good horse went back to stable and had another feed of corn, while my wrath sunk within me. There are two things, according to my experience (which may not hold with another man), fitted beyond many others to take hot tempers out of us. The first is to see our favorite creatures feeding, and licking up their food, and happily snuffing over it, yet sparing time to be grateful, and showing taste and perception; the other is to go gardening boldly in the spring of the year without any misgiving about it, and hoping the utmost of everything. If there be a third anodyne, approaching these two in power, it is to smoke good tobacco well, and watch the setting of the moon; and if this should only be over the sea, the result is irresistible.

Master Huckaback showed no especial signs of joy at my return, but received me with a little grunt, which appeared to me to mean. "Ah, I thought he would hardly be fool enough to go." I told him how sorry I was for having in some way offended him; and he answered that I did well to grieve for one at least of my offences. To this I made no reply, as behooves a man dealing with cross and fractious people; and presently he became better-tempered, and sent little Ruth for a bottle of wine. She gave me a beautiful smile of thanks for my forbearance as she passed, and I knew by her manner that she would bring the best bottle in all the cellar.

As I had but little time to spare (although the days were long and light) we were forced to take our wine with promptitude and rapidity; and whether this loosened my uncle's tongue, or whether he meant beforehand to speak, is now almost uncertain. But true it is that he brought his chair very near to mine, after three or four glasses, and sent Ruth away upon some errand which seemed of small importance. At this I was vexed: for the room always looked so different without her.

"Come, Jack," he said, "here's your health, young fellow, and a good and obedient wife to you. Not that your wife will ever obey you, though; you are much too easy tempered. Even a bitter and stormy woman might live in peace with you, Jack. But never give her the chance to try. Marry some sweet little thing, if you can. If not, don't marry any. Ah! we have the maid to suit you, my lad, in this old town of Dulverton."

"Have you so, sir? But perhaps the maid might have no desire to suit me."

"That you may take my word she has. The color of this wine will prove it. The sly little hussy has been to the cobwebbed arch of the cellar, where she has no right to go for any one under a magistrate. However, I am glad to see it; and we will not spare it, John. After my time, somebody, whoever marries little Ruth, will find some rare wine there, I trow, and perhaps not know the difference."

Thinking of this, the old man sighed, and expected me to sigh after him. But a sigh is not (like a yawn) infectious; and we are all more prone to be sent to sleep than to sorrow by one another. Not but what a sigh sometimes may make us think of sighing.

"Well, sir," cried I, in my sprightliest manner, which rouses up most people, "here's to your health and dear little Ruth's; and may you live to knock off the cobwebs from every bottle in under the arch. Uncle Reuben, your life and health, sir!"

With that I took my glass thoughtfully, for it was wondrous good; and Uncle Ben was pleased to see me dwelling pleasantly on the subject, with parenthesis, and self-commune, and oral judgment unpronounced, though smacking of fine decision. *Curia vult advisari*, as the lawyers say, which means, "Let us have another glass, and then we can think about it."

"Come now, John," said Uncle Ben, laying his wrinkled hand on my knee, when he saw that none could heed us, "I know that you have a sneaking fondness for my grandchild, Ruth. Don't interrupt me now; you have; and to deny it will only provoke me."

"I do like Ruth, sir," I said boldly, for fear of misunderstanding; "but I do not love her."

"Very well; that makes no difference. Liking may very soon be loving (as some people call it), when the maid has money to help her."

"But if there be, as there is in my case—"

"Once for all, John, not a word. I do not attempt to lead you into any engagement with little Ruth, neither will I blame you (though I may be disappointed) if no such engagement should ever be. But whether you will have my grandchild, or whether you will not—and such a chance is rarely offered to a fellow of your standing"—Uncle Ben despised all farmers—"in any case I have at last resolved to let you know my secret, and for two good reasons. The first is that it wears me out to dwell upon it all alone, and the second is that I can trust you to fulfill a promise. Morever, you are my next of kin, except among the womankind; and you are just the man I want to help me in my enterprise."

"And I will help you, sir," I answered, fearing some conspiracy, "in anything that is true and loyal, and according to the laws of the realm."

"Ha, ha!" cried the old man, laughing until his eyes ran over, and spread-

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