

was quite aware that portrait-taking was not in Mr. English's ordinary line of business; but under the circumstances, he would, perhaps—and the little white-haired old lady put her two hands together, and looked up so entreatingly in his face, that John had no heart to refuse her request. John called on Mr. Edwin the same afternoon, and found him to be a little withered gentleman, very sprightly and cheerful, despite his great age and the ailment which confined him to the house. The portrait was duly taken, as well as one of Miss Edwin; and the two duly despatched to the antipodes; but John's visits to the little cottage did not cease with this; he had grown to like the society of the old gentleman and his sister, a liking which was cordially reciprocated; and he not unfrequently strolled down for an hour after his day's work was over, for the sake of a pleasant chat with the Nestor of the little town.

Mr. Edwin, with his sister by way of supplement or addendum, might be considered as a living chronicle of the sayings and doings of Normanford for the last half-century; and John English could not have found any one more likely to supply him with the information he needed. With the propitiatory offering of a packet of genuine Keenall Brown in his pocket—for Mr. Edwin was a great snuff-taker—the young photographer went down to the cottage on the evening of the day on which he received the letter from his friend at Nice. It was not difficult to bring the conversation round to the required point, for the ex-schoolmaster was always ready and willing to talk about any person or thing that referred in any way to his beloved town.

"Yes," said Mr. Edwin, in reply to a question of John's, as he balanced a pinch of his favourite mixture between finger and thumb—"the landlady of the *Hand and Dagger* has certainly been a resident of Normanford for many years.—For how many years? Let me consider. Why, for two-and-twenty years, this past summer. She came to Belair with Lady Spencelaugh—with the present Lady Spencelaugh, that is—who is Sir Philip's second wife, his first lady having died in India, poor creature! a few years after marriage. Martha Winch was a young unmarried woman at that time, and a great favourite with her Ladyship. After a time she married Job Winch, a pudding-headed fellow, who originally was hostler at the very hotel of which he afterwards became landlord. I remember it was currently reported at the time that it was her Ladyship's money which put the newly-married couple into the *Hand and Dagger*; and through all these years, Mrs. Winch has never quite broken off her connection with Belair; she still goes frequently to see Lady Spencelaugh.

"How do you account," said John, "for the existence of so strong a tie between two people so different in social position as Lady Spencelaugh and Mrs. Winch?"

"All I can tell you with regard to that is from hearsay, and not from observation," replied the schoolmaster. "Lady Spencelaugh is the daughter of a poor Yorkshire squire. When young, her health was very delicate; and her father, with the view of improving it, sent her to be brought up in the house of a small farmer, one of his tenants, who resided somewhere in that wild stretch of country between Ingleton and Hawes, in the North-west Riding. Mrs. Winch that is now, was the daughter of this farmer; and the two girls, living under the same roof for five or six years, became firmly attached to one another; and not all the chances and changes of after-life have been able to trample out this early liking: the great lady up at Belair has never forgotten the friend of her youth."

"Had not Mrs. Winch a brother, when she first came to Normanford?" asked John.

"To be sure she had," replied the old gentleman; "and a drunken, dissolute, gambling dog he was—a surgeon by profession. He came to Normanford, and began to practise here soon after the arrival of Lady Spencelaugh; but he was too fond of shaking his elbow to do any good either to himself or others; and after lead-

ing a useless, bankrupt-sort-of life for two or three years, he left the country, and has not been heard of in this neighbourhood since."

"Do you remember his name?" said John.

"To be sure. His name was Jeremiah, or Jerry, as he was more commonly called."

"But the surname?" urged John.

"Ah, there I confess I'm at fault," said Mr. Edwin, after a minute or two of silent cogitation. "It was rather an uncommon name, I'm sure; but"—

"Kreefe," broke in Miss Edwin hastily, and then went on silently with her knitting.

"Ah, to be sure," said her brother. "The fellow's name was Jeremiah Kreefe."

"Was he married?" said John.

"Yes. He brought his wife with him when he came here, and took her away when he went."

"Any family?"

"No—none," said Miss Edwin sharply, considering, perhaps, that it was within her province to answer such a question.

"Stay a moment, Janet, my dear," said Mr. Edwin with lifted forefinger. "Have you forgotten what I told you when I came back from Liverpool?"

"No, I have not forgotten," answered Miss Edwin; "but I still hold to the same opinion that I did then, that it was not the child of Dr. Kreefe and his wife whom you saw."

"The child might have been put out to nurse, you know, without any one in this neighbourhood being aware of it," said her brother.

"A most unlikely thing," replied Miss Edwin. "If the child were their own, what necessity existed for any concealment of the fact? Besides, I remember to have heard Mrs. Kreefe say more than once, that she thought her husband would love her more, and be a better man, if there was only a pretty baby-face to entice him home of an evening. No, you may rely upon it, Gustavus, the child whom you saw was not their own."

"Then you incline to the belief," said Mr. Edwin, "that it was the child of some relative or friend whom they were taking over with them for reasons best known to themselves."

"I cannot think otherwise," answered the little lady.

This dialogue was listened to by John English with breathless interest. "I have a particular reason," he said, "for wishing to know all that can now be learned respecting the antecedents of this man. Pray, oblige me by giving me whatever particulars you can recollect of the little incident just spoken of by you."

"Willingly," replied Mr. Edwin; "but there is really nothing worth telling. However—to begin at the beginning—Kreefe and his wife had been about two years at Normanford, when it was given out that they were about to emigrate; and sure enough, a few weeks later, the house was shut up, and we were told that they were gone. The fact of their going did not make much impression on my mind, the acquaintance between us being of the most distant kind; besides which, I was busy just then fitting out my boy Jack, whose mind was firmly bent on going to Australia. About a week or nine days after the departure of the Kreefes from Normanford, I found myself at Liverpool with Jack in tow. Well, sir, I saw my boy safely on board ship, took my last grip of his hand, saw the vessel he was in fairly under-weight, and was walking slowly along among the docks and basins, for I lost my way in going back, but felt just then in too disconsolate a mood to care whether I was wandering, when I saw a cab draw up a few paces before me, from which, much to my surprise, there descended Mr. and Mrs. Kreefe, and a child, a boy, apparently about five years of age. They did not see me, and in the humour in which I then was, I did not care to go forward and make myself known. I waited a few minutes, and saw their luggage hoisted on board, and themselves cross the gangway, and disappear below decks, and then I came away. Janet and I have talked the matter over many times since that day, but I don't recollect that we have ever spoken of it

to any but you; you see it was no business of ours."

John had listened to this narration with the deepest interest. Mr. Edwin spoke again. "I remember," he said, "that Kreefe's death was reported here several years ago, and that Mrs. Winch went into mourning avowedly on his account."

"Was there not something peculiar," said John—"something out of the common way, in the appearance of this Dr. Kreefe?"

"He walked with a limp, one of his legs being shorter than the other," said the ex-schoolmaster.

"And had a slight cast in one eye," added Miss Edwin.

"And a very peculiar, rugose, aquiline nose," continued her brother. "Take him altogether, Jeremiah Kreefe was certainly a singular-looking being; and once known, would not readily be forgotten."

John English walked back to Cliff Cottage that night with many strange new thoughts at work in his mind.

CHAPTER XVI.—THE POSTSCRIPT.

The landlady of the *Hand and Dagger*, sitting one afternoon in a thoughtful mood in the bow-window of her little snuggery, which looked across the market-place, saw John English turn the corner of the opposite street, and make as though he were coming to the hotel. The widow's heart beat faster than usual as she drew back into the darkest corner of the room, but still with her eye fixed on the young photographer. He had been in her thoughts at the very moment of coming into view—he had been there indeed of late to the exclusion of almost every other topic. His prolonged stay in Normanford made her anxious and uneasy. Nearly a month had elapsed since his dismissal from Belair, but still he lingered; and, as Mrs. Winch had heard from a reliable source, no hint had yet been received by Mrs. Jakeway as to the probability of his early departure. Why did he not go? And why did he call so often on that gossiping old Mr. Edwin and his sister—people who had known her (Mrs. Winch) ever since her arrival at Normanford? Above all, what and how much of a certain matter did he know? That was the great question; and it was one that troubled Mrs. Winch's peace of mind by day and night. And now he was actually coming to visit her! The widow drew in her breath, and her thin lips compressed themselves tightly, while her eyebrows fell a little lower over the cold wary eyes beneath them. She became intent on her sewing. Suddenly the door opened, and John English stood before her.

"Why, Mr. English, what a stranger you are!" said the landlady, dropping her work, and rising with much cordiality of manner. "I thought you had entirely forgotten the old roof that first sheltered you when you came to Normanford;" she stopped to smile on him, and then she added: "Will you not take a chair? Pray, be seated."

John English was rather taken aback by this reception, so different from what he had expected; and forgot for a moment or two what he had intended to say. Could it be really true that he had been labouring all this time under some terrible misapprehension—that there was nothing but a mare's nest at the bottom of the business, and that the widow was secretly laughing at him? No, the proofs were too overwhelming; and the woman who stood before him had merely put on that smiling mask to help her in her endeavours to hide the truth.

"We will never mind the old roof just now, if you please, Mrs. Winch," said John gravely, as he closed the door, and advanced into the room. "I have no doubt you are quite as well aware as I am of the nature of the business which has brought me here to-day—better, perhaps."

"No, really," answered the widow, with a little dissentient smile and shake of the head: "you credit me with far more knowledge, Mr. English, than I can claim to possess. Positively, since you put the case on a business footing, I have not the remotest idea as to what has induced you to favour me with a visit this afternoon." She paused for a moment to thread her needle