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Содержание

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THE BOX TUNNEL
BY CHARLES READE

The 10:15 train glided from Paddington May 7, 1847. In the left compartment of a certain first-class carriage were four passengers; of these two were worth description. The lady had a smooth, white, delicate brow, strongly marked eyebrows, long lashes, eyes that seemed to change colour, and a good-sized, delicious mouth, with teeth as white as milk. A man could not see her nose for her eyes and mouth; her own sex could, and would have told us some nonsense about it. She wore an unpretending grayish dress, buttoned to the throat with lozenge-shaped buttons, and a Scottish shawl that agreeably evaded colour. She was like a duck, so tight her plain feathers fitted her, and there she sat, smooth, snug, and delicious, with a book in her hand and a soupcon of her wrist just visible as she held it. Her opposite neighbour was what I call a good style of man, the more to his credit since he belonged to a corporation that frequently turns out the worst imaginable style of young men. He was a cavalry officer, aged twenty-five. He had a moustache, but not a very repulsive one – not one of those subnasal pigtails on which soup is suspended like dew on a shrub; it was short, thick, and black as a coal. His teeth had not yet been turned by tobacco smoke to the colour of juice; his clothes did not stick to nor hang to him; he had an engaging smile, and, what I liked the dog for, his vanity, which was inordinate, was in its proper place, his heart, not in his face, jostling mine and other people's who have none; in a word, he was what one oftener hears of than meets – a young gentleman. He was conversing in an animated whisper with a companion, a fellow-officer; they were talking about what it is far better not to – women. Our friend clearly did not wish to be overheard; for he cast ever and anon a furtive glance at his fair vis-a-vis and lowered his voice. She seemed completely absorbed in her book, and that reassured him. At last the two soldiers came down to a whisper (the truth must be told); the one who got down at Slough, and was lost to posterity, bet ten pounds to three that he who was going down with us to Bath and immortality would not kiss either of the ladies opposite upon the road. "Done, done!" Now I am sorry a man I have hitherto praised should have lent himself, even in a whisper, to such a speculation; "but nobody is wise at all hours," not even when the clock is striking five and twenty, and you are to consider his profession, his good looks, and the temptation – ten to three.

After Slough the party was reduced to three. At Twylford one lady dropped her handkerchief; Captain Dolignan fell on it like a lamb; two or three words were interchanged on this occasion. At Reading the Marlborough of our tale made one of the safe investments of that day; he bought a "Times" and "Punch" – the latter full of steel-pen thrusts and woodcuts. Valour and beauty deigned to laugh at some inflamed humbug or other punctured by "Punch." Now laughing together thaws our human ice; long before Swindon it was a talking-match; at Swindon who so devoted as Captain Dolignan? He handed them out, he souped them, he tough-chickened them, he brandied and cochinealed one, and he brandied and burnt-sugared the other; on their return to the carriage one lady passed into the inner compartment to inspect a certain gentleman's seat on that side of the line.

Reader, had it been you or I, the beauty would have been the deserter, the average one would have stayed with us till all was blue, ourselves included; not more surely does our slice of bread and butter, when it escapes from our hand, revolve it ever so often, alight face downward on the carpet. But this was a bit of a fop, Adonis, dragoon, – so Venus remained in tete-a-tete with him. You have seen a dog meet an unknown female of his species; how handsome, how *empresse*, how expressive

he becomes: such was Dolignan after Swindon, and, to do the dog justice, he got handsome and handsomer. And you have seen a cat conscious of approaching cream: such was Miss Haythorn; she became demurer and demurer. Presently our captain looked out of the window and laughed; this elicited an inquiring look from Miss Haythorn.

"We are only a mile from the Box Tunnel."

"Do you always laugh a mile from the Box Tunnel?" said the lady.

"Invariably."

"What for?"

"Why, hem! it is a gentleman's joke."

Captain Dolignan then recounted to Miss Haythorn the following:

"A lady and her husband sat together going through the Box Tunnel; there was one gentleman opposite; it was pitch-dark. After the tunnel the lady said, 'George, how absurd of you to salute me going through the tunnel!' 'I did no such thing.' 'You didn't?' 'No; why?' 'Because somehow I thought you did!'"

Here Captain Dolignan laughed and endeavoured to lead his companion to laugh, but it was not to be done. The train entered the tunnel.

Miss Haythorn. Ah!

Dolignan. What is the matter?

Miss Haythorn. I am frightened.

Dolignan (moving to her side). Pray do not be alarmed; I am near you.

Miss Haythorn. You are near me – very near me indeed, Captain Dolignan.

Dolignan. You know my name?

Miss Haythorn. I heard you mention it. I wish we were out of this dark place.

Dolignan. I could be content to spend hours here reassuring you, my dear lady.

Miss Haythorn. Nonsense!

Dolignan. Pweep! (Grave reader, do not put your lips to the next pretty creature you meet, or will understand what this means.)

Miss Haythorn. Ee! Ee!

Friend. What is the matter?

Miss Haythorn. Open the door! Open the door!

There was a sound of hurried whispers; the door was shut and the blind pulled down with hostile sharpness.

If any critic falls on me for putting inarticulate sounds in a dialogue as above, I answer, with all the insolence I can command at present, "Hit boys as big as yourself" – bigger, perhaps, such as Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes; they began it, and I learned it of them sore against my will.

Miss Haythorn's scream lost most of its effect because the engine whistled forty thousand murders at the same moment, and fictitious grief makes itself heard when real cannot.

Between the tunnel and Bath our young friend had time to ask himself whether his conduct had been marked by that delicate reserve which is supposed to distinguish the perfect gentleman.

With a long face, real or feigned, he held open the door; his late friends attempted to escape on the other side; impossible! they must pass him. She whom he had insulted (Latin for kissed) deposited somewhere at his feet a look of gentle, blushing reproach; the other, whom he had not insulted, darted red-hot daggers at him from her eyes; and so they parted.

It was perhaps fortunate for Dolignan that he had the grace to be a friend to Major Hoskyns of his regiment, a veteran laughed at by the youngsters, for the major was too apt to look coldly upon billiard-balls and cigars; he had seen cannon-balls and linstocks. He had also, to tell the truth, swallowed a good bit of the mess-room poker, which made it as impossible for Major Hoskyns to descend to an ungentlemanlike word or action as to brush his own trousers below the knee.

Captain Dolignan told this gentleman his story in gleeful accents; but Major Hoskyns heard him coldly, and as coldly answered that he had known a man to lose his life for the same thing.

"That is nothing," continued the major, "but unfortunately he deserved to lose it."

At this blood mounted to the younger man's temples, and his senior added, "I mean to say he was thirty-five; you, I presume, are twenty-one!"

"Twenty-five."

"That is much the same thing; will you be advised by me?"

"If you will advise me."

"Speak to no one of this, and send White the three pounds, that he may think you have lost the bet."

"That is hard, when I won it."

"Do it, for all that, sir."

Let the disbelievers in human perfectibility know that this dragoon, capable of a blush, did this virtuous action, albeit with violent reluctance; and this was his first damper. A week after these events he was at a ball. He was in that state of factitious discontent which belongs to us amiable English. He was looking in vain for a lady equal in personal attraction to the idea he had formed of George Dolignan as a man, when suddenly there glided past him a most delightful vision – a lady whose beauty and symmetry took him by the eyes; another look: "It can't be! Yes, it is!" Miss Haythorn! (not that he knew her name), but what an apotheosis!

The duck had become a peahen – radiant, dazzling; she looked twice as beautiful and almost twice as large as before. He lost sight of her; he found her again. She was so lovely she made him ill, and he alone must not dance with her, speak to her. If he had been content to begin her acquaintance the usual way it might have ended in kissing; it must end in nothing. As she danced sparks of beauty fell from her on all around but him; she did not see him; it was clear she never would see him. One gentleman was particularly assiduous; she smiled on his assiduity; he was ugly, but she smiled on him. Dolignan was surprised at his success, his ill taste, his ugliness, his impertinence. Dolignan at last found himself injured; who was this man? and what right had he to go on so? "He never kissed her, I suppose," said Dolle. Dolignan could not prove it, but he felt that somehow the rights of property were invaded. He went home and dreamed of Miss Haythorn, and hated all the ugly successful. He spent a fortnight trying to find out who his beauty was; he never could encounter her again. At last he heard of her in this way: a lawyer's clerk paid him a little visit and commenced a little action against him in the name of Miss Haythorn for insulting her in a railway-train.

The young gentleman was shocked, endeavoured to soften the lawyer's clerk; that machine did not thoroughly comprehend the meaning of the term. The lady's name, however, was at last revealed by this untoward incident; from her name to her address was but a short step, and the same day our crestfallen hero lay in wait at her door, and many a succeeding day, without effect. But one fine afternoon she issued forth quite naturally, as if she did it every day, and walked briskly on the parade. Dolignan did the same, met and passed her many times on the parade, and searched for pity in her eyes, but found neither look nor recognition nor any other sentiment; for all this she walked and walked till all the other promenaders were tired and gone; then her culprit summoned resolution, and, taking off his hat, with a voice for the first time tremulous, besought permission to address her. She stopped, blushed, and neither acknowledged nor disowned his acquaintance. He blushed, stammered out how ashamed he was, how he deserved to be punished, how he was punished, how little she knew how unhappy he was, and concluded by begging her not to let all the world know the disgrace of a man who was already mortified enough by the loss of her acquaintance. She asked an explanation; he told her of the action that had been commenced in her name; she gently shrugged her shoulders, and said, "How stupid they are!" Emboldened by this, he begged to know whether or not a life of distant unpretending devotion would, after a lapse of years, erase the memory of his madness – his crime!

She did not know!

She must now bid him adieu, as she had some preparations to make for a ball in the Crescent, where everybody was to be. They parted, and Dolignan determined to be at the ball where everybody was to be. He was there, and after some time he obtained an introduction to Miss Haythorn and he danced with her. Her manner was gracious. With the wonderful tact of her sex, she seemed to have commenced the acquaintance that evening. That night for the first time Dolignan was in love. I will spare the reader all a lover's arts by which he succeeded in dining where she dined, in dancing where she danced, in overtaking her by accident when she rode. His devotion followed her to church, where the dragoon was rewarded by learning there is a world where they neither polk nor smoke, the two capital abominations of this one.

He made an acquaintance with her uncle, who liked him, and he saw at last with joy that her eye loved to dwell upon him when she thought he did not observe her. It was three months after the Box Tunnel that Captain Dolignan called one day upon Captain Haythorn, R.N., whom he had met twice in his life, and slightly propitiated by violently listening to a cutting-out expedition; he called, and in the usual way asked permission to pay his addresses to his daughter. The worthy captain straightway began doing quarter-deck, when suddenly he was summoned from the apartment by a mysterious message. On his return he announced, with a total change of voice, that it was all right, and his visitor might run alongside as soon as he chose. My reader has divined the truth; this nautical commander, terrible to the foe, was in complete and happy subjugation to his daughter, our heroine.

As he was taking leave, Dolignan saw his divinity glide into the drawing-room. He followed her, observed a sweet consciousness deepen into confusion; she tried to laugh, and cried instead, and then she smiled again; when he kissed her hand at the door it was "George" and "Marian" instead of "Captain" this and "Miss" the other.

A reasonable time after this (for my tale is merciful and skips formalities and torturing delays) these two were very happy; they were once more upon the railroad, going to enjoy their honeymoon all by themselves. Marian Dolignan was dressed just as before – duck-like and delicious, all bright except her clothes; but George sat beside her this time instead of opposite, and she drank him in gently from her long eyelashes.

"Marian," said George, "married people should tell each other all.

Will you ever forgive me if I own to you; no – "

"Yes, yes!"

"Well then, you remember the Box Tunnel?" (This was the first allusion he had ventured to it.) "I am ashamed to say I had three pounds to ten pounds with White I would kiss one of you two ladies," and George, pathetic externally, chuckled within.

"I know that, George; I overheard you," was the demure reply.

"Oh! you overheard me! Impossible."

"And did you not hear me whisper to my companion? I made a bet with her."

"You made a bet? how singular! What was it?"

"Only a pair of gloves, George."

"Yes, I know; but what about it?"

"That if you did you should be my husband, dearest."

"Oh! but stay; then you could not have been so very angry with me, love. Why, dearest, then you brought that action against me."

Mrs. Dolignan looked down.

"I was afraid you were forgetting me! George, you will never forgive me?"

"Sweet angel! why, here is the Box Tunnel!"

Now, reader – fie! no! no such thing! you can't expect to be indulged in this way every time we come to a dark place. Besides, it is not the thing. Consider – two sensible married people. No such phenomenon, I assure you, took place. No scream in hopeless rivalry of the engine – this time!

MINIONS OF THE MOON
BY F. W. ROBINSON

Our story is of the time when George III was king, and our scene of action lies only at an old farm-house six miles or so from Finchley – a quaint, ramshackle, commodious, old-fashioned, thatched farm-house that we see only in pictures now, and which has long since been improved off the face of the earth.

It was a farm estate that was flourishing bravely in those dear disreputable days when the people paid fivepence a pound for bread, and only dared curse Protection in their hearts; when few throve and many starved, and younger sons of gentry, without interest at court or Parliament, either cut the country which served them so badly, or took to business on the king's highway and served the country badly in return.

The Maythorpe Farm belonged to the Pemberthys, and had descended from father to son from days lying too far back to reckon up just now; and a rare, exclusive, conservative, bad-tempered, long-headed race the Pemberthys had always borne the reputation of being, feathering their own nests well, and dying in them fat and prosperous.

There were a good many Pemberthys scattered about the home and midland counties, but it was generally understood in the family that the head of the clan, as it were, lived at Maythorpe Farm, near Finchley, and here the Pemberthys would forgather on any great occasion, such as a marriage, a funeral, or a christening, the funeral taking precedence for numbers. There had been a grand funeral at Maythorpe Farm only a few days before our story opens, for Reuben Pemberthy had been consigned to his fathers at the early age of forty-nine. Reuben Pemberthy had left one son behind him, also named Reuben, a stalwart, heavy-browed, good-looking young fellow, who, at two and twenty, was quite as well able to manage the farm and everybody on it as his father had been before him. He had got rid of all his relatives save two six days after his father's funeral; and those two were stopping by general consent, because it was signed, sealed, and delivered by those whom it most concerned, that the younger woman, his cousin, pretty Sophie Tarne, was to be married before the year was out to the present Reuben Pemberthy, who had wooed her and won her consent when he went down to her mother's house at King's Norton for a few days' trip last summer. Being a steady, handsome fellow, who made love in downright earnest, he impressed Sophie's eighteen years, and was somewhat timidly but graciously accepted as an affianced suitor. It was thought at King's Norton that Mrs. Tarne had done a better stroke of business in the first year of her widowhood than her late husband had done – always an unlucky wretch, Timothy – in the whole course of his life. And now Sophie Tarne and her mother were staying for a few days longer at Maythorpe Farm after the funeral.

Mrs. Tarne, having been a real Pemberthy before her unfortunate marriage with the improvident draper of King's Norton, was quite one of the family, and seemed more at home at Finchley than was the new widow, Mrs. Pemberthy, a poor, unlucky lady, a victim to a chronic state of twittering and jingling and twitching, but one who, despite her shivers, had made the late Reuben a good wife, and was a fair housekeeper even now, although superintending housekeeping in jumps, like a palsy-stricken kangaroo.

So Sophie and her bustling mother were of material assistance to Mrs. Pemberthy; and the presence of Sophie in that house of mourning – where the mourning had been speedily got over and business had begun again with commendable celerity – was a considerable source of comfort to young Reuben, when he had leisure after business hours, which was not always the case, to resume those tender relations which had borne to him last autumn such happy fruit of promise.

Though there was not much work to do at the farm in the winter-time, when the nights were long and the days short, yet Reuben Pemberthy was generally busy in one way or another; and on the particular day on which our story opens Reuben was away at High Barnet.

It had been a dull, dark day, followed by a dull, dark night. The farm servants had gone to their homes, save the few that were attached to the premises, such as scullery-maids and dairymaids; and Mrs. Pemberthy, Mrs. Tarne, and her daughter Sophie were waiting early supper for Reuben, and wondering what kept him so long from his home and his sweetheart.

Mrs. Tarne, accustomed, mayhap, to the roar and bustle of King's Norton, found the farm at Finchley a trifle dull and lonely, – not that in a few days after a funeral she could expect any excessive display of life or frivolity, – and, oppressed a bit that evening, was a trifle nervous as to the whereabouts of her future son-in-law, who had faithfully promised to be home a clear hour and a half before the present time, and whose word might be always taken to be as good as his bond. Mrs. Tarne was the most restless of the three women. Good Mrs. Pemberthy, though physically shaken, was not likely to be nervous concerning her son, and, indeed, was at any time only fidgety over her own special complaints – a remarkable trait of character deserving of passing comment here.

Sophie was not of a nervous temperament; indeed, for her eighteen years, was apparently a little too cool and methodical; and she was not flurried that evening over the delay in the arrival home of Reuben Pemberthy. She was not imaginative like her mother, and did not associate delay with the dangers of a dark night, though the nights *were* full of danger in the good old times of the third George. She went to the door to look out, after her mother had tripped there for the seventh or eighth time, not for appearances' sake, for she was above that, but to keep her mother company, and to suggest that these frequent excursions to the front door would end in a bad cold.

"I can't help fearing that something has happened to Reu," said the mother; "he is always so true to time."

"There are so many things to keep a man late, mother."

"Not to keep Reuben. If he said what hour he'd be back – he 's like his father, my poor brother – he'd do it to the minute, even if there weren't any reason for his hurry."

"Which there is," said Sophie, archly.

"Which there is, Sophie. And why you are so quiet over this I don't know. I am sure when poor Mr. Tarne was out late – and he was often very, very late, and the Lord knows where he'd been, either! – I couldn't keep a limb of me still till he came home again. I was as bad as your aunt indoors there till I was sure he was safe and sound."

"But he always came home safe and sound, mother."

"Nearly always. I mind the time once, though – bless us and save us, what a gust!" she cried, as the wind came swooping down the hill at them, swirling past them into the dark passage and puffing the lights out in the big pantry beyond, where the maids began to scream. "I hope he hasn't been blown off his horse."

"Not very likely that," said Sophie, "and Reuben the best horseman in the county. But come in out of the gale, mother; the sleet cuts like a knife too, and he will not come home any the sooner for your letting the wind into the house. And – why, here he comes after all. Hark!"

There was a rattling of horses' hoofs on the frost-bound road; it was a long way in the distance, but it was the unmistakable signal of a well-mounted traveller approaching – of more than one well-mounted traveller, it became quickly apparent, the clattering was so loud and incessant and manifold.

"Soldiers!" said Sophie. "What can bring them this way?"

"It's the farmers coming the same way as Reuben for protection's sake these winter nights, child."

"Protection?"

"Haven't you heard of the highwaymen about, and how a single traveller is never safe in these parts? Or a double one either – or – "

"Perhaps these are highwaymen."

"Oh, good gracious! Let us get indoors and bar up," cried Mrs. Tarne, wholly forgetful of Reuben Pemberthy's safety after this suggestion. "Yes, it's as likely to be highwaymen as soldiers."

It was more likely. It was pretty conclusive that the odds were in favour of highwaymen when, five minutes afterward, eight mounted men rode up to the Maythorpe farm-house, dismounted with considerable noise and bustle, and commenced at the stout oaken door with the butt-ends of their riding-whips, hammering away incessantly and shouting out much strong language in their vehemence. This, being fortunately bawled forth all at once was incomprehensible to the dwellers within doors, now all scared together and no longer cool and self-possessed.

"Robbers!" said Mrs. Tarne.

"We've never been molested before, at least not for twenty years or more," said Mrs. Pemberthy; "and then I mind – "

"Is it likely to be any of Reuben's friends?" asked Sophie, timidly.

"Oh no; Reuben has no bellowing crowd like that for friends. Ask who is there – somebody."

But nobody would go to the door save Sophie Tarne herself. The maids were huddled in a heap together in a corner of the dairy, and refused to budge an inch, and Mrs. Tarne was shaking more than Mrs. Pemberthy.

Sophie, with the colour gone from her face, went boldly back to the door, where the hammering on the panels continued and would have split anything of a less tough fibre than the English oak of which they were constructed.

"Who is there? What do you want?" she gave out in a shrill falsetto; but no one heard her till the questions were repeated about an octave and a half higher.

"Hold hard, Stango; there's a woman calling to us. Stop your row, will you?"

A sudden cessation of the battering ensued, and some one was heard going rapidly backward over cobblestones amid the laughter of the rest, who had dismounted and were standing outside in the cold, with their hands upon their horses' bridles.

"Who is there?" asked Sophie Tarne again.

"Travellers in need of assistance, and who – " began a polite and even musical voice, which was interrupted by a hoarse voice:

"Open in the king's name, will you?"

"Open in the fiend's name, won't you?" called out a third and hoarser voice; "or we'll fire through the windows and burn the place down.'

"What do you want?"

"Silence!" shouted the first one again; "let me explain, you dogs, before you bark again."

There was a pause, and the polite gentleman began again in his mellifluous voice:

"We are travellers belated. We require corn for our horses, food for ourselves. There is no occasion for alarm; my friends are noisy, but harmless, I assure you, and the favour of admittance and entertainment here will be duly appreciated. To refuse your hospitality – the hospitality of a Pemberthy – is only to expose yourselves to considerable inconvenience, I fear."

"Spoken like a book, Captain."

"And, as we intend to come in at all risks," added a deeper voice, "it will be better for you not to try and keep us out, d' ye hear? D' ye – Captain, if you shake me by the collar again I'll put a bullet through you. I – "

"Silence! Let the worthy folks inside consider the position for five minutes."

Not a minute longer, if they don't want the place burned about their ears, mind you," cried a voice that had not spoken yet.

"Who are you?" asked Sophie, still inclined to parley.

"Travellers, I have told you."

"Thieves, cutthroats, and murderers – eight of us – knights of the road, gentlemen of the highway, and not to be trifled with when half starved and hard driven," cried the hoarse man. "There, will that satisfy you, wench? Will you let us in or not? It's easy enough for us to smash in the windows and get in that way, isn't it?"

Yes, it was very easy.

"Wait five minutes, please," said Sophie.

She went back to the parlour and to the two shivering women and the crowd of maids, who had crept from the dairy to the farm parlour, having greater faith in numbers now.

"They had better come in, aunt, especially as we are quite helpless to keep them out. I could fire that gun," Sophie said, pointing to an unwieldy old blunderbuss slung by straps to the ceiling, " and I know it's loaded. But I'm afraid it wouldn't be of much use."

"It might make them angry," said Mrs. Pemberthy.

"It would only kill one at the best," remarked Mrs. Tarne, with a heavy sigh.

"And the rest of the men would kill us, the brutes," said Mrs.

Pemberthy. "Yes, they'd better come in."

"Lord have mercy upon us," said Mrs. Tarne.

"There's no help for it," said Mrs. Pemberthy. "Even Reuben would not have dared to keep them out. I mind now their coming like this twenty years agone. It was – "

"I will see to them," said Sophie, who had become in her young, brave strength quite the mistress of the ceremonies. "Leave the rest to me."

"And if you can persuade them to go away – " began Mrs. Tarne; but her daughter had already disappeared, and was parleying through the keyhole with the strangers without.

"Such hospitality as we can offer, gentlemen, shall be at your service, providing always that you treat us with the respect due to gentlewomen and your hosts."

"Trust to that," was the reply. "I will answer for myself and my companions, Mistress Pemberthy."

"You give me your word of honour?"

"My word of honour," he repeated; "our words of honour, and speaking for all my good friends present; is it not so, men?"

"Ay, ay – that 's right," chorused the good friends; and then Sophie Tarne, not without an extra plunging of the heart beneath her white crossover, unlocked the stout oaken door and let in her unwelcome visitors.

Seven out of the eight seemed to tumble in all at once, pushing against one another in their eagerness to enter, laughing, shouting, and stamping with the heels of their jack-boots on the bright red pantiles of the hall. The eighth intruder followed – a tall, thin man, pale-faced and stern and young, with a heavy horseman's cloak falling from his shoulders, the front of which was gathered up across his arms. A handsome and yet worn face – the face of one who had seen better days and known brighter times – a picturesque kind of vagabond, take him in the candle-light. He raised his hat and bowed low to Sophie Tarne, not offering to shake hands as the rest of them had done who where crowding around her; then he seemed to stand suddenly between them and their salutations, and to brush them unceremoniously aside.

"You see to those horses, Stango and Grapp," he said, singling out the most obtrusive and the most black-muzzled of his gang. "Mistress Pemberthy will perhaps kindly trust us for a while with the keys of the stables and corn-bins."

"They are here," said Sophie, detaching them from a bunch of keys which, in true housewifely fashion, hung from her girdle. "The farm servants are away in the village, or they should help you, sir."

"We are in the habit of helping ourselves – very much," said one of the highwaymen, drily. "Pray don't apologise on that score, mistress."

Two of the men departed; five of them stalked into the farm parlour, flourishing their big hats and executing clumsy scrapings with their feet while bowing in mock fashion to the two nervous widows, who sat in one corner regarding them askance: the leader of these lawless ones dropped his cloak from his shoulders, left it trailing on the pantile floor, and made a rapid signal with his hand to Sophie to pause an instant before she entered the room.

"Treat them with fair words, and not too much strong waters," he said, quickly; "we have a long ride before us."

He said it like a warning, and Sophie nodded as though she took his advice and was not ungrateful for it. Then they both went into the parlour and joined the company; and the maid-servant, becoming used to the position or making the best of it, began to bustle about and wait upon their visitors, who had already drawn up their seats to the supper-table, which had been spread with good things two hours ago anticipative of the return Reuben Pemberthy to Maythorpe.

It was an odd supper-party at which Sophie Tarne presided, the highwaymen insisting, with much clamour and some emphatic oaths, that they would have no old women like Mrs. Tarne and Mrs. Pemberthy at the head of the table. Sophie was a pretty wench, and so must do the honours of the feast.

"The young girl's health, gentlemen, with three times three, and may her husband be a match for her in good looks," cried one admiring knight of the road; and then the toast was drunk. The ale flowed freely, and there was much laughter and loud jesting.

The man whom they called "Guy" and "Captain" sat by Sophie's side. He ate very little, and kept a watchful eye upon his men after Stango and his companion had come in from the stable and completed the number. He exchanged at first but few words with Sophie, though he surveyed her with a grave attention that brought the colour to her cheeks. He was a man upon guard. Presently he said:

"You bear your position well. You are not alarmed at these wild fellows?"

"No – not now. I don't think they would hurt me. Besides – "

"Besides – what? "he asked, as she paused.

"I have your word for them."

"Yes," he answered; "but it is only a highwayman's word."

"I can trust it."

"These men can be demons when they like, Mistress Pemberthy."

Sophie did not think it worth while to inform the gentleman that her name was not Pemberthy; it could not possibly matter to him, and there was a difficulty in explaining the relationship she bore to the family.

"Why are you with such men as these?" she asked, wonderingly.

"Where should I be? Where can I be else?" he asked, lightly now; but it was with a forced lightness of demeanour, or Sophie Tarne was very much deceived.

"Helping your king, not warring against him and his laws," said Sophie, very quickly.

"I owe no allegiance to King George. I have always been a ne'er-do-well, despised and scouted by a hard father and a villainous brother or two, and life with these good fellows here is, after all, to my mind. There's independence in it, and I prefer to be independent; and danger, and I like danger. A wronged man wrongs others in his turn, mistress; and it is my turn now."

"Two wrongs cannot make a right."

"Oh, I do not attempt the impossible, Mistress Pemberthy."

"What will be the end of this – to you?"

"The gallows – if I cannot get my pistol out in time."

He laughed lightly and naturally enough as Sophie shrank in terror from him. One could see he was a desperate man enough, despite his better manners; probably as great an outcast as the rest of them, and as little to be trusted.

"That is a dreadful end to look forward to," she said.

"I don't look forward. What is the use – when *that* is the prospect?"

"Your father – your brothers – "

"Would be glad that the end came soon," he concluded. "They are waiting for it patiently. They have prophesied it for the last five years."

"They know then?"

"Oh yes; I have taken care that they should know," he answered, laughing defiantly again.

"And your mother – does she know?"

He paused, and looked at her very hard.

"God forbid."

"She is – "

"She is in heaven, where nothing is known of what goes on upon earth."

"How can you tell that?"

"There would be no peace in heaven otherwise, Mistress Pemberthy; only great grief, intense shame, misery, despair, madness, at the true knowledge of us all," he said, passionately. "On earth we men are hypocrites and liars, devils and slaves."

"Not all men," said Sophie, thinking of Reu Pemberthy.

"I have met none other. Perhaps I have sought none other – all my own fault, they will tell you where my father is; where," he added, bitterly, "they are worse than I am, and yet, oh, so respectable."

"You turned highwayman to – to – "

"To spite them, say. It is very near the truth."

"It will be a poor excuse to the mother, when you see her again."

"Eh?"

But Sophie had no time to continue so abstruse a subject with this misanthropical freebooter. She clapped her hand to her side and gave a little squeak of astonishment.

"What is the matter?" asked Captain Guy.

"My keys! They have taken my keys."

And, sure enough, while Sophie Tarne had been talking to the captain, some one had severed the keys from her girdle and made off with them, and there was only a clean-cut black ribbon dangling at her waist instead.

"That villain Stango," exclaimed the captain "I saw him pass a minute ago. He leaned over and whispered to you, Kits. You remember?"

"Stango?" said Kits, with far too innocent an expression to be genuine.

"Yes, Stango; you know he did."

"I dare say he did. I don't gainsay it, Captain, but I don't know where he has gone."

"But *I* will know," cried the captain, striking his hand upon the table and making every glass and plate jump thereon. "I will have no tricks played here without my consent. Am I your master, or are you all mine?"

And here, we regret to say, Captain Guy swore a good deal, and became perfectly unheroic and inelegant and unromantic. But his oaths had more effect upon his unruly followers than his protests, and they sat looking at him in a half-sullen, half-shamefaced manner, and would have probably succumbed to his influence had not attention been diverted and aroused by the reappearance of Stango, who staggered in with four or five great black bottles heaped high in his arms. A tremendous shout of applause and delight heralded his return to the parlour.

"We have been treated scurvily, my men," cried Stango, "exceedingly scurvily; the best and strongest stuff in the cellar has been kept back from us. It's excellent – I've been tasting it first, lest you should all be poisoned; and there's more where this come from – oceans more of it!"

"Hurrah for Stango!"

The captain's voice was heard once more above the uproar, but it was only for a minute longer. There was a rush of six men toward Stango; a shouting, scrambling, fighting for the spirits which he

had discovered; a crash of one black bottle to the floor, with the spirit streaming over the polished boards, and the unceremonious tilting over of the upper part of the supper-table in the ruffians' wild eagerness for drink.

"To horse, to horse, men! Have you forgotten how far we have to go?" cried the captain.

But they had forgotten everything, and did not heed him. They were drinking strong waters, and were heedless of the hour and the risks they ran by a protracted stay there. In ten minutes from that time Saturnalia had set in, and pandemonium seemed to have unloosed its choicest specimens. They sang, they danced, they raved, they blasphemed, they crowed like cocks, they fired pistols at the chimney ornaments, they chased the maidservants from one room to another, they whirled round the room with Mrs. Tarne and Mrs. Pemberthy, they would have made a plunge at Sophie Tarne for partner had not the captain, very white and stern now, stood close to her side with a pistol at full cock in his right hand.

"I shall shoot the first man down who touches you," he said, between his set teeth.

"I will get away from them soon. For heaven's sake – for mine – do not add to the horror of this night, sir," implored Sophie.

He paused.

"I beg your pardon," he said, in a low tone of voice, "but – but I am powerless to help you unless I quell these wolves at once. They are going off for more drink."

"What is to be done?"

"Can you sing, Mistress Pemberthy?"

"Yes, a little; at least, they say so," she said, blushing at her own self-encomium.

"Sing something – to gain time. I will slip away while you are singing, and get the horses round to the front door. Do not be afraid."

"Gentlemen," he cried, in a loud voice, and bringing the handle of his pistol smartly on the head of the man nearest to him to emphasise his discourse, "Mistress Pemberthy will oblige the company with a song. Order and attention for the lady!"

"A song! a song!" exclaimed the highwaymen, clapping their hands and stamping their heels upon the floor. And then, amid the pause which followed, Sophie Tarne began a plaintive little ballad in a sweet, tremulous voice, which gathered strength as she proceeded.

It was a strange scene awaiting the return of Reuben Pemberthy, whose tall form stood in the doorway before Sophie had finished her sweet, simple rendering of an old English ballad. Reuben's round blue eyes were distended with surprise, and his mouth, generally very set and close, like the mouth of a steel purse, was on this especial occasion, and for a while, wide open. Sophie Tarne singing her best to amuse this vile and disorderly crew, who sat or stood around the room half drunk, and with glasses in their hands, pipes in their mouths, and the formidable, old-fashioned horse-pistols in their pockets!

And who was the handsome man, with the long, black, flowing hair, and a pale face, standing by Sophie's side – his Sophie – in a suit of soiled brocade and tarnished lace, with a Ramilie cocked hat under his arm and a pistol in his hand? The leader of these robbers, the very man who had stopped him on the king's highway three hours ago and taken every stiver which he had brought away from Barnet; who had, with the help of these other scoundrels getting mad drunk on his brandy, taken away his horse and left him bound to a gate by the roadside because he would not be quietly robbed, but must make a fuss over it and fight and kick in a most unbecoming fashion, and without any regard for the numbers by whom he had been assailed.

"I did not think you could sing like that," said the captain, quietly and in a low voice, when Sophie had finished her song, and a great shout of approval was echoing throughout the farm and many hundred yards beyond it.

"You have not got the horses ready," said Sophie, becoming aware that he was still at her side. "You said – you promised – "

"I could not leave you while you were singing Did you know that was my mother's song?"

"How should I know that?"

"No – no. But how strange – how – ah! there is your brother at the door. I have had the honour of meeting Master Pemberthy of Finchley earlier this evening, I think. A brave young gentleman; you should be proud of him."

"My bro – oh! it is Reu. O Reu, Reu, where have you been? Why did you not come before to help us – to tell us what to do?" And Sophie Tarne ran to him and put her arms round his neck and burst into tears. It was not a wise step on Sophie's part, but it was the reaction at the sight of her sweetheart, at the glimpse, as it were, of deliverance.

"There, there, don't cry, Sophie; keep a stout heart!" he whispered. "If these villains have robbed us, they will not be triumphant long. It will be my turn to crow presently."

"I – I don't understand."

"I can't explain now. Keep a good face – ply them with more drink – watch me. Well, my friends," he said, in a loud voice, "you have stolen a march upon me this time; but I've got home, you see, in time to welcome you to Maythorpe and share in your festivity. I'm a Pemberthy, and not likely to cry over spilled milk. More liquor for the gentlemen, you wenches, and be quick with it. Captain, here's to you and your companions, and next time you catch a Pemberthy, thy, treat him more gently in return for a welcome here. More liquor, girls; the gentlemen are thirsty after their long ride."

Reuben drank to the healths of the gentlemen by whom he was surrounded; he was very much at home in his own house, very cool and undismayed, having recovered from his surprise at finding an evening party being celebrated there. The highwaymen were too much excited to see anything remarkable in the effusion of Reuben Pemberthy's greeting; these were lawless times, when farmers and highwaymen were often in accord, dealt in one another's horses, and drove various bargains at odd seasons and in odd corners of the market-places; and Reuben Pemberthy was not unknown to them, though they had treated him with scant respect upon a lonely country road, and when they were impressed by the fact that he was riding homeward with well-lined pockets after a day's huckstering. They cheered Mr. Pemberthy's sentiments, all but the captain, who regarded him very critically, although bowing very low while his health was drunk.

"My cousin and my future bride, gentlemen will sing you another song; and I don't mind following suit myself, just to show there is no ill feeling between us; and our worthy captain, he will oblige after me, I am sure. It may be a good many years before we meet again."

"It may," said the captain, laconically.

"I – I cannot sing any more, Reuben," cried Sophie.

"Try, Sophie, for all our sakes; our home's sake – the home they would strip, or burn to the ground, if they had only the chance."

"Why do you wish to keep them here?" Sophie whispered back to him.

"I was released by a troop of soldiers who were coming in this direction," he said, hurriedly. They have gone on toward Finchley in search of these robbers, but, failing to find them, they will return here as my guests till morning. That was their promise."

"Oh!"

Sophie could not say more. Reuben had left her side, and was talking and laughing with Stango as though he loved him.

"Your sweetheart, then, this cock o' the game?" said the captain to Sophie, as he approached her once more.

"Yes."

"'I had need wish you much joy, for I see but little toward it,' as the poet says," he remarked, bluntly. "He will not make you a good husband."

"You cannot say that."

"It's a hard face that will look into yours, mistress, and when trouble comes, it will not look pleasantly. You are going to sing again? I am glad."

"You promised to go away – long since."

"I did. But the host has returned, and I distrust him. I am waiting now to see the end of it."

"No – no – I hope not. Pray go, sir."

"Is there danger?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. I am fond of danger, I have told you. It braces me up; it – why are you so pale?"

"You have been kind to me, and you have saved me from indignity.

Pray take your men away at once."

"They will not go, and I will not desert them."

"For my sake – do!"

"A song! a song! No more love-making tonight, Captain. A song from the farmer's pretty lass!" cried out the men.

And then Sophie began to sing again, this time a love-song, the song of a maiden waiting for her soldier boy to come back from the wars; a maiden waiting for him, listening for him, hearing the tramp of his regiment on the way toward her. She looked at Captain Guy as she sang, and with much entreaty in her gaze, and he looked back at her from under the cock of his hat, which he had pulled over his brows; then he wavered and stole out of the room. Kits was at the door, still with his mug of brandy in his hand. Guy seized him by the ear and took him out with him into the fresh air, where the white frost was and where the white moon was shining now.

"The soldiers are after us and know where we are, Kits. Pitch that stuff away."

"Not if – "

"And get the horses ready – quick! I will be with you in a moment."

He walked along the garden path in front of the big old farm, swung wide the farm gates, and propped them open. Then he went down on all fours and put his ear to the frost-bound country road and listened. "Yes," he added, "two miles away, and coming on sharp. Why not let them come? What does it matter how soon?" He strode back, however, with quick steps. Five minutes afterward he was at the door of the farm parlour again, with his cloak over his shoulder and his riding-whip in his hand.

"Boys, the redcoats are upon us!" he shouted "Each man to his horse."

"We are betrayed then!"

"We won't go and leave all the good things in this house," cried Stango. "Why, it's like the Bank of England upstairs, and I have the keys. I – "

"Stango, I shall certainly put a bullet through your head if you attempt to do anything more save to thank our worthy hose for his hospitality and give him up his keys. Do you hear?" he thundered forth. "Will you hang us all, you fool, by your delay?"

The highwaymen were scurrying out of the room now, a few in too much haste to thank the givers of the feast, the others bowing and shaking hands in mock burlesque of their chief. Stango had thrown down his keys and run for it.

"Sorry we must leave you, Master Pemberthy," said the captain, "but I certainly have the impression that a troop of horse soldiers is coming in this direction. Pure fancy, probably; but one cannot risk anything in these hard times. Your purse, sir, which I took this afternoon – I shall not require it. Buy Mistress Sophie a wedding with it. Good-night."

He bowed low, but he did not smile till he met Sophie's frightened looks; then he bowed still lower, hat in hand, and said good-night with a funny break in his voice and a longing look in his dark eyes that Sophie did not readily forget.

It was all like a dream after the highwaymen had put spurs to their horses and galloped away from Maythorpe Farm.

It will be fifteen years come next winter-time since the "Minions of the Moon" held high carnival at the farm of Reuben Pemberthy. Save that the trees about the homestead are full of rustling green leaves and there is sunshine where the white frost lay, the farm looks very much the same; the great thatched roof has taken a darker tinge, and all the gold in it has turned to gray, and the walls are more weather-beaten than of yore; but it is the old farm still, standing "foursquare," with the highroad to Finchley winding over the green hill yonder like a great, white, dusty snake Along the road comes a horseman at full speed, as though anxious to find a shelter before nightfall, for the king's highway in this direction is no safer than it used to be, and people talk of Abershaw and Barrington, and a man with sixteen strings to his hat, who are busy in this direction. But the days are long now, and it wants some hours before sundown, when the traveller leaps from his horse and stands under the broad eaves of the porch, where the creepers are growing luxuriantly and are full of fair white flowers.

The traveller is a good horseman, though he has passed the heyday of his youth. It is not for some three minutes afterward that his man-servant, hot and blown and powdered thick with dust, comes up on horseback after him and takes charge of his master's steed. The master is a man of forty years or more, and looking somewhat older than his years, his hair being very gray. He stoops a little between the shoulders too when off his guard, though he can look straight and stalwart enough when put to it. He is very dark, – a fiercer sun than that which shines on England has burned him a copper colour, – and he has a moustache that Munchausen might have envied.

He knocks at the door, and asks if Master Reuben Pemberthy can be seen at a moment's notice. The maid-servant looks surprised, but says, "My mistress is within, sir."

"Reuben Pemberthy's wife, that is," he mutters, pulling thoughtfully at his long moustache; "ah, well, perhaps she will see me."

"What name shall I say?"

"Sir Richard Isshaw; but she will not know the name."

He stands in the hall, looking about him critically; his man-servant, still mounted, goes slowly back toward the roadway with his master's horse and his own, where he remains in waiting. Presently, Sir Richard Isshaw is shown into the farm parlour, very cool and full of shadow, with great green plants on the broad recesses of the open window, and bees buzzing about them from the outer world.

A young woman in deep widow's weeds rises as he enters, and makes him one of those profound courtesies which were considered appropriate for the fair sex to display to those in rank and honour in the good old days when George was king. Surely a young woman still, despite the fifteen years that have passed, with a young supple figure and a pleasant unlined face. Eighteen years and fifteen only make thirty-three, and one can scarcely believe in time's inroads looking upon Sophie Pemberthy. The man cannot. He is surprised and he looks at her through tears in his dark eyes.

"You asked to see Mr. Reuben Pemberthy," she says, sadly. "You did not know that – "

"No, I did not know," he says, a little huskily; "I am a stranger to these parts; I have been long abroad."

"May I inquire the nature of your errand, Sir Richard?" she asks, in a low voice. "Though I am afraid I cannot be of any service as regards any business of the farm."

"How is that?" he asks, steadily keeping gaze upon her.

"The farm passes to Mr. Pemberthy's cousin in a few days' time."

"Indeed! Then you – "

He pauses half-way for a reply, but it is long in coming. Only the humming of the bees disturbs the silence of the room.

"Then you leave here?" he concludes at last.

"Yes. It is only the male Pemberthys who rule," she says.

"Your – your children?"

"My one little boy, my dear Algy, died before his father. It was a great disappointment to my husband that he should die. We female Pemberthys," she says, with a sudden real bright little smile that settles down into sadness again very quickly, "do not count for a great deal in the family."

"How long has Mr. Pemberthy been dead?"

"Six months."

"You are left poor?" he says, very quickly now.

"I – I don't think you have a right to ask me such a question, sir."

"I have no right," he replies. "These are foreign manners. Excuse them, please; don't mind me."

Still he is persistent.

"From son to son's son, and the women left anywhere and anyhow – that is the Pemberthy law, I expect. I have seen the workings of such a law before. Not that I ought to complain," he adds, with a forced laugh, – a laugh that Mrs. Pemberthy seems suddenly to remember, – "for I have profited thereby."

"Indeed!" says the farmer's widow, for the want of a better answer at the moment.

"I am a younger son; but all my brothers have been swept away by wars or pestilence, and I am "sent" for in hot haste – I, who had shaken the dust of England from my feet for fifteen years."

"Fifteen years?"

"Almost. Don't you recollect the last time I was in this room?"

"You – in this room, Sir Richard?"

"Yes; try and remember when that was. I only come to look at the old place and you, just for once, before I go away again. Try and think, Mistress Pemberthy, as I used to call you."

She looks into the red, sunburnt face, starts, blushes, and looks away.

"Yes, I remember. You are – "

"Well?"

"Captain Guy!"

"Yes, that is it; Richard Guy Isshaw, younger son, who went wholly to the bad – who turned highwayman – whom *you* saved. The only one out of the eight, – the rest were hanged at Tyburn and Kennington, poor devils, – and thought I would ride over and thank you, and see you once more. Your husband would have hanged me, I dare say – but there, there, peace to his soul."

"Amen," whispers Sophie Pemberthy.

"You saved me; you set me thinking of my young mother, who died when I was a lad and loved me much too well; and you taught me there were warm and loving hearts in the world; and when I went away from here I went away from the old life. I cannot say how that was; but," shrugging his shoulders, "so it was."

"It was a call," said Sophie, piously.

"A call to arms, for I went to the wars. And what is it now that brings me back here to thank you – an old, time-worn reprobate, turned soldier and turned respectable! – what is that?"

"I don't know."

"Another call, depend upon it. A call to Maythorpe, where I expected to find a fat farmer and his buxom partner and a crowd of laughing boys and girls; where I hoped I might be of help to some of them, if help were needed. And," he adds, "I find only you – and you just the same fair, bright girl I left behind me long ago."

"Oh no."

"It is like a dream; it is very remarkable to me. Yes, it's another call, Mistress Pemberthy, depend upon it."

And it is not the last call, either. The estate of Richard Isshaw lies not so many miles from Maythorpe Farm that a good long ride cannot overcome the distance between them. And the man turned respectable – the real baronet – is so very much alone and out of place in his big house that he knows not what to do.

And Mistress Pemberthy is very much alone too, and going out alone into the world, almost friendless, and with only two hundred pounds and perhaps the second-best bed – who knows? – as her share of her late loving, but rather hard and unsympathetic, husband's worldly goods.

And folks do say, Finchley way, that pretty Mistress Pemberthy will be Lady Isshaw before the winter sets in, and that it will be exactly fifteen years since these two first set eyes upon each other.

THE FOUR-FIFTEEN EXPRESS BY AMELIA B. EDWARDS

The events which I am about to relate took place between nine and ten years ago. Sebastopol had fallen in the early spring, the peace of Paris had been concluded since March, our commercial relations with the Russian empire were but recently renewed; and I, returning home after my first northward journey since the war, was well pleased with the prospect of spending the month of December under the hospitable and thoroughly English roof of my excellent friend, Jonathan Jelf, Esq., of Dumbleton Manor, Clayborough, East Anglia. Travelling in the interests of the well-known firm in which it is my lot to be a junior partner, I had been called upon to visit not only the capitals of Russia and Poland, but had found it also necessary to pass some weeks among the trading ports of the Baltic; whence it came that the year was already far spent before I again set foot on English soil, and that, instead of shooting pheasants with him, as I had hoped, in October, I came to be my friend's guest during the more genial Christmas-tide.

My voyage over, and a few days given up to business in Liverpool and London, I hastened down to Clayborough with all the delight of a school-boy whose holidays are at hand. My way lay by the Great East Anglian line as far as Clayborough station, where I was to be met by one of the Dumbleton carriages and conveyed across the remaining nine miles of country. It was a foggy afternoon, singularly warm for the 4th of December, and I had arranged to leave London by the 4:15 express. The early darkness of winter had already closed in; the lamps were lighted in the carriages; a clinging damp dimmed the windows, adhered to the door-handles, and pervaded all the atmosphere; while the gas-jets at the neighbouring book-stand diffused a luminous haze that only served to make the gloom of the terminus more visible. Having arrived some seven minutes before the starting of the train, and, by the connivance of the guard, taken sole possession of empty compartment, I lighted my travelling-lamp, made myself particularly snug, and settled down to the undisturbed enjoyment of a book and a cigar. Great, therefore, was my disappointment when, at the last moment, a gentleman came hurrying along the platform, glanced into my carriage, opened the locked door with a private key, a stepped in.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.