A MAN OF HIS WORD.

(Continued.)

V.

The young man's thoughts were not of the most cheerful kind. With his elbow resting on the table, and his right hand caressing his beard, he sat idly and half-unconsciously surveying the great dining-hall which visitors to Rye Court so much admired on show-days. The dark oak panelling, the carved chimney-piece, which reached from floor to ceiling, the inlaid cabinets, the broad sunbeams sloping through the mullioned windows and deepening the gloom of dark corners—all these things he noted with an artist's appreciation of light and shade, and with a regretful recollection of past years, when troubles had been less frequent, when his mother had been still alive, when Grinstead had not yet gone to the dogs, and when the old house had always been full of guests. It would have to be let now, he supposed. Time had been when the raising of £20,000 would have been almost a trifle to the Earls of Rye, who had formally been territorial magnates of the first water; but those good old days were gone forever. Having once begun to descend the hill, the family had rushed downwards, as families which follow that path generally do, with alarming rapidity, and the present head of the great House of Denne had nothing that was great left to him, except his name and the chivalrous, if somewhat exaggerated, veneration with which he regarded it.

Egbert, who belonged to the latter half of the nineteenth century, did not altogether share this feeling, yet he could not but admit that in marrying the daughter of a successful grocer he would be marrying beneath him. This admission did not shake his resolve: his view of the case was the modern one—that a lady may be permitted to lack ancestry so long as she possesses a handsome fortune. But his father, it seemed, was of another opinion; and his father was very obstinate, as was also Mr Hobday. For himself, he was conscious of being somewhat deficient in obstinacy. He had always taken life easily, giving way in most things, as he had done in this present matter of his entering Parliament, because it was not worth while to have a fuss; and although he did not waver in his allegiance to Josephin he did doubt a little whether circumstances might not, in the long-run, prove too strong for him. It was all very well to talk about earning an independent income; but in his heart of hearts he was inclined to agree with Lord Rye, that, if he postponed his marriage to that epoch, he would never marry at all. Possibly old Staveley might be able to suggest something in the way of encouragement. He took his hat presently, and strolled down the avenue in the autumn sunshine, thinking that it could at all events do no harm to consult the oracle.

However, he was not destined to be consoled by his ingenious friend that day; for, as the morning was a fine one for walking, and as he was in no great hurry, he went a little out of his way in order to revisit the scene of his first meeting with Josephine, and, when he reached the spot, whom should he see, leaning over the boundary-fence in an attitude significant of listless dejection, but Josephine herself! He hastened to join her, and though her first words were, "I can't speak to you," she was persuaded, without very much difficulty, to consent to a brief interview, upon the understanding that her lover was not to cross the frontier, which he had shown signs of attempting to do.

"I may sit upon the fence, though, I suppose," said Egbert, suiting the action to the word.

"Very well," answered Josephine, who had retreated a pace or two, "but you must not come any farther, and I can only stay a very few minutes. We ought not to meet at all."

"Why not, when we are engaged?" asked Egbert, reproachfully.

She shook her head. "We are not engaged; how can we be, now that everybody is against it? I did not mind so much about papa, because there was no real reason for his objecting, and I thought perhaps he would give in if he saw that we were determined; but he has just told me that Lord Rye would not hear of such a thing as our being married."

"Well, what of that? My father has even less right to object than yours."

"Oh, I don't think so. They both have a right to object, I suppose; only I can't understand papa's objections, and I do quite understand Lord Rye's. It is much better that every one should keep to his or her own class, and I can't make myself your equal."

"No, because you are my superior in every way," returned the young man, quickly.

"Ah, you don't really mean that; and, if you did, your thinking it would not make it so. Just now you don't mind, because—because—"

"Because I love you."

"Well, because you are in love with me. But some day it would be different, and even now I don't think you would quite like telling your friends that you were going to marry a grocer's daughter."

There was a degree of truth in this assertion which Egbert was honest enough to leave uncontradicted. "The only question of any importance," he said, "is whether we love each other sufficiently to be constant in spite of drawbacks. If we do, no drawbacks can be worth considering. I am sure of myself, may I not be sure of you too?"

She did not answer; so, after a minute, he repeated his question. "Won't you say that you love me as much as you did, Josephine?"

"Oh, you *know*," exclaimed the girl, without looking at him. "How could I change? It is only that I can't bear to think of your doing a thing which you might live to regret."

It was at this juncture that Egbert, who had hitherto been sitting sideways on the fence, with his legs loyally on his own side of the boundary, swung himself over and committed a trespass on Mr. Hobday's property. The most inexperienced reader will hardly require to be told what followed this lawless act. Josephine protested; but her protests were not listened to, nor, in truth, were they very forcibly urged. The lovers parted, after exchanging promises of eternal fidelity, and one of them, at all events, felt that in combating the misgivings of the other he had overcome his own.

"You'll let me see you again, won't you?" he asked beseechingly; but upon this point Josephine was firm. "No," she answered; "I don't choose to deceive my father, even if I can't obey him. Indeed, I shall tell him that we have met to-day; and I think you ought to tell Lord Rye."

Egbert laughed. "Oh, I don't think that is necessary," said he. "I don't consider myself bound to keep my father informed of all my proceedings, and I doubt whether he would thank me if I did. I must trust to chance, then, for my next sight of you, and I warn you that I shall assist chance if I can."

Josephine, without saying anything, made a slight gesture of dissent. She hardly expected that Egbert should understand her feeling, which was nevertheless a very natural one. It seemed to her that she was entitled to resist her father's will so far as to remain faithful to an absent lover; but she was determined there should be nothing clandestine about her rebellion. She kept her word, and communicated the fact of her having encountered Egbert to Mr. Hobday, who showed less displeasure than might have been anticipated, merely saying, "This must not occur again, mind."

Mr. Hobday's attention was engaged with matters which he considered more important than the philanderings of foolish boys and girls. The polling day was drawing near, and, as it approached, it became more evident that the chances of the Radical candidate were scarcely worth taking into account. All that he hoped for was a minority of votes sufficiently large to give him some sort of standing at the next election, when the opposite side should be represented by some less formidable person than a member of the Denne family. He knew something of Lord Rye's affairs, as well as those of Lord Grinstead, and he foresaw that at no distant day the whole House of Denne would fall with a crash, and that Egbert would have to resign his seat.

This cheerful anticipation enabled him to bear with fortitude the very unfriendly reception accorded to him when, accompanied by two or three bold spirits who had avowed themselves on his side, he drove down to the Flying Horse, there to await the counting of the votes. He was made to wait a long time, the proceedings being an entire novelty to Stillbourne, and the officials meeting with many difficulties in the performance of their duties. Mr. Hobday's supporters were discouraged and discouraging, and the landlord of the Flying Horse was exceedingly grumpy—as well he might be, seeing that, by espousing the wrong cause, he had kept his house empty when he ought to have been driving a roaring trade. At the Rye Arms, over the way, all the magnates of the county were assembled, having felt it their duty to deprecate factious opposition in a public manner. The free and independent electors paraded the streets, cheering Egbert lustily, and howling at Mr. Hobday's snub nose whenever that feature could be discerned at the first-floor windows of the Flying House. It was not until half-past eight o'clock in the evening that the following result was announced from the town-hall:

Denne	345
Hobday	22
Majority	323

An amiable eccentricity had led half a dozen electors to record their votes in favor of both candidates, and about a score more had spoiled their voting-papers in other ways.

Egbert, in a few well-chosen words, expressed his deep sense of the honor conferred upon him, and then Mr. Hobday was given to understand that he would be expected to say something. He had got ready a short speech in anticipation of the popular verdict, but he had not been prepared for so crushing a defeat, and in his wrath he substituted an impromptu oration that came straight from his heart:

"Electors of Stillbourne,—Nobody could mix with you for a week without discovering that you are one and all fools, but I didn't know that you had such a lot of cowards among you. There are more than two-and-twenty of you who'd have voted against Lord Rye if they'd dared. Don't tell me! I hope you're ashamed of yourselves, that's all. Why, what harm do you suppose Lord Rye can do you? What good do you suppose he's going to do you? Precious little—you may take my word for that! Now, you needn't think I'm disappointed. I mean to represent you before very long—not because it's any honor to represent such a pack of blockheads, but because I said I would. My compliments to the honest fellows who promised to vote for me, and then broke their promise. That's all I've got to say to you for the present. Good-night."

Mr. Hobday then retired, pursued by sounds which the local newspaper afterwards described as ironical cheering. He was more despondent than he was willing to allow, and as he drove home he wished he had never said that he meant to be member for Stillbourne. Having said so, he was of course bound to persevere; but it did seem rather absurd that he should be put to so much trouble in order to be returned for a petty borough which would certainly be done away with when the next redistribution of seats took place, while there were plenty of important constituencies which would doubtless elect him gladly.

"These intelligent beggars won't have anything to do with me, you see," he remarked, with a rather sour smile, to Staveley, whom he met a few days after the event.

"*Tu l'as voulu, Georges Dandin!*" answered the other, placidly.