LORNA DOONE

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CHAPTER XLIX

MAIDEN SENTINELS ARE BEST

It was not likely that the outlaws would attack our premises until some time after the moon was risen; because it would be too dangerous to cross the flooded valleys in the darkness of the night. And but for this consideration, I must have striven harder against the stealthy approach of slumber. But even so, it was very foolish to abandon watch, especially in such as I, who sleep like any dormouse. Moreover, I had chosen the very worst place in the world for such employment, with a goodly chance of awaking in a bed of solid fire.

And so it might have been, nay, it must have been, but for Lorna's vigilance. Her light hand upon my arm awoke me, not too readily; and leaping up, I seized my club, and prepared to knock down somebody.

"Who's that?" I cried; "stand back I say, and let me have a fair chance at you."

"Are you going to knock me down, dear John?" replied the voice I loved so well. "I am sure I should never get up again, after one blow from you, John."

"My darling, is it you?" I cried; "and breaking all your orders? Come back into the house at once; and nothing on your head, dear."

"How could I sleep, while at any moment you might be killed beneath my window? And now is the time of real danger; for men can see to travel."

I saw at once the truth of this. The moon was high, and clearly lighting all the watered valleys. To sleep any longer might be death, not only to myself, but all.

"The man on guard at the back of the house is fast asleep," she continued; "Gwenny, who let me out, and came with me, has heard him snoring for two hours. I think the women ought to be the watch, because they have had no traveling. Where do you suppose little Gwenny is?"

"Surely not gone to Glen Doone?" I was not sure, however; for I could believe almost anything of the Cornish maiden's hardihood.

"No," replied Lorna, "although she wanted even to do that. But, of course, I would not hear of it, on account of the swollen waters. But she is perched in yonder tree, which commands the Barrow valley. She says that they are almost sure to cross the streamlet there; and now it is so wide and large that she can trace it in the moonlight half a mile beyond her. If they cross she is sure to see them, and in good time to let us know."

"What a shame," I cried, "that the men should sleep, and the maidens be the soldiers! I will sit in that tree myself and send little Gwenny back to you. Go to bed, my best and dearest; I will take good care not to sleep again."

"Please not to send me away, dear John," she answered very mournfully. "You and I have been together through perils worse than this. I shall be only more timid, and more miserable, indoors."

"I cannot let you stay here," I said; "it is altogether impossible. Do you suppose that I can fight, with you among the bullets, Lorna? If this is the way you mean to take it, we had better go both to the apple-room, and lock ourselves in, and hide under the tiles, and let them burn all the rest of the premises."

At this idea Lorna laughed, as I could see by the moonlight; and then she said:

"You are right, John. I should only do more harm than good; and of all things I hate fighting most, and disobedience next to it. Therefore, I will go indoors, although I cannot go to bed. But promise me one thing, dearest John. You will keep yourself out of the way—now won't you, as much as you can, for my sake?"

"Of that you may be quite certain, Lorna. I will shoot them all through the hav-ricks."

"That is right, dear," she answered, never doubting but what I could do it; "and then they cannot see you, you know. But don't think of climbing that tree, John; it is a great deal too dangerous. It is all very well for Gwenny; she has no bones to break."

"None worth breaking you mean I suppose. Very well; I will not climb the tree, for I should defeat my own purpose, I fear; being such a conspicuous object. Now go indoors, darling, without more words. The more you linger, the more I shall keep you."

She laughed her own bright laugh at this, and only said, "God keep you love," and then she tripped away across the yard, with the step I loved to watch so. And thereupon I shouldered arms, and resolved to tramp till morning. For I was vexed at my own neglect, and that Lorna should have to right it.

But before I had been long on duty, making the round of the ricks and stables, and hailing Gwenny now and then from the bottom of her tree, a short wide figure stole toward me, in and out the shadows, and I saw that it was no other than the little maid herself, and that she bore some tidings.

"Ten on 'em crossed the watter down yonder," said Gwenny, putting her hand to her mouth, and seeming to regard it as good news rather than otherwise: "be arl craping up by hedgerow now. I could shutt dree on 'em from the bar of the gate, if so be I had your goon, young man."

"There is no time to lose, Gwenny. Run to the house and fetch Master Stickles, and all the men, while I stay here and watch the rick-yard."

Perhaps I was wrong in heeding the ricks at such a time as that, especially as only the clover was of much importance. But it seemed to me like a sort of triumph that they should even be able to boast of having fired our mow-yard. Therefore, I stood in a nick of the clover, whence we had cut some trusses, with my club in hand, and gun close by.

The robbers rode into our yard as coolly as if they had been invited, having lifted the gate from the hinges first, on account of its being fastened. Then they actually opened our stable doors, and turned our honest horses out, and put their own rogues in the place of them. At this my breath was quite taken away; for we think so much of our horses. By this time I could see our troopers waiting in the shadow of the house round the corner from where the Doones were, and expecting the order to fire; but Jeremy Stickles very wisely kept them in readiness until the enemy should advance upon them.

"Two of you lazy fellows go," it was the deep voice of Carver Doone, "and make us a light to cut their throats by. Only one thing, once again. If any man touches Lorna, I will stab him where he stands. She belongs to me. There are two other young damsels here, whom you may take away if you please. And the mother, I hear, is still comely. Now for our rights. We have borne too long the insolence of these yokels. Kill every man and every child, and burn the cursed place down."

As he spoke thus blasphemously, I set my gun against his breast; and by the light buckled from his belt, I saw the little "sight" of brass gleaming alike on either side, and the sleek round barrel glimmering. The aim was sure as death itself. If I only drew the tigger (which went very lightly), Carver Doone would breathe no more. And yet—will you believe me?—I could not pull the tigger. Would to God that I had done so!

For I never had taken human life, neither done bodily harm to man, beyond the little bruises, and the trifling aches and pains, which follow a good and honest bout in the wrestling ring. Therefore, I dropped my carbine, and grasped again my club, which seemed a more straightforward implement.

Presently two young men came toward me, bearing brands of resined hemp, kindled from Carver's lamp. The foremost of them set his torch to the rick within a yard of me, the smoke concealing me from him. I struck him with a back-handed blow on the elbow, as he bent it, and I heard the bone of his arm break as clearly as ever I heard a twig snap. With a roar of pain he fell on the ground, and his torch dropped there, and singed him. The other man stood amazed at this, not having yet gained sight of me, till I caught his fire-brand from his hand, and struck it into his countenance. With that he leaped at me, but I caught him in a manner learned from early wrestling, and snapped his collar-bone, as I laid him upon the top of his comrade.

The little success so encouraged me that I was half incline to advance, and challenge Carver Doone to meet me; but I bore in mind that he would be apt to shoot me without ceremony; and what is the utmost of human strength against the power of powder? Moreover, I remembered my promise to sweet Lorna; and who would be left to defend her, if the rogues got rid of me?

While I was hesitating thus (for I always continue to hesitate, except in actual conflict) a blaze of fire lit up the house, and brown smoke hung around it. Six of our men had let go at the Doones, by Jeremy Stickles' order, as the villains came swaggering down in the moonlight ready for rape or murder. Two of them fell, and the rest hung back, to think at their leisure what this was. They were not used to this sort of thing; it was neither just nor courteous.

Being unable any longer to contain myself, as I thought of Lorna's excitement at all this noise of firing, I came across the yard, expecting whether they would shoot at me. However, no one shot at me; and I went up to Carver Doone, whom I knew by his size in the moonlight, and I took him by the beard, and said, "Do you call yourself a man?"

For a moment he was astonished that he could not answer. None had ever dared, I suppose, to look at him in that way; and he saw that he had met his equal, or perhaps his master. And then he tried a pistol at me; but I was too quick for him.

"Now, Carver Doone, take warning," I said to him, very soberly; "you have shown yourself a fool by your contempt of me. I may not be your match in craft, but I am in manhood. You are a despicable villain. Lie low in your native muck."

And with that word I laid him flat upon his back in our straw-yard by the trick of the inner heel, which he could not have resisted (though his strength had been twice as great as mine) unless he were a wrestler. Seeing him down the others ran, though one of them made a shot at me, and some of them got their horses before our men came up, and some went away without them. And among these last was Captain Carver, who arose while I was feeling myself (for I had a little wound,) and strode away with a train of curses enough to poison the light of the moon.

We gained six very good horses by this attempted rapine, as well as two young prisoners, whom I had smitten by the clover-rick. And two dead Doones were left behind, whom (as we buried them in the church-yard, without any service over them) I, for my part, was most thankful that I had not killed. For to have the life of a fellow man laid upon one's conscience—deserved he his death, or deserved it not—is, to my sense of right and wrong, the heaviest of all burdens; and the one that wears most deeply inward, with the dwelling of the mind on this view and on that of it.

I was inclined to pursue the enemy and try to capture more of them; but Jeremy Stickles would not allow it, for he said that all the advantage would be upon their side, if we went hurrying after them with only the moon to guide us. And who could tell but what there might be another band of them, ready to fall upon the house, and burn it, and seize the women, if we left them unprotected? When he put the case thus, I was glad enough to abide by his decision. And one thing was quite certain, that the Doones had never before received so rude a shock, and so violent a blow to their supremacy, since first they had built up their power, and become the lords of Exmoor. I knew that Carver Doone would gnash those mighty teeth of his, and curse the men around him, for the blunder (which was in truth his own) of over-confidence and carelessness. And at the same time, all the rest would feel that such a thing had never happened while Sir Ensor was alive, and that it was caused by nothing short of gross mismanagement.

I scarcely know who made the greatest fuss about my little wound—mother, or Annie, or Lorna. I was heartily ashamed to be so treated like a milksop; but, most unluckily, it had been impossible to hide it. For the ball had cut along my temple just above the eyebrow; and being fired so near at hand, the powder, too, had scarred me. Therefore it seemed a great deal worse than it really was; and the sponging, and plastering, and the sobbing, and the moaning, made me quite ashamed to look Master Stickles in the face.

However, at last I persuaded them that I had no intention of giving up the ghost that night: and then they all fell to, and thanked God with an emphasis unknown in church. And hereupon Master Stickles said, in his free and easy manner (for no one courted his observation) that I was the luckiest of all mortals in having a mother, and a sister, and a sweetheart, to make much of me. For his part, he said, he was just as well off in not having any to care for him. For now he might go and get shot, or stabbed, or knocked on the head, at his pleasure, without any one being offended. I made bold, upon this, to ask him what was become of his wife; for I had heard him speak of having one. He said that he neither knew not cared; and perhaps I should be like him some day. That Lorna should hear such sentiments, was very grievous to me. But she looked at me with a smile, which proved her contempt for all such ideas; and lest anything still more unfit might be said, I dismissed the question.

But Master Stickles told me afterward, when there was no one with us, to have no faith in any woman, whatever she might seem to be. For he assured me that now he possessed very large experience, for so small a matter, being thoroughly acquainted with women of every class, from ladies of the highest blood to Bonarobas and peasants' wives; and that they all might be divided into three heads, and no more; that is to say, as follows: First, the very hot and passionate, who were only contemptible; second, the cold and indifferent, who were simply odious; and third, the mixture of the other two, who had the bad qualities of both. As for reason, none of them had it: it was like a sealed book to them, which if they ever tried to open, they began at the back of the cover.

Now I did not like to hear such things; and to me they appeared to be insolent, as well as narrow-minded. For if you came to that, why might not men, as well as women, be divided into the same three classes, and be pronounced upon by women as beings even more devoid than their gentle judges of reason? Moreover, I knew, both from my own sense, and from the greatest of all great poets, that there are, and always have been, plenty of women, good and gentle, warm-hearted, loving and lovable; very keen, moreover, at seeing the right, be it by reason or otherwise. And upon the whole I prefer them much to the people of my own sex, as goodness of heart is more important than to show good reason for having it. And so I said to Jeremy:

"You have been ill-treated, perhaps, Master Stickles, by some woman or other?"

"Ay, that have I," he replied, with an oath; "and the last on earth who should serve me so, the woman who was my wife. A woman whom I never struck, never wronged in any way, never even let her know that I liked another better. And yet when I was at Berwick last, with the regiment on guard there against those vile moss-troopers, what does that woman do but fly in the face of all authority, and of my especial business, by running away herself with the biggest of all moss-troopers? Not that I cared a groat about her; and I wish the fool well rid of her; but the insolence of the thing was such that everybody laughed at me; and back I went to London, losing a far better and safer job than this; and all through her. Come, let's have another onion."

Master Stickles' view of the matter was so entirely unromantic, that I scarcely wondered at Mistress Stickles for having run away from him to an adventurous moss-trooper. For nine women out of ten must have some kind of romance or other, to make their lives endurable; and when their love has lost this attractive element, this soft dew-fog (if such it be), the love is apt to languish, unless its bloom be well replaced by the budding hopes of children. Now Master Stickles neither had, nor wished to have, any children.

Without waiting for any warrant, only saying something about "*captus in flagrante delicto*"—if that be the way to spell it—Stickles sent our prisoners off, bound, and looking miserable, to the jail at Taunton. I was desirous to let them go free, if they would promise amendment; but although I had taken them, and surely, therefore, had every right to let them go again, Master Stickles said, "Not so." He assured me that it was a matter of public polity; and of course, not knowing what he meant, I could not contradict him, but thought that surely my private rights ought to be respected. For if I throw a man in wrestling, I expect to get his stakes; and if I take a man prisoner, why, he ought, in common justice, to belong to me, and I have a good right to let him go, if I think proper to do so. However, Master Stickles said that I was quite benighted, and knew nothing of the constitution; which was the very thing I knew beyond any man in our parish?

Nevertheless, it was not for me to contradict a commissioner; and therefore I let my prisoners go, and wished them a happy deliverance. Stickles replied, with a merry grin, and if they ever got it, it would be a jail deliverance, and the bliss of dancing; and he laid his hand to his throat in a manner which seemed to me most uncourteous. However, his foresight proved too correct; for both these poor fellows were executed soon after the next assizes. Lorna had done her very best to earn another chance for them; even going down on her knees to that common Jeremy, and pleading with great tears for them. However, although much moved by her he vowed that he durst do nothing else. To set them free was more than his own life was worth; for all the country knew by this time that two captive Doones were roped to the cider-press at Plovers Barrows. Annie bound the broken arm of the one whom I had knocked down with the club, and I myself supported it; and then she washed and rubbed with lard the face of the other poor fellow which the torch had injured; and I fetched back his collar-bone to the best of my ability. For before any surgeon could arrive, they were off with a well armed escort. That day we were reinforced so strongly from the stations along the coast, even as far as Minehead, that we not only feared no further attack, but even talked of assaulting Glen Doone without waiting for the train-bands. However, I thought that it would be mean to take advantage of the enemy in the thick of floods and confusion; and several of the others thought so too, and did not like fighting in water. Therefore it was resolved to wait and keep a watch upon the valley, and let the floods go down again.

CHAPTER L

A MERRY MEETING A SAD ONE

Now the business I had most at heart (as every one knows by this time) was to marry Lorna as soon as might be, if she had no objection, and then to work the farm so well as to nourish all our family. And herein I saw no difficulty; for Annie would soon be off our hands, and somebody might come and take a fancy to little Lizzie (who was growing up very nicely now, though not so fine as Annie); moreover, we were almost sure to have great store of hay and corn after so much snow, if there be any truth in the old saying:

"A foot deep of rain
Will kill hay and grain;
But three feet of snow
Will make them come mo.'"

And although it was too true that we had lost a many cattle, yet even so we had not lost money; for the few remaining fetched such prices as were never known before. And though we grumbled with all our hearts, and really believed at one time that starvation was upon us, I doubt whether, on the whole, we were not the fatter, and the richer, and the wiser, for that winter. And I might have said the happier, except for the sorrow which we felt at the failures among our neighbors. The Snowes lost every sheep they had, and nine out of ten horned cattle; and poor Jasper Kebby would have been forced to throw up the lease of his farm, and perhaps to go to prison, but for the help we gave him.

However, my dear mother would have it that Lorna was too young, as yet, to think of being married; and indeed I myself was compelled to admit that her form was becoming more perfect and lovely, though I had not thought it possible. And another difficulty was, that as we had all been Protestants from the time of Queen Elizabeth, the maiden must be converted first, and taught to hate all Papists. Now Lorna had not the smallest idea of ever being converted. She said that she loved me truly, but wanted not to convert me; and if I loved her equally, why should I wish to convert her? With this I was tolerably content, not seeing so very much difference between a creed and a credo, and believing God to be our Father, in Latin as well as English. Moreover, my darling knew but little of the Popish ways—whether excellent, or otherwise — inasmuch as the Doones, though they stole their houses, or at least the joiner's work, had never been tempted enough by the devil to steal either church or chapel.

Lorna came to our little church when Parson Bowden reappeared after the snow was over; and she said that all was very nice, and very like what she had seen in the time of her Aunt Sabina, when they went far away to the little chapel, with a shilling in their gloves. It made the tears come into her eyes, by the force of memory, when Parson Bowden did the things, not so gracefully nor so well, yet with pleasant imitation of her old priest's sacred rites.

"He is a worthy man," she said, being used to talk in the service-time, and my mother was obliged to cough: "I like him very much indeed: but I wish he would let me put his things the right way on his shoulders."

Everybody in our parish who could walk at all, or hire a boy and a wheelbarrow, ay, and half the folk from Countisbury, Brendon, and even Lynmouth, was and were to be found that Sunday in our little church of Oare. People who would not come anigh us, when the Doones were threatening with carbine and with fire-brand, flocked in their very best clothes to see a lady Doone go to church. Now all this came of that vile John Fry; I knew it as well as possible; his tongue was worse than the clacker of a charity-school bell, or the ladle in the frying-pan, when the bees are swarming.

However, Lorna was not troubled; partly because of her natural dignity and gentleness, partly because she never dreamed that the people were come to look at her. But when we came to the Psalms of the day, with some vague sense of being stared at more than ought to be, she dropped the heavy black lace fringing of the velvet hat she wore, and concealed from the congregation all except her bright red lips, and the oval snow-drift of her chin. I touched her hand, and she pressed mine; and we felt that we were close together, and God saw no harm in it.

As for Parson Bowden (as worthy a man as ever lived, and one who could shoot flying), he scarcely knew was he doing, without the clerk to help him. He had borne it very well indeed when I returned from London; but to see a live Doone in his church, and a lady Doone, a lovely Doone, moreover, one engaged to me, upon whom he almost looked as the Squire of his parish (although not rightly an armiger), and to feel that this lovely Doone was a Papist, and therefore of higher religion—as all our parsons think—and that she knew exactly how he ought to do all the service, of which he himself knew little, I wish to express my firm belief that all these things together turned Parson Bowden's head a little, and made him look to me for orders.

My mother, the very best of women, was (as I could well perceive) a little annoyed and vexed with things. For this particular occasion, she had procured from Dulverton, by special message to Ruth Huckaback (whereof more anon), a head-dress with a feather never seen before upon Exmoor, to the best of every one's knowledge. It came from a bird called a flaming something—a flaming oh, or a flaming ah, I will not be positive—but I can assure you that it did flame; and dear mother had no other thought but that all the congregation would neither see nor think of any other mortal thing, or immortal even, to the very end of the sermon.

Herein she was so disappointed, that no sooner did she get home, but upstairs she went at speed, not even stopping at the mirror in our little parlor, and flung the whole thing to a cupboard, as I knew by the bang of the door, having eased the lock for her lately. Lorna saw there was something wrong; and she looked at Annie and Lizzie (as more likely to understand it) with her former timid glance; which I knew so well, and which had first enslaved me.

"I know not what ails mother," said Annie, who looked very beautiful, with lilac lutestring ribbons, which I saw the Snowe girls envying; "but she has not attended to one of the prayers, nor said 'Amen,' all the morning. Never fear, darling Lorna, it is nothing about you. It is something about our John, I am sure, for she never worries herself much about any body but him." And here Annie made a look at me such as I had had five hundred of.

"You keep your opinions to yourself," I replied; because I knew the dear, and her little bits of jealousy; "it happens that you are quite wrong this time. Lorna, come with me, my darling."

"Oh yes, Lorna; go with him," cried Lizzie, dropping her lip, in a way which you must see to know its meaning; "John wants nobody now but you; and none can find fault with his taste, dear."

"You little fool, I should think not," I answered, very rudely: for, betwixt the lot of them, my Lorna's eyelashes were quivering: "now, dearest angel, come with me; and snap your hands at the whole of them."

My angel did come, with a sigh, and then with a smile, when we were alone, but without any unangelic attempt at snapping her sweet white fingers.

These little things are enough to show that while every one so admired Lorna, and so kindly took to her, still there would, just now and then, be petty and paltry flashes of jealousy concerning her; and perhaps it could not be otherwise among so many women. However, we were always doubly kind to her afterward; and although her mind was so sensitive and quick that she must have suffered, she never allowed us to perceive it, nor lowered herself by resenting it.

Possibly I may have mentioned that little Ruth Huckaback had been asked, and had even promised to spend her Christmas with us; and this was the more desirable, because she had left us through some offence, or sorrow, about things said of her. Now, my dear mother, being the kindest and best-hearted of all women, could not bear that poor dear Ruth (who would some day have such a fortune) should be entirely lost to us. "It is our duty, my dear children," she said more than once about it, "to forgive and forget as freely as we hope to have it done to us. If dear little Ruth has not behaved quite as well as we might have expected, great allowance should be made for a girl with so much money. Designing people get hold of her, and flatter her, and coax her, to obtain a base influence over her; so that when she falls among simple folk, who speak the honest truth of her, no wonder the poor child is vexed, and gives herself airs, and so on. Ruth can be very useful to us in a number of little ways, and I consider it quite a duty to pardon her freak of petulance.

Now one of the little ways in which Ruth had been very useful was the purchase of the scarlet feathers of the flaming bird; and now that the house was quite safe from attack, and the mark on my forehead was healing, I was begged over again to go and see Ruth, and make all things straight, and pay for the gorgeous plumage. This last I was very desirous to do, that I might know the price of it, having made a small bet on the subject with Annie; and having held counsel with myself whether or not it were possible to get something of the kind for Lorna of still more distinguished appearance. Of course she could not wear scarlet as yet, even if she had wished it; but I believed that people of fortune often wore purple for mourning; purple, too, was the royal color, and Lorna was by right a queen; therefore I was quite resolved to rausack uncle Reuben's stores in search of some bright purple bird, if nature had kindly provided one.

All this, however, I kept to myself, intending to trust Ruth Huckaback, and no one else, in the matter. And so, one beautiful spring morning, when all the earth was kissed with scent, and all the air caressed with song, up the lane I stoutly rode, well armed and well provided.

Now, though it is part of my life to heed, it is no part of my tale to tell, how the wheat was coming on. I reckon that you who read this story after I am dead and gone (and before that none shall read it) will say "Tush! What is his wheat to us? We are not wheat, we are human beings; and all we care for is human doings." This may be very good argument, and in the main I believe that it is so. Nevertheless, if a man is to tell only what he thought and did, and not what came around him, he must not mention his own clothes, which his father and mother bought for him. And more than my clothes to me, ay, and as much as my own skin, are the works of nature round about, whereof a man is the smallest.

And now will tell you, although most likely only to be laughed at because I cannot put it in the style of Mr. Dryden—whom to compare to Shakespeare! but if once I begin upon that, you will never hear the last of me—nevertheless, I will tell you this; not wishing to be rude, but only just because I know it: the more a man can fling his arms (so to say) round Nature's neck, the more he can upon her bosom, like an infant, lie and suck, the more that man shall earn the trust and love of all his fellow-men.

In this matter is no jealousy (when the man is dead;) because thereafter all others know how much of the milk he had, and he can suck no longer; and they value him accordingly, for the nourishment he is to them. Even as when we keep a roaster of the sucking pigs, we choose, and praise at table most, the favorite of its mother. Fifty times have I seen this, and smiled and praised our people's taste and offered them more of the victuals.

Now here am I upon Shakespeare (who died, of his own fruition, at the age of fifty-two, yet lived more than fifty thousand men, within his little span of life,) when all the while I ought to be riding as hard as I can to Dulverton. But, to tell the truth, I could not ride hard, being held at every turn, and often without any turn at all, by the beauty of things around me. These things grow upon man if once he stops to notice them.

It wanted yet two hours to noon, when I came to Master Huckaback's door and struck the panels smartly. Knowing nothing of their manners, only that people in a town could not be expected to entertain (as we do in farmhouses,) having, moreover, keen expectation of Master Huckaback's avarice, I had brought some stuff to eat, made by Annie and packed by Lorna, and requiring no thinking about it.

Ruth herself came and let me in, blushing very heartily, for which color I praised her health, and my praises heightened it. That little thing had lovely eyes, and could be trusted thoroughly. I do like an obstinate little woman when she is sure that she is right. And indeed if love had not sped me straight to the heart of Lorna (compared to whom, Ruth was no more than the thief is to the candle,) who knows but what I might have yielded to the law of nature, that thorough trimmer of balances, and verified the proverb that the giant loves the dwarf.

"I take the privilege, Mistress Ruth, of saluting you according to kinship, and the ordering of the Canons." And therewith I bussed her well, and put my arm around her waist, being so terribly restricted in the matter of Lorna, and knowing the use of practice. Not that I had any warmth—all that was darling Lorna's—only out of pure gallantry, and my knowledge of London fashions. Ruth blushed to such a pitch at this, and looked up at me with such a gleam, as if I must have my own way, that all my love of kissing sunk, and I felt that I was wronging her. Only my mother had told me, when the girls were out of the way, to do all I could to please darling Ruth, and I had gone about it accordingly.

Now Ruth as yet had never heard a word about dear Lorna; and when she led me into the kitchen (where everything looked beautiful), and told me not to mind for a moment about the scrubbing of my boots, because she would only be too glad to clean it all up after me, and told me how glad she was to see me, blushing more at every word, and recalling some of them, and stooping down for pots and pans when I looked at her too ruddily—all these things came upon me so, without any legal notice, that I could only look at Ruth, and think how very good she was, and how bright her handles were, and wonder if I had wronged her. Once or twice I began—this I say, upon my honor—to endeavor to explain exactly how we were at Plovers Barrows; how we all had been bound to fight, and had defeated the enemy, keeping their queen among us. But Ruth would make some great mistake between Lorna and Gwenny Carfax, and gave me no chance to set her aright, and cared about nothing much, except some news of Sally Snowe.

What could I do with this little thing? All my sense of modesty, and value for my dinner, were against my overpressing all the graceful hints I had given about Lorna. Ruth was just a girl of that sort who will not believe one word, except from her own seeing; not so much from any doubt, as from the practice of using eyes which have been in business.

I asked Cousin Ruth (as we used to call her, though the cousinship was distant) what was become of Uncle Ben, and how it was that we never heard anything of or from him now. She replied that she hardly knew what to make of her grandfather's manner of carrying on for the last half year or more. He was apt to leave his home, she said, at any hour of the day or night; going none knew whither, and returning no one might say when. And his dress, in her opinion, was enough to frighten a hodman or a scavenger of the roads, instead of the decent suit of kersey, or of Sabbath doeskins, such as had won the respect and reverence of his fellow-townsmen. But the worst of all things was, as she confessed with tears in her eyes, that the poor old gentleman had something weighing heavily on his mind.

"It will shorten his days, Cousin Ridd," she said, for she would never call me Cousin John; "he has no enjoyment of anything that he eats or drinks, nor even in counting his money, as he used to do all Sunday; indeed no pleasure in anything, unless it be smoking his pipe, and thinking, and staring at bits of brown stone, which he pulls every now and then out of his pockets. And the business he used to take such pride in is now left almost entirely to the foreman and to me."

"And what will become of you, dear Ruth, if anything happens to the old man?"

"I am sure I know not," she answered, simply; "and I cannot bear to think of it. It must depend, I suppose, upon dear grandfather's pleasure about me."

"It much rather depend," said I, though having no business to say it, "upon your own good pleasure, Ruth; for all the world will pay court to you."

"That is the very thing which I never could endure. I have begged dear grandfather to leave no chance of that. When he had threatened me with poverty, as he does sometimes, I have always met him truly, with the answer that I feared one thing a great deal worse than poverty—namely, to be an heiress. But I can not make him believe it. Only think how strange, Cousin Ridd, I can not make him believe it."

"It is not strange at all," I answered, "considering how he values money. Neither would any one else believe you, except by looking into your true and very pretty eyes, dear."

Now I beg that no one will suspect for a single moment either that I did not mean exactly what I said, or meant a single atom more, or would not have said the same, if Lorna had been standing by. What I had always liked in Ruth was the calm, straightforward gaze and beauty of her large brown eyes. Indeed I had spoken of them to Lorna as the only ones to be compared (though not for more than a moment) to her own for truth and light, but never for depth and softness. But now the little maiden dropped them, and turned away without reply.

"I will go and see to my horse," I said; "the boy that has taken him seemed surprised at having no horns on his forehead. Perhaps he will lead him into the shop and feed him upon broadcloth."

"Oh, he is such a stupid boy," Ruth answered, with great sympathy; "how quick of you to observe that now; and you call yourself 'Slow John Ridd!' I never did see such a stupid boy; sometimes he spoils my temper. But you must be back in half an hour at the latest, Cousin Ridd. You see I remember what you are, when once you get among horses, or cows, or things of that sort."

"Things of that sort! Well done, Ruth! One would think you were quite a cockney."

Uncle Reuben did not come home to his dinner, and his granddaughter said she had strictest orders never to expect him. Therefore we had none to dine with us except the foreman of the shop, a worthy man, named Thomas Cockram, fifty years of age or so. He seemed to me to have strange intentions of his own about little Ruth; and on that account to regard me with a wholly undue malevolence. And perhaps, in order to justify him, I may have been more attentive to her than otherwise need have been; at any rate, Ruth and I were pleasant, and he the very opposite.

"My dear Cousin Ruth," I said, on purpose to vex Master Cockram, because he eyed us so heavily and squinted so unluckily, "we have been long looking for you at our Plovers Barrows farm. You remember how you used to love hunting for eggs in the morning, and hiding up in the tallat with Lizzie, for me to seek you among the hay, when the sun was down. Ah, Master Cockram, those are the things young people find their pleasure in, not in selling a yard of serge, and giving twopence-halfpenny change, and writing 'settled' at the bottom with a pencil that has blacked their teeth. Now, Master Cockram, you ought to come as far as our good farm at once and eat two new-laid eggs for breakfast, and be made to look quite young again. Our good Annie would cook for you; and you should have the hot new milk, and the pope's eye from the mutton; and every foot of you would become a yard in about a fortnight." And hereupon I spread my chest, to show him an example. Ruth could not keep her countenance; but I saw that she thought it wrong of me, and would scold me if ever I gave her the chance of taking those little liberties. However, he deserved it all, according to my young ideas, for his great impertinence in aiming at my cousin.

But what I said was far less grievous to a man of honest mind than little Ruth's own behavior. I could hardly have believed that so thoroughly true a girl, and one so proud and upright, could have got rid of any man so cleverly as she got rid of Master Thomas Cockram. She gave him not even a glass of wine, but commended to his notice, with a sweet and thoughtful gravity, some invoice which must be corrected before her dear grandfather should return; and to amend which, three great ledgers must be searched from first to last. Thomas Cockram winked at me with the worst of his two wrong eyes; as much as to say, "I understand it; but I cannot help myself. Only you look out, if ever" and before he had finished winking, the door was shut behind him. Then Ruth said to me in the simplest manner, "You have ridden far to-day, Cousin Ridd; and have far to ride to get home again. What will dear Aunt Ridd say if we send you away without nourishment? All the keys are in my keeping, and dear grandfather has the finest wine, not be matched in the west of England, as I have heard good judges say; though I know not wine from cider. Do you like the wine of Oporto, or the wine of Xeres?"

"I know not one from the other, fair cousin, except by the color," I answered: "but the sound of Oporto is nobler and richer. Suppose we try wine of Oporto."

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