

THE YOUNG SQUIRE'S RETURN.

(Continued.)

"And what do you offer now, Roderick Warstone?" said the girl, pausing as she spoke, and confronting her companion with a quiet but piercing gaze, before which his eyes for a moment fell.

"Leave Longhill at once, Mabel, with me," he burst out. "I know very well that, although my own master, and that no one can legally control me, many difficulties would be cast in my way if it were known that I was about to marry—in England, at any rate. We will cross to the continent; we can be there in a day. The chaplain at one of the British embassies is an intimate friend of my own, and he will join us, so that nothing can prevent Longhill Manor from having the most beautiful mistress in the country."

"Roderick!" said Mabel, and there were both pathos and reproach in the emphasis with which she uttered the word. "Roderick!"

"It is true, I swear!" exclaimed Warstone. "Before to-morrow's sun has set we shall see the bright waves of the Channel, and a long vista of joy and happiness will be opened to us. Nay, Mabel—"

He sought to take the girl's hand, but she drew back, still confronting him with the same quiet, yet searching gaze.

"You cannot slight this appeal," he continued. "I will arrange everything; you have but to listen and—"

"I have listened too long," said Mabel, interrupting him. "Not so much on account of what is past, as that I mean it to be the last time—the last time, Roderick. I see on the slope of the next meadow my father coming towards us. Should he find you here now, your scheme may have a rougher conclusion than you expected."

"By Jove! you are right!" exclaimed the young man. "For a few hours, then, I postpone my plans. I must leave you; but I will be at the Mill Farm Copse each evening at nine o'clock until I see you. Farewell."

With this he plunged through a gap in the hedge, and was immediately lost to sight.

It was destined that Roderick Warstone should, on this evening, still further discuss some matrimonial projects. At the Manor, after a few guests who had dined there had taken their early departure, and father and son were left alone, the former assumed an air of importance, and "ahemmed" once or twice in a grave and impressive manner, as his son could well remember his being wont to do in times past, and at once knew that some weighty discussion was near.

He did not change from his cool, self-possessed manner, but drew a decanter to him, filled his glass, selected a cigar from his case with unusual care, and then, leaning back in his chair, awaited the conversation with far greater appearance of coolness than did his father.

"I am glad we are alone to-night, Roderick," began the old gentleman, "as it gives me an opportunity to discuss the subject I hinted at in my letters. Let me see, Roderick; you are twenty-five—no, twenty-six years old, and as poor George is gone, I really think you ought to see about getting married. You have no—no engagement, or—or preference, I presume?"

"Not the slightest," returned his son, with the utmost coolness; he was poisoning a glass filled with wine between his eye and the lamp as he spoke, and a much keener observer than the old Squire could not have detected the trembling of a muscle.

"I am glad to hear it, Roderick," pursued his father; "for in that case, as the proposal or suggestion I am about to make is so eminently advantageous, I cannot doubt your agreeing with me. You remember Matilda Jermyn?"

"Of course I do; a pretty, meek looking little girl with light hair," replied his son, with the same nonchalance as before.

"Humph!" ejaculated the Squire. "I daresay she is meek, and she certainly has light hair, but you would hardly have thus described the belle of the country—which Tilly Jermyn undoubtedly is—had you seen her within the last year or two. She has grown into the most beautiful girl I ever seen; she is a sort of third cousin to us, you know, and so is supposed to like you; and she will have thirty thousand pounds on the day she is married."

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed the young man, looking up with a little more animation than he had previously exhibited. "What a combination of attractions. I have generally noticed that the pretty girls have no money, and the fortunes are, consequently, linked with the ugly ones. I am glad Miss Matilda is an exception."

Mr. Warstone frowned slightly, as if this remark was not quite to his taste, but took no further notice of it.

"Why I introduced the subject to-night," he said, "is because I know that your cousin will be a guest of Dr. Hadley, at Wrentham, for a few days, and I have written to say that I shall call to-morrow, when I wish you to ride over with me."

"To-morrow!" exclaimed his son.

"Yes, to-morrow, Roderick," he continued; "why not to-morrow as well as any other day?"

"Ah, just so," assented his son, who in the brief pause had recovered his nonchalance—"why not, indeed! To-morrow, by all means. I was taken a trifle aback by the amazing promptness of your action, that was all To-morrow be it."

In the consultation which followed Roderick bore his part with a show of interest sufficient to satisfy his father, despite his uttering a few cynical remarks, which the Squire regretfully felt he must not cavil at, as all the young men whom he now met seemed to cultivate the same unpleasant,

flippant style. And, after all, the grand object of the discussion was achieved; he had made the proposal, his son had accepted it, and he had no doubt of the result now. It had always been his aim to secure Miss Jermyn for the heir of Longhill Manor, and he could not but feel that the tall, handsome, gay Roderick was more calculated to win a young girl than had been his retiring and somewhat ascetic elder brother.

Mr. Roderick's reflections were of a different character, but were serious enough to detain him while he finished a fresh cigar after his father had retired.

"Upon my word," so his meditations ran, "on the whole it is a very good job that Mabel did not quite assent to go off to-morrow. Lucky accident, too, that of her father coming up, or she would have agreed; I know well enough what such airs are worth. It is very odd, but a fact, nevertheless, that I took a dislike to that highly respectable rustic—Mr. Banks, Binns, Burn, or whatever his name is—the moment I saw him, before I had the slightest idea that we were likely to have a difference in some rather important matters. Yet, after all, I hope the matrimonial project will not be long delayed, for I fear I have a little startled my excellent governor by the few items I have already mentioned in connection with my finances, and I must tell him a good deal more soon, or some others will do so. If, however, it is known that I am about to marry a girl with real, actual ready money, no tied-up estates, or anything of that kind, they will be quiet for a good while."

In this manner, with the natural variations which arise in a train of thought, he occupied himself a long time, until the servants who were sitting up on his account wondered audibly, and with very strong "seasoning" to their language, when he really did mean to go to bed.

Roderick made up his mind on this point at last, rose from his chair, and stretched himself with a great yawn, but had scarcely begun the process when his whole aspect suddenly changed, his arms dropped, a stern, yet alarmed expression came over his features, and he sprang to the window opposite which he was standing, the glass doors of which descended to the floor.

He threw these open with a force which threatened to shiver the glass, and knowing the spot well, with a spring cleared the parapet of the balcony and reached the lawn. He stepped quickly to the right and to the left, looking closely into the shadowed space under the balcony, then hurrying to a door, opened it with his private key, and in answer to his shrill whistle the house-dog came bounding out, followed by a servant who had heard the sound.

"Hi! there, Pluto!" exclaimed Roderick, "go for them!" and the dog tore round and round the lawn in silence, save for a low growl, but nothing was found.

After a few minutes Roderick turned to the servant and said:

"Take him in, Thomas; I thought I saw some one on the lawn."

The servant obeyed, and after a pause his master followed him, as he could not re-enter the dining-room by the way he had left it.

"If it were a delusion," he muttered, "it was the strangest—the only one I ever had. I had drunk no wine to speak of, and why I should imagine a face at the window, if none were there—and that face too—is more than I can understand."

CHAPTER III.

Swivel Dick—this being the flattering *sobriquet* of Roderick's agent—was in request early in the morning to convey a note to Miss Rayford, and although he received no particular directions as to the mode in which it should be handed to her, yet the man proved his fitness for such an errand by delivering it when she was alone, and by taking such a homeward route that no one would suppose he had been to the farm. He was in time to communicate the success of his mission to his master before the latter set out with his father for Wrentham.

Here they arrived in good time, and Roderick found that Miss Jermyn fully justified his father's encomiums, and—the other inducements being borne in mind—never felt more anxious to render himself agreeable to any young lady. There was reason for supposing that he did make himself agreeable to this particular young lady, as they chatted together, laughed together, and recalled memories of early times; in this last matter Miss Jermyn may not have drawn upon her imagination for her facts, but Roderick had his misgivings. He related several incidents which covertly conveyed the idea of his always having been attached to Miss Jermyn, incidents quite romantic in their character, but which had no existence even in his own mind, until he invented them upon the spur of the moment, and the lady professed to have a perfect remembrance of them all.

They walked together when the party went to see the Wrentham cottagers' flower show, and, for what may be considered a first interview, they progressed fairly towards a respectable flirtation. So the day was a very successful one for Roderick, as he had highly gratified his father, made an undoubted impression on the young heiress, and raised his own spirits to the pitch which such good fortune commanded.

There was only one slight ripple in this tide of success, and even that was but a fancy, a ridiculous delusion. He told himself so a hundred times over, yet the fancy, absurd as it was, haunted him a good deal. What he fancied was that while he was walking with Miss Jermyn through the High Street of Wrentham, a face looked on him from one of the narrow alleys which are as surely to be found in old country towns as they are in London itself, and the impression left on him by the momentary glance was that this face was the face he had seen at his window on the previous night.

He so palpably started as to attract the attention of Miss Jermyn, who