

looked wonderingly at him, and, indeed, the shock was so decided and unpleasant that he was within a hair's breadth of dropping the lady's arm and dashing up the alley before he recovered himself. He pooh-poohed the incident, and told himself that it was absurd to think of it a second time, but other and better men before Roderick Warstone have found it one thing to decide that some subject ought not to be thought of, but quite another to dismiss it from their minds.

"I wish that Swivel Dick was here," he thought; "he would put the thing beyond doubt in five minutes."

However, as Dick was not there, whatever doubt surrounded the incident was performed allowed to remain.

The next two or three days were busy ones with Roderick, for he twice went over to Wrentham, yet found time to call each day at Mr. Rayford's in the hope of seeing Mabel alone. Although he failed in this, there was a troubled look about the girl, which his experienced judgment decided was a favorable symptom, as it showed the conflict in her mind which was certain to take place before she could resolve on the desperate step she was doubtless considering.

Miss Jermyn left Wrentham, having promised with Mrs. Hadley to spend a few days at the Manor later in the season, but as this was a good way ahead there was an interval which might be utilized and would be sufficient for Roderick's plans. There must be an excuse made to his father for his absence, if Mabel consented to leave the village with him; but the Squire was pleased with him, and not likely to be very critical. Besides, he thought—with a smile which did not improve the expression of his countenance—he had often found excuses which passed very well in positions not less difficult than the present.

Such reflections as these were in Mr. Roderick Warstone's mind as he strolled towards the village, hoping for some incident to throw Mabel in his way, if but for a minute, so that he could propose an appointment for the evening. She might at the time refuse to meet him—that was very likely; but he would keep tryst, and if his knowledge of the feminine mind was worth anything, so would she. At any rate it would be a good test, and—further consideration of the matter was prevented by his unexpectedly meeting Mr. Rayford himself, face to face. The old yeoman was pleased at meeting Roderick, who was more than equally pleased at seeing him, as now he would be almost certain to find Mabel alone—so he thought.

Roderick wrung the farmer's hand with an unlooked-for cordiality, and began a conversation which showed the deep interest he took in the operations on the latter's land, thus still more completely propitiating Mr. Rayford.

"I don't know, though, how I shall go on next year," said the yeoman, "for I shall lose my right hand very soon."

"Ah, indeed!" ejaculated Roderick, assuming all the interest which such an announcement demanded. "Who is—how is that?"

"Why, of course I mean Mabel," returned the farmer with a smile. "An old fellow like me must not expect to keep young people about him for ever; and as Wilfrid Burn, of the Mill Farm, and she have been sweethearts for pretty nigh two years, he has settled to take a new mistress to the old home in a few weeks. They will be asked for the first time on Sunday."

It was quite as well for Roderick that the fulness of the farmer's heart caused him to be somewhat garrulous, and to take such an interest in his own speech as to prevent his noticing a wild change in his companion's face which might have startled him. By a tremendous effort the young man controlled himself, but he was deadly pale, while to his own ears his voice had a harsh unnatural hoarseness as he spoke.

"How long has this been arranged?" he asked.

"Only this very week," returned Rayford, "and Mabel is so unwilling to leave her old father that we were obliged to say 'yes' for her. Young Wilfrid was quite willing to do that, you may be sure," he added with a laugh.

Roderick tried to echo the laugh, and said:

"I must take an opportunity of congratulating Mr. Burn when I find these tidings generally known. He is a fortunate man. I must bid you good-morning, Mr. Rayford, for I see a servant coming after me to say that a gentleman whom I expect has arrived."

With this he disappeared, but not in the direction of Mr. Rayford's dwelling, for he felt he was in no mood for an interview with the farmer's daughter at that moment; while Rayford went cheerfully on his way, pleased with the interest which the young Squire evidently took in his farm and his family.

This was the day on which Miss Rayford paid her weekly visit to the old servant, and on this occasion, uncouth as she always seemed, there was a strangeness in her manner which almost frightened the girl. Not but that she was as loving and devoted as ever; with all her uncouthness that trait was never absent; but there was a meaning in her eye and a solemnity in her voice which might have been the warning of coming death, and much impressed Mabel. She concealed this feeling as far as possible, and after her usual stay left, but as she was going old Hepzibah called her back and said:

"Didst ever ha' thee fortune told, Miss Mabel?"

"No," said her astonished visitor.

"Then do'ee go and have un' told to-night," continued the old woman. "Vind one of the wise volk, cross her hand wi' rale gould, and thee won't be sorry vor't."

Mabel smiled at old Hep's words, and left her, but felt—as almost every girl would have felt—disturbed by the strange manner and language of her pensioner.

(To be continued.)



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