

The Broad Highway

Jeffery Hall

"Which We Call Life"

(Continued from yesterday.)
Hereupon the smithy became full of the merry din of my hammer, and while I worked the Ancient smoked his pipe and watched me, informing me, between whistles, that the Jersey cow was "in calf," that the horse seemed more than usually forward, and that he had waked that morning with a "touch of the rheumatics," but, otherwise, he was unusually silent; moreover, each time that I happened to glance up, it was to find him regarding me with a certain fixity of eye, which at another time would have struck me as portentous.

"Ye be paleish this mornin', Peter," said he, dabbling at me suddenly with his pipe-stem; "shouldn't wonder if you was to tell me as your appetite was bad; come now—ye didn't eat much of a breakfast this mornin', did ye?"

"I don't think I did, Ancient."
"A course not!" said the old man, with a nod of profound approval—"It aren't to be expected. Let's see, it be all of four months since I found ye, hasn't it?"

"Four months and a few odd days," I nodded, and fell to work upon my glowing iron bar.

"Ye'll make a tidy smith one of these days, Peter," said the old man encouragingly, as I straightened my back and plunged the iron back into the fire.

"Thank you, Ancient."
"Ay—ye've learned to use a hammer perty well, considerin', though you be wastin' your opportunities shamefully, Peter, shamefully!"

"Am I, Ancient?"
"Ay, that ye be—moon can't last much longer—she be on the wane a' ready!"

"Moon?" said I, staring.
"Ah, moon!" nodded the old man; "there's nowt like a moon, Peter, an' if she be at the full so much the better."

"But what have the moon and I to do with each other, Ancient?"
"Old I be, Peter, a old old man, I were young once, an' I tell 'ee the moon as a lot more to do w' it than some folks think—why, Lord love 'ee! there wouldn't be near so many children aplayin' in the sun if it wasn't for the moon!"

"Ancient," said I, "what might you be driving at?"
"Love, Peter!"

"Love?" said I, letting go the handle of the bellows.
"An' marriage, Peter!"

"What in the world—put—such thoughts into your head?"
"You did, Peter."

"I?"
"Ah!—some men be born lovers, Peter, an' you be one. I never see such eyes as yours afore, so burnin' 'ot they be. Ah, Peter! some maid will see the lovelet afame in 'em some day, an' droop 'er 'ead an' blush an' tremble for she'll know, Peter, she'll know; maids would be loved, Peter!"

"But Ancient, I am not the kind of man women would be attracted by. I love books and solitude, and am called a pedant! and, besides, I am not of a loving sort—"

"Some men, Peter, falls in love as easy as they falls out; it comes to some soft an' quiet—like the dawn of a summer's day, Peter; but to others it comes like a gert an' terrible storm—oh, that I do! There's fire ready to burn up inside o' ye at the touch of some woman's 'ead, or the peep o' 'er eye—ah! a fire as 'll burn, an' burn, an' never so out again—no! even if you should live to be as old as I be, an' you'll find 'er, Peter, an' she'll find you—"

"And," said I, staring away into the distance, "do you think that, by any possible chance, she might love me, this woman?"

"Ay, for sure," said the Ancient, "for sure she will; why don't 'ee up an' ax 'er? W' a fine, round moon over 'ead, an' a pretty maid at 'ee, yer self, it's easy enough to tell 'er you love 'er, aren't it?"

"Indeed, yes," said I, beginning to rub my chin, "very easy!" and I sighed.

"An' when you looks into a pair o' sweet eyes, an' sees the shine o' the moon in 'em—why, it aren't so very far to 'er lips, an' 'er Peter!"

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fore 'e knows for sure if 'er eyes be black 'uns or brown 'uns—that she 'as. Here he extracted a pinch of snuff. "As for Prudence—she loves 'ee w' all 'er 'art an' soul!"

"Prudence?" said I, staring.
"Ah! Prudence—I be 'er granddier, an' I know."

"Prudence?" said I again.
"She 'm 'andsome lass, an' so perty as a piter—you said so yourself, an' what's more, she 'm a sensible lass, an' 'll make ye as fine a wife as ever was if only—"

"If only she loved me, Ancient?"
"To be sure, Peter."

"But, you see, she doesn't."
"Eh—what? What, Peter?"
"Prudence doesn't love me!"

"Doesn't?"
"Not by any means."

"Peter—ye're jokin'!"
"No, Ancient."

"But I—be all took aback—mailed I be—not love ye, an' me w' my 'art set on it—are ye sure?"

"Certain."
"Ow d'ye know?"

"She told me so."
"But—why—why shouldn't she love ye?"

"Why should she?"
"But I—I'd set my 'art on it, Peter."

"It is very unfortunate!" said I, and began blowing up the fire.

"Peter."
"Yes, Ancient?"

"De be 'ere she?"
"No, Ancient. The old man rose, and hobbling forward, tapped me upon the breast with the handle of his stick.

"Then who was you a-talkin' of, a white back—'bout 'er eyes, an' 'er 'air, an' 'er dress, an' 'bout afraid o' them?"

"To be exact, I don't know, Ancient."

"Oh, Peter!" exclaimed the old man, shaking his head, "I wonders at ye; arter me a-chinkin' an' a-dinkin', an' a-planin' an' a-planin' all these months arter me a-sendin' Black Jargo about 'is business—"

"Ancient, what do you mean?"
"Why, didn't I out an' tell un as you was sweet on Prue—"

"Did you tell him that?" I cried.
"Ay, to be sure I did; an' what's more, I says to un often an' often, when you want 'er, 'Jargo, I'd say, 'Prue's a lovely maid, an' Peter's a fine young chap, an' they 'm beginnin' to find each other out, they be allus a-talkin' to each other an' a-lookin' at each other, mornin', noon an' night, says: 'like as not we'll 'ave 'em marryin' each other afore we're long!' an' Jargo 'ur just wrinkle up 'is brows, an' walk away, an' never say a word. But now—it be terrible 'ad to be disappointed like this, Peter—arter I'd set my 'art off it—an' me such a old man—such a very ancient man. Oh, Peter! you be full o' disappointments, an' all 'em—"

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He nodded and grinned as I came up, but in both there was a vague unpleasantness, as also in the manner in which he eyed me slowly up and down.

"You've stood alookin' up into the sky for a good ten minutes!" said he.

"And what if I have?"
"Nothin'," said Peter, "nothin' at all—though if the moon 'ad been up, a cove might 'a' thought as I was dreamin' of some Eve or other; love-sick folk always stares at the moon—"

"Leastways, so they tell me. Any one as stares at the moon when 'e might be doin' summat better is a fool, as great a fool as any man as stares at a Eve, for a Eve never will, now?"

"Don't know, young cove, nor shake your 'ead, for it's true; wot's caused more sorrow an' blood than them Eves? Blood—ah! rivers of it! Oceans of blood—'s been spilt all along o' women, from the Eve as tricked Adam to the Eve as tricks the like o' me, or say—yourself!"

"Here he regarded me with so evil a leer that I turned my back in disgust.

"Don't go, young cove! I ain't done yet, and I got summat to tell ye."

"Then tell it!" said I, stopping again struck by the fellow's manner, "and tell it quickly."

"'m a-comin' to it as fast as I can, ain't I? Very well then! You're a fine, up-standin' young cove, and may 'ave white 'ands (which I don't see myself, but no matter) and may likewise be shock-bull at talkin' ways (which, though not nothin', I won't go for to deny)—but a Eve's a Eve, and always will be—ye'll mind as I warned you again 'em last time I see ye?—very well then!"

"Well!" said I impatiently.
"Well!" nodded the Pedler, and his eyes twinkled malevolently. "I says it again—I warns you again, you're a nice, civil-spoken young cove, and quiet (though I don't like the cock o' your eye, and, mind I don't bear you no ill-will—though you did turn me from your door on a cold, dark night—"

"It was neither a cold nor a dark night!" said I.

"Well, it might 'a' been, might n't it?—very well then! Still, I don't," said the Pedler, spitting dolefully into the ditch, "I don't bear you no 'ard feelin's for it, no'—me always makin' it a pint to forgive them as woefully oppresses me, likewise them as despitely uses me—it might 'a' been cold, and dark, w' ice and snow, and I might 'a' froze to death—"

"You've said pretty well, I think," said I, "supposing you tell me what you have to tell me—otherwise—good night!"

"Very well then!" said the Pedler, "let's talk o' summat else; still livin' in the 'Oller, I suppose?"

"Ah, well! I come through there to-day," said he, grinning, and again his eyes grew malevolent.

"Indeed!"
"Ah!—indeed! I come through this 'ere very afternoon, and uncommon pretty everythin' was lookin', w' the grass so green, and the trees so—"

"Shady,"
"Shady's the word!" nodded the Pedler, glancing up at me through "A paradise you might call it—ah! a Paradise or a garden of Eden, w' Eve and the serpent and all!" and he broke

"Suffer No Longer From Constipation!"

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How Gabbing Dick, the Pedler, Set a Hammer Going in My Head.

Having finished my bars, with four strong brackets to hold them, I put away my tools, and dozed hat and coat.

It was yet early, and there was, besides, much work waiting to be done, but I felt unwontedly tired and out of sorts, wherefore, with my bars and brackets beneath my arm, I set out for the Hollow.

From the hedges, on either side of me, came the sweet perfume of the honeysuckle, and beyond the hedges the fields stood high with ripening corn—a yellow, heavy-headed host, nodding and swaying lazily. I stood awhile to listen to its whisper as the gentle wind swept over it, and to look down the long green alleys of the hop-gardens beyond; and at the end of one of these straight arched vistas there shone a solitary, great star.

And presently, lifting my eyes to the sky, already deepening to evening, and remembering how I had looked round me ere I faced Black George, I breathed a sigh of thankfulness that I was yet alive with strength to walk through the night so beautiful.

Now, as I stood thus, I heard a voice hailing me, and, glancing about, es-

ayed one, some distance up the road, who sat beneath the hedge, whom upon approaching, I recognized as Gabbing Dick, the Pedler.

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out into a cackling laugh. And, in the look and the laugh, indeed about his white figure, there was something so repellent, even, that I was minded to kick and trample him down into the ditch, yet the leering triumph in his eyes held me.

"Yes!" said I.

"Ye see, belin' by, I 'appened to pass the cottage—and very pretty that looked too, and nice and neat inside!"

"Yes!" said I.

"And, belin' so near, I 'appened to glance in at the window, and there, sure enough, I see—er—as you might say, Eve in the garden. And a fine figure of a Eve she be, and 'andsome w' 'er—'er, ain't often as ye see a female the likes o' 'er, so proud and 'aughty like."

"Well!" said I.

"Well, just as I 'appened to look in at the window, she 'appened to be standin' w' 'er open book in 'er 'and—a old, leather book w' a broken cover."

"Yes!" said I.

"Yes, soft, Eve's laughin'—and a pretty, soft, Eve's laugh it were, too."

"Yes!" said I.

"And—'e were alookin' at the book—over 'er shoulder!" The iron slipper, and, catching up his pack, retreated some little way down the road.

"Ketches ye, does it?" said the Pedler. "I did not speak, but, meeting my eye, he scrambled hastily, to his feet, and, catching up his pack, retreated some little way down the road."

"Ketches ye, does it, my cove?" he repeated; "turn me away from your door on a cold, dark night, would ye (just as I bear you any ill-will for it, belin' of a forgivin' nature?) But I says to you, I says—look but—a fine 'andsome lass she be, w' 'er soft eyes and red lips, and long, white arms—the eyes and lips and arms of a Eve; and Eve tricked Adam, didn't she?—and you ain't a better man nor Adam, are ye?—very well then!" saying which, he spat once more into the ditch, and, shouldering his pack, strode away.

And, after some while, I took up my iron bars, and trudged on towards the cottage. As I went, I repeated to myself, over and over again, the word "Eve!"

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