

but possessed of a singular interest for me, as throwing an unexpected ray of light on the mystery of my life.

I have already stated that my first two nights in Normanford were spent at its principal hotel, a great rambling place, a relic, I suppose, of the old coaching-days, many of its rooms being now denuded of its furniture, and entirely unused. It is now widely known under the sign of the *Hand and Dagger* (part of the armorial cognizance of the family at Belair), and is kept by a widow of the name of Winch, a tall, angular, hard-featured woman, with slaty eyes, and a most determined-looking mouth. She is not, however, too far advanced in life to have lost all hopes of matrimony, her "intended," who came in, and to whom I was introduced, in the course of my first evening, being a chemist of the name of Brackenridge, who keeps a shop in the town. He is much younger than the widow—not over thirty, I imagine—and is a stoutly-built man, with huge sandy whiskers, and a face that would be handsome, if it bore fewer traces of premature dissipation, and were less cynically defiant in expression. What his object is in seeking the hand of the landlady of the *Hand and Dagger*, it is not, I think, difficult to opine; and the widow's eyes are evidently blind to all his imperfections. He seemed disposed to fraternise with me, but beyond the barest civilities, I would have nothing to do with the fellow: he is one of those people to whom I take an antipathy at first sight—it may be prejudice on my part, but I can't help it—and I soon wandered out to smoke a solitary pipe.

I was just finishing breakfast next morning, which had been laid for me in the landlady's own little snugery, when I heard a voice call loudly outside, "Jerry! Jerry!" Merely those two words: ridiculous words you will probably call them, but I cannot tell you how strangely I was moved at hearing them. Yes, they thrilled me through and through, and my memory seemed to go back to some far-distant time when I had heard these very words repeated, and that by a woman's voice. I sat for a moment or two like one petrified. Happily, I was alone; there was no one to observe how strangely I was affected. Where and when had I heard those words before? I asked myself the question again and again, but without being able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion. You know something of the mystery that surrounds the history of my early years, and how anything that seems to touch, however remotely, upon that time has for me an indescribable fascination; and I could only conclude, that to some vague recollection of that period which still lingered faintly in my memory, was due the sense of unfamiliar familiarity, if I may use such a term, with which the repetition of those two words affected me.

But who was "Jerry?" I got up from the table, and lighted my pipe, and wandered out towards the back premises of the house on a voyage of discovery. How I progressed, I will tell you to-morrow; for the present I am tired—so, good-night, and pleasant dreams.

CHAPTER VIII.—THE LETTER CONTINUED.

I walked through the long flagged passage leading to the back of the house without encountering any one, and was just about to enter the yard, when, glancing through one of the side-windows, I saw a sight which brought me to a stand. Sitting astride a wooden bench, placed full in the warmth of the morning sun, was one of the strangest figures I have seen for a long time—a youth of eighteen or twenty, with features that were almost feminine in the delicacy of their outline, but freckled and burnt by the heats of summer; and with long tangled elf-locks, in colour a pale yellow, falling low over his shoulders. On the ground near him was an old felt hat, gray and napless, in shape like a sugar-loaf; and on the other side of him, a steaming bowl of oatmeal porridge, waiting till it should be cool enough to be eaten. But what took my attention most was the singular way in which he was occupied. He was playing one of those long tin whistles, the like of which may not infrequently be seen among the gamins of London, and the music he elicited from it was

such as I could not have believed so rude an instrument capable of producing. What the air was, I know not. It was one that I had never heard before—weird and melancholy, and for anything I know to the contrary, may have been improvised by himself. Over the bench in front of him was spread a piece of green baize, on which two large vipers were now placed, which swayed their heads slowly to and fro as he played, darting their long tongues here and there with every movement, and seeming mightily pleased with their master's shrill music. I stood for three or four minutes a silent spectator of this singular scene. At length, the youth ceased playing, and turned his head to look after his porridge, and as he did so, I saw, with a thrill of sorrowful surprise, that he was an idiot. No—that is too strong a word; he was what the Scotch call "daft," and the Yorkshire call "soft"—in fact, a harmless simpleton, with three grains of sense in his head to one of foolishness. His eyes told the story of his misfortune at once; and yet they were beautiful eyes, large and bright, but with an expression in them beyond my skill to analyse.

"Jerry will catch thee a nice fat mouse to-night, my beautiful Mogaddo," he said, apparently addressing one of the reptiles. "But as for thee, my little Pipanta, thou shalt go supperless to bed; thou art getting too lazy to dance to thy lord's music, and thou must be punished. Jerry dreamt last night that he was king of the monkeys, and lived in a grand palace; and the monkeys were masters of everything; and all the men and women that were left in the world ran wild in the woods. And King Jerry, and his lords and ladies, went out hunting them; and it was rare sport to see how the men ran and hid themselves among the bushes, and to hear them roar with pain when our arrows took them in a tender part. And why shouldn't the monkeys be masters for the next thousand years, I should like to know? They would be a far jollier lot of fellows to live among than these miserable two-legged creatures that have it all their own way now. Beautiful Venus and red Mars would shine just as brightly if all this was to happen to-morrow. What would it matter to them? But Jerry wants his breakfast. When he is sultan of the apes, thou, Mogaddo, shalt be his grand vizier. Hoo-hoo-hoo?" and he ended his speech with a wild crackling laugh, such as no sane being could have given utterance to, and then fell to work ravenously on his porridge; while his two pets coiled themselves up on the green baize, and basked lazily in the grateful warmth of the sun.

This, then, was the Jerry whose name, when called aloud, had startled me so strangely. "Good-morning, Master Jerry," I said as I advanced; "you seem to be enjoying your breakfast." The poor lad started at my sudden appearance, and stared up in my face with a touching, wistful look, as though deprecating any possible anger on my part. "Sahib Mogaddo, too," I said, turning to the larger of the two vipers, "seems to relish the bright sunshine;" and as I spoke, I seized the reptile with my left hand quickly up its back, grasped it tightly with my thumb and finger, just behind the head, and so held it, powerless for injury, while its body twisted and untwisted itself rapidly round my arm. "I met thy uncle one day on the banks of the Ganges, and thy grandfather among the Mountains of the Moon, and each of them sent thee a message," I continued, addressing myself to the viper; and with what I mumbled over a few sentences of Arabic which I had picked up during my travels; while Jerry looked on with a silent awe, his nether lip trembling with nervous agitation. Afraid, apparently, lest I might treat Pipanta in the same unceremonious way, he hastened to seize the smaller viper, and put it away in a box which he drew from under the bench; and I was by no means sorry to deposit Mogaddo in the same place of security. Jerry was evidently disposed to regard me with reverence, if not with absolute fear: that any one should be on speaking-terms with his favourites, and introduce himself to them as a family friend, was something altogether beyond the narrow range of his experience. Where might the know-

ledge of this mysterious stranger be expected to stop? So, to shew the depth of respect in which he held me, he proceeded to favour me with a series of old-fashioned rustic bows, running the open palm of his hand close up by his face, and then bringing it down through the air in a sweeping curve almost to his feet. "Jerry hopes that your Lordship has salubrity of health, this saffron-tinted morn'g," said the poor lad. "He is your Highness's most complaisant and obedient slave. My Lord Mogaddo and his bride, the beautiful Pipanta, are your slaves. We know nothing, and the master, to whom everything is known, holds the key of our destiny."

What answer I should have made to this high-flown tirade, I cannot say, but at this moment Mrs. Winch entered the yard. "Good-morning, sir," she said. "I perceive that you are making the acquaintance of my poor boy. Heaven, for some wise purpose, has seen fit to afflict him, but he is none the less dear to a mother's heart: it may be, indeed, that I love him more than I should do were he the same as others;" and the widow bent and kissed her son's forehead fondly. But Jerry was again ravenously intent on finishing his breakfast, and seemed to have no attention to spare for either his mother or myself. The widow signed to me to follow her. As soon as we reached her little parlour, she turned to me and said: "Last night, sir, in the course of conversation, you mentioned that you were a photographer by profession. Would it be too great a favour to ask you to take the portrait of my poor boy some day when you may have a little spare time? It is what I have desired to have—a good one I mean—for a long time. I will pay you whatever you may choose to ask."—"I will take your son's portrait with pleasure," I replied (and so I would have done, for it isn't every day that one has an opportunity of adding such an original to one's gallery); "although portraiture is out of my usual line of business, and I only dabble a little in it occasionally, and that merely for my own amusement; still, in the present case, I will gladly do my best to give you satisfaction; and as for the expense, we will talk about that some other time."

I was away at Eastringham all that day on matters of business, and did not get back to the *Hand and Dagger* till close upon eleven o'clock. "Mr. Brackenridge and I have been talking about photography this evening," said the widow to me as I lingered over my last pipe. "He tells me that by its means copies of fading portraits may be taken, and that thus the features of those who, when living, were dear to us may be perpetuated for years after the original likeness has become blurred and unrecognisable with age. Will you, sir, kindly tell me whether this is so or not?"—"What Mr. Brackenridge told you is to some extent true," I replied. "Pictures can, of course, be photographed just as any other object can; but the brighter the picture is, the clearer will the photograph of it be: a dim picture will yield but a dim copy through the camera. But you had better let me see any portrait that you may wish to have photographed, and I can then judge better as to its capabilities for coming out well under the process."—"I am really ashamed, Mr. English, to trouble you about such a trifle," said the landlady, "but I have, up-stairs, a portrait of my brother, which has, unfortunately, been hung for some time in a damp room, and now I find that the colours are fading rapidly, and that in another year or two it will look nothing more than an unmeaning daub."—"Let me see the portrait," I said; "something can be made of it, I have no doubt." The interest I shewed in the matter evidently pleased her; she rose with a gratified air, and went at once to fetch the picture. She came back with it almost immediately, and laid it on the table before me. It was a poor thing enough—a Kit-cat, done in water-colours, in that florid style of art so popular among a certain class about the time that you and I were born. But scarcely had I set eyes on it before I recognised it as the portrait of a man whom I knew when I was a child—of a man whose rugged and strongly-marked face I have but too much reason to remember; and the same instant there flashed across my mind the very time, place, and circumstances