GOULD NAT

THE RUNAWAYS: A NEW AND ORIGINAL STORY

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Содержание

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NAT GOULD: AN APPRECIATION

NAT GOULD'S novels of the Turf are read and enjoyed by multitudes of men and women all over the world. That in itself is a guarantee of literary merit. Had he been a stylist, the sale of his hundred odd books would never have run into a score of millions. He wrote to please and not to puzzle, to give pleasure and not to educate, and his reward came in the gratitude of a host of admirers of clean, healthy fiction.

His main theme was the King of Sports and the Sport of Kings. Nat Gould dearly loved a horse, and so does the great British public, including those who have no liking for racing. It is a characteristic as national as our admiration of ships, sailors and the sea. The theme fascinated him, and, combined with a gift for writing, was one of the secrets of his success. Another reason for his almost boundless popularity is to be found in the "atmosphere" of his stories, which is created without elaborate literary setting. The machinery of it is hidden by reason of its very artlessness. The romance is told in a plain, straightforward

way that carries intense conviction, and though the plots are neither subtle nor involved, they are unfolded in so vigorous and lifelike a manner that few people who pick up one of Nat Gould's novels are able to put it down before having finished the last chapter. Few modern writers can boast that they are read and understood at a single sitting.

His novels ring true. They are clean, manly and sincere. There is nothing vicious about them. As *The Times* truly said of Nat Gould in its obituary notice of him, "He must have written some millions of words, but few of them were wasted, if a rattling good story makes a reader happier and more contented for having read it."

Such praise is praise indeed, for literature that is involved and appeals to a select few obviously cannot have the influence of literature that embraces so large a section of the population. To have added to the enjoyment of so vast a number of young and old, rich and poor, were a monument worthy of any man.

Nathaniel Gould was born in Manchester in 1857, and died in 1919. His wide experience as a journalist in England and Australia doubtless explained his methods of rapid workmanship, while his travels in the Antipodes and elsewhere afforded him that "local colour" which is not the least pleasing characteristic of his novels. He not only wrote of outdoor life, but enjoyed it, for racing, driving and gardening were his hobbies.

E. LATON BLACKLANDS.

CHAPTER I
AS THE SNOW FALLS

Redmond Maynard stood at the dining-room window gazing at the deep-dyed reflection upon the snow of the blood-red setting sun. The leafless trees, with their gnarled trunks and gaunt, twisted branches, spreading fiercely in imprecation at the hardness of their lot, resembled giant monsters from an unknown world. These diseased protruding growths put on all manner of fantastic shapes, as his eyes dwelt first upon one, then upon another. It was the shortening winter's day drawing near a close, and a spirit of melancholy brooded over the landscape. On such an evening as this, the thoughts of thinking men are apt to draw comparisons which bring vividly before them the uncertainty of life, and the prospects of that something after death which has never been understood, never will be, until each one solves the problem by going out into the eternal night.

It seemed to Redmond Maynard that he was peering into a mystery he had no hope of solving. He was not a godless man, neither was he a man whose life had been altogether well spent. His mistakes had been many; he acknowledged this, and thereby robbed his detractors of selfish victories. Slowly the sun sank, and as it dipped lower and lower into obscurity the red shadows on the snow grew fainter, the harshness melted, and

a gentle warmth seemed to mingle with the biting cold. The glow remained some time after the sun had disappeared, and Redmond Maynard stood in the same position watching it.

Then, almost without warning —

> "Out of the bosom of the air,
> Out of the cloud folds of her garment shaken —
> Over the woodlands brown and bare,
> Over the harvest fields forsaken,
> Silent and soft and slow,
> Descended the snow."

It came fluttering down from the "bosom of the air," to nestle in the bosom of the earth, to mingle with the white mantle lying there, to lie pure and undefiled until an angry thaw turned all its beauty into dulness and decay. How gently the flakes fell, and Redmond Maynard watched them with the warm glow from the fire shedding flickering light behind and around him.

"Shall I draw the curtain, sir?"

"No."

The man silently left the room, sighing as he did so, thinking to himself, "It's two years come to-night since Mr. Ulick left home. I wonder will he come back. The Squire's thinking of it now. God help 'em both."

"There will be no darkness to-night," muttered Redmond Maynard, as he saw a silvery ray cross the lawn in front of the house. No darkness, perhaps not, but in his heart there was a

desolate feeling deeper than the blackness of night. Two years ago Ulick Maynard walked out of that very room, and had not since returned. Bitter words were spoken between father and son. Both were proud. The accusation fell upon Ulick like a thunderbolt; for the moment he was stunned. Then, with his frozen blood bursting into a fiery torrent, he hurled back the insult his father had put upon him. He stayed not to think what causes led Redmond Maynard to make the charge. In his mind no evidence, however conclusively circumstantial, ought to have been considered sufficient to make his father speak such words.

The elder man recoiled under the shock. Given an opportunity, he would have recalled his words. But the chance was not allowed.

"Believing, as you must, or you would not have accused me, that I am guilty of this infamy, I will no longer inflict my presence upon you, sir. Good-night."

No more, no less; those were the very words, and Ulick Maynard left the room. That was two years ago, and nothing had been heard of him since.

"Ulick!" called his father, as the door closed behind him. "Come back at once. Ulick!"

No answer was returned, and the still angry man thought, "He'll get over it by morning. Gad, what a devil of a temper he has. He's the culprit, safe enough, although Eli will not hear of it."

Ulick Maynard did not "get over it by morning." He disappeared, and his father had never been the same man

since. Without drawing the curtains, Redmond Maynard left the window, and, walking to the fireplace, stood with his back to the blaze.

Stretched on the hearthrug was a strong, powerful, shaggy wolf-hound. Bersak raised his long, lean head, and looked at his master, but observing no sign that his services were required, stretched himself out again at full length with a sigh of satisfaction. There was ample room between the dog and the hearth for his master to stand, and Redmond Maynard looked down upon him from a height of nearly six feet.

"His dog," he muttered. "Bersak, where's Ulick?"

The hound sprang to his feet and stood alert, every nerve strained, head erect, listening for footsteps he had not heard for two years, but which he would have recognised even amidst the deadening snow. Man and dog looked at each other. That question had been asked before.

"Bersak, where's Ulick?"

Rather shaky the tones this time, and something in them affected the hound, for he lifted up his head and whined; the sound would have developed into a howl, but Redmond Maynard placed his hand on his head and said —

"Don't howl, Bersak, I could not stand it. Lie down. Good dog, lie down."

Obedient to the word of command, Bersak lowered himself – no other word adequately expresses the dog's movement, – to the hearthrug, and with his fore-paws stretched out watched the

Squire's face.

How much would Redmond Maynard have given to see the door open and his son Ulick walk in. All he possessed – aye, more, many years of his life. He knew how Bersak would have leapt [to] his feet with a mighty bark of welcome, and a spring forward until his strong paws reached Ulick's shoulders.

He fixed his eyes on the door, and as he did so it opened. But it was not Ulick entering, although the newcomer brought a faint smile on his face.

"Irene!" he exclaimed, as the vision in furs came across the fire-lit room; "this is good of you. However did you get here; is it still snowing?"

"No, Squire, it is not snowing, although there is plenty of snow; and as to how I came here, well – look at my boots," and she held up her dress and disclosed a pair of strong "lace-ups," fitting perfectly her well-shaped feet.

"So you walked all the way from the Manor, and with the express object of cheering a lonely old man on a depressing winter's evening. I call that good of you, positively charitable, but Irene Courtly's name is ever associated with good works," said the Squire.

"I am afraid the good work on this occasion is closely allied with selfishness," she replied, smiling. "Being alone, I appreciate the feelings of others similarly situated, and that is how I came to think of you."

"Alone!" he exclaimed. "Where is Warren?"

"Gone to London. Important business. No hunting, you see, Squire," she said, with a laugh he thought had not a very true ring about it.

Redmond Maynard gave an impatient gesture, and Bersak pushed his head against her hand in doggish sympathy. Irene Courtly noticed the movement, and said —

"He really had to go; he assured me it was absolutely necessary," she said.

Warren Courtly had also added. "I'll be back in a few days, Irene. Run over and see the Squire, you will be company for each other."

"You cannot humbug me, Irene," said Redmond Maynard. "He's tired of the country because there is no sport, and I call it downright selfish of him to go up to town and leave you behind at Anselm Manor."

"But, really, I did not wish to go, Squire."

"You mean it?"

"Yes, most decidedly."

"Then pull off those furs; let me send Bob over for your things and your maid, and stay here until Warren returns," said the Squire.

This time the laugh was hearty enough, and she said —

"Impetuous as ever, Squire. I only wish I could."

"And what is to prevent your doing so?"

"My duty towards my neighbours," said Irene, laughing.

"Love your neighbour as yourself, and I am your nearest

neighbour," he answered.

Then, going to the window, he opened it, and, putting out his arm for a few moments, drew it in again and showed her the snowflakes on his coat-sleeve.

"You cannot possibly return to the Manor in such weather," he said, and touched the bell.

"Can you drive, or ride, to Anselm Manor, Bob?" he asked.

The man shook his head doubtfully.

"I'll try, sir."

"Take the old mare and 'the tub,' and bring Mrs. Courtly's maid back. She will know what her mistress requires."

"Yes, sir, I'll manage it," replied Bob Heather, with alacrity.

Mary Marley, Mrs. Courtly's maid, was Bob Heather's favourite, and he had an idea she preferred him to any of her admirers.

"The maid did it," said the Squire, with a smile. "I doubt if he would have undertaken the journey for the luggage alone."

Irene laughed, and then, in a serious mood, said, as she stroked Bersak's head, "Do you think it right for me to remain here. You are my oldest friend, and my guardian until I married Warren. Ought I to stay?"

"Of course, of course," he replied impatiently. "It is snowing fast again. Warren would not expect you to go home on such a night."

She settled down to spend a quiet evening with him. She knew what this night meant to him, what it might have meant to her

had all gone well with Ulick.

Watching him as he sat with the firelight on his face, she noticed how he had aged during the past year. No, not aged exactly, for he was still a firm, strong, active man; but there was something in his noble, if severe, face that told of a great struggle racking him within.

She knew the largeness of his heart, and his notions of honour, which many modern hypocrites laughed at, because their little minds could not grasp his greatness. She remembered how he guarded her [as] his own child when her father, Colonel Carstone, died and left her as a legacy to his old friend. He brought her as a girl of sixteen to Hazelwell, and said —

"Irene, this is your home. Your father gave you to me, and it is a sacred gift. You will get on with Ulick, he is a good lad, and you have known each other for some years. Hazelwell will be the brighter for your presence."

She revered Redmond Maynard above all men, and whatever he did she considered right, until – until Ulick left his home.

"He is thinking of him now," she thought. "Oh, why does he not come home? The old scandal is dead; I have forgiven him, surely he has – he must."

Bersak sat with his head in her lap looking into her face, his sharp, keen eyes blinking, and occasionally he turned to look at the silent figure in the chair. Irene did not disturb him, but to know his thoughts she would have given much.

She saw his hands clench the chair tightly – sure sign of a

strong man's emotion.

Quietly she rose from her seat, took a footstool, placed it beside him, and sat at his feet. She laid her head on his knee; Bersak followed her and lay at her feet. They formed a pretty group in the firelight's glow. The room was warm and cosy, although large; outside, the snow was still falling, adding steadily to the frozen mass upon which it descended.

Redmond Maynard placed his hand on her head and gently stroked her hair. She remained silent and quite still.

"It is like old times to have you here again," he said at length.

"And I am very glad to be with you. Will you play chess, shall I read to you, or will you talk?" she said.

"Being a woman, Irene, I will talk to you."

"Am I such a chatterbox?" she answered, laughing.

"Not that, anything but that. You speak when you have something to say; you are not an aimless chatterer."

"Warren says my tongue is never still."

"Warren is an ass," he snapped.

"Oh, dear no, not at all. He is by no means stupid."

"I retract; I ought not to have made use of the expression."

"I will keep it to myself in strict confidence," she replied, with a smile.

The door opened, and a maid said —

"Shall I light the lamps, sir?"

"Please."

The room was soon aglow with a soft, delicate light, and as

the maid went out she said to herself —

"Well, I never. The ways of these gentry are past me. Fancy her sitting like that, and going to stop here all night. It's not respectable."

She was a new maid, with a narrow mind and a relaxable conscience, which could be stretched to any required length to suit her own purposes.

The maid, the luggage, and Bob Heather duly arrived. Bob had taken good care Mary Marley should not be cold during the drive.

"Are you tired, Irene?"

"No. I will sit up until you are ready to go."

"An hour longer, and then I shall pack you off," he said.

"And you?"

"I shall be up all night."

"All night?" she exclaimed, in surprise, "Why?"

"Because it is the night, two years ago, that Ulick left home. I sat up all night on this date last year. I know it will be on a night such as this he will come back."

"To-night, not to-night? Will he come home to-night?" she asked, eagerly.

"How can I tell, child? If he does not I must wait another year," he said, sadly.

"You have forgiven him?"

"Yes; but not his sin," he said.

"Are you sure, quite sure, it is his sin?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, there is no doubt about it."

"But Eli Todd – " she commenced.

"Is wrong," he answered. "He is blinded by his faith in Ulick. Eli would sacrifice even more than he has done for him, and God knows how he has suffered."

"I wish we had Eli's faith," she replied.

CHAPTER II
THE RUNAWAYS

There was a stud of thoroughbreds at Hazelwell, not large, but select, some of the mares boasting of blue blood such as can seldom be obtained after much search. Eli Todd was the manager of the stud, and lived in a small but picturesque and comfortable cottage on the estate. He served in the – th Hussars with Colonel Carstone, and during the time they were in India he acquired a considerable knowledge of horses of every description. He handled the Colonel's "Walers," and broke them in cleverly; he also trained the Colonel's horses for the races, and on one occasion had the audacity to declare he meant to win the Viceroy's Cup for his master, a feat he all but accomplished, as the Scout ran a good second for that coveted trophy.

When Colonel Carstone died, and Irene was committed to the care of Redmond Maynard, Eli Todd entered his service at the same time. It was owing to Irene that he did so. She persuaded her guardian that Eli was a veritable wonder in the management of horses, and that she was perfectly certain that if his services were secured Hazelwell Stud would benefit thereby.

Ulick Maynard backed up her recommendation, declaring he had cast curious eyes upon Eli ever since he returned from India with the Colonel.

"Lose no time in securing him," said Ulick; "such a man will be snapped up at once. Don't lose him whatever you do."

Redmond Maynard engaged Eli to manage his stud, and also to superintend the hunters and all the horses on the estate – a step he had never regretted. Eli was a widower with one child, a daughter, Janet Todd. She was about the same age as Irene, and a bright, merry, mischievous, exceedingly pretty girl. Vanity was her besetting sin, but apart from this she was of an amiable disposition, and innocent of any desire beyond harmless flirtations. Naturally her father idolised her, and it was mainly on her account he accepted the position Mr. Maynard offered him.

The night that Redmond Maynard sat up, hoping against hope that his son would return, Eli Todd was in a troubled state of mind.

Like his master, he dated the great misfortune of his life two years back from that night. He recalled vividly how his daughter Janet had kissed him good-night and then gone to bed. Her manner gave no indication of what was to befall during the next few hours.

He remembered how he sat waiting for her to come down to breakfast, wondering what kept her so long. Her room was above that in which he sat, and he heard no movement on the floor above. The strain became too great, and at last he could bear it no longer. He did not ring for the housekeeper, but crept upstairs and tapped gently at her door. There was no answer, and as he sat now, two years after, he felt again the throbbing of

his heart in anticipation of some unknown evil he experienced on that occasion. He knocked again, and then slowly, noiselessly opened the door.

The room was empty, the bed had not been slept upon. Dazed and bewildered, he failed at first to understand what it meant. The stillness stunned him, and he groped his way forward like a blind man. Mechanically he ran his hands over the spotless counterpane, seeking, feeling for that he knew he should not find. He looked under the bed, in a closet, and even in her wardrobe; she was hiding, playing him a trick, but where had she hidden herself?

He sat down in the chair at her bedside and looked helplessly about the room. He fingered the candlestick which stood on a small table near the bed, examining it with unusual interest. There was an old pair of snuffers there, and he took them up and pressed the wick, which stuck fast, and the candle with the snuffers attached fell on the table. He put the empty candlestick on the bed and got up.

Walking to the window, he drew up the blinds and looked round the room again. He was near the dressing-table, and picked up one article after another. He did not look for a letter, a brief note; he would not have found one had he done so. She had gone, left him desolate without one parting word.

Still in a dazed condition, and not fully realising his loss, he went out of the room, closing the door after him, and stumbled downstairs.

Mrs. Marley, his housekeeper, heard him, and came into the room,

"Is Janet ill?" she asked, in a tone of concern.

"Yes," he replied, in a hollow voice. "I will take her breakfast upstairs."

"I can take it myself," she replied.

"No; please let me do it."

"Very well, but you spoil her, Mr. Todd; it is not good for her," said Mrs. Marley.

He laughed strangely, and she looked at him in surprise. He took the tray upstairs, placed it on the table at the bedside, and locked the door as he came out, putting the key in his pocket. Why he did this he failed to understand, except that he wanted time to think.

He was going over again everything that happened that terrible night. He had considered it many times, and he would not lay the guilt at Ulick's door; no, not even after two years of grave suspicion, which had not yet been removed. He once more saw the door open and Ulick Maynard come in out of the snowy night. He heard the startled cry Janet gave as she sprang from her chair, and her exclamation, "Mr. Ulick, what are you doing here?" rang in his ears.

"Eli, I want to sit down and think," Ulick had said, and, wonderingly, he bade him make the house his home, as he had always done.

Janet, pale and bewildered, left the room.

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Ulick?" asked Eli.

"You'll learn soon enough," was the vague reply; and then he saw Ulick take out his pocket-book and count some notes.

"Have some supper?" said Eli.

"No, I dined at home an hour ago." Then he looked hard at Eli. Surely he knew what people were saying, knew of the gossip about Janet. It amazed him when he had to acknowledge that Eli Todd was the only person in the village who was in ignorance of what concerned him most.

"Where's Janet? I must speak to her," said Ulick.

Eli called her, and she came slowly into the room, her face as pale as death.

"Mr. Ulick wishes to speak to you. I'll leave you together, I want to look at Blossom again."

What passed between them he never knew; what he did know was that next morning Janet was gone.

As he sat crushed and stunned under the blow, there came a furious knocking at the door, and Mrs. Marley called out in an agitated voice —

"It's the Squire, and isn't he in a rage!"

As Eli sat in his chair by the fire he again conjured up the picture of Redmond Maynard striding furiously into the room, knocking the snow from his boots with his hunting crop.

"Is my son here, or has he been here?" he asked, angrily.

"He was here last night," said Eli, in a hollow voice.

"And is he here still?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know; he went away after – after – "

"After what?" thundered the Squire.

"After he had seen Janet about something he wished to say to her," said Eli, slowly.

"And where is the hussey; d – n it, man, where is she?"

Eli strode up to him, and looking him full in the face, said —

"Not that word from you, Squire, take it back, take it back; she is my child."

Redmond Maynard controlled his feelings.

"It is a hard word, Eli, I ought not to have used it. You have sufficient to bear without that," he said.

"He knows," thought Eli. "How does he know?" and he looked at the Squire, who could not fail to notice his surprise.

"May I speak with your daughter?" said the Squire; and from this Eli knew there was some mystery he did not yet grasp.

"She is gone," he replied, in a low voice, for the first time acknowledging the dreadful truth.

"Left your house!" exclaimed Redmond Maynard.

"Yes. I found her room empty this morning, but I have, so far, concealed her flight from my housekeeper."

Redmond Maynard strode up and down the room, muttering threats and imprecations.

"He has stolen her from you, Eli; but he shall pay for it dearly. He is even a greater scoundrel than I accused him of being," said

the Squire.

"Do you know who has tempted my daughter to leave me?" asked Eli, placing his hand on the Squire's arm in his earnestness.

"Man, you must know," replied the Squire, amazed at his stupidity. "Have you noticed nothing wrong with her during the past few weeks?"

"No, my Janet has always been the same to me until last night."

The Squire's rage against Ulick passed all bounds. He had accused him of trifling with Janet's affections, and now, to crown his offence, the graceless fellow had induced her to run away with him.

"My son came here last night," he said. "You left him alone with your daughter, and it was no doubt during that time they planned to go away together. He has taken her from you, Eli, and I hope he will make her an honest woman. To think a son of mine should be such a scoundrel. Ulick, whom I have loved beyond all others, it is too terrible."

At last Eli Todd understood. His daughter, the pride of his life, the prettiest of all the village lasses, was a light o' love, and Ulick, his favourite, to whom he would have entrusted her life, was accused of betraying her. The shock of this discovery overwhelmed him, but he had more faith in Ulick than his father had.

"If a man has tempted my daughter to leave my home and follow him, it is not Mr. Ulick, Squire," said Eli, solemnly. "He'd never do it; he'd cut off his right hand first. You wrong him, and

you'll regret the day you taxed him with such a charge."

Redmond Maynard wondered at the man's faith in his son. To his mind the proof was clear as day, especially now Janet Todd had disappeared at the same time as Ulick.

"Your feelings do you credit," he replied; "but the evidence is too clear. You know as well as I that when people hear Ulick and Janet have disappeared, they will say they went together. Can it be otherwise? They have been great friends, constantly meeting, and have often been seen alone together. My son has done you a great and grievous wrong, and I must do all in my power to lessen the blow."

"I'll hear no words against Mr. Ulick, Squire. True, he came here last night, but he left long before Janet could have gone. I will never believe it of him. It was not his nature to do evil. He'll prove it some day. As for my poor lass, God help her. She'll come back to me some day, when her heart is sore and aching for her father's love. Whatever she is, whatever she may have done, I will never refuse her the shelter of my home and name. We don't know all, Squire; there may be something we cannot understand, but which will be explained in the future. But Mr. Ulick! Why, Squire, I'd as soon accuse myself of crime as him."

Two years ago this scene took place between master and man, and Eli still held firm in his belief in the stainless honour of Ulick Maynard. No word had come from Janet during all that time. Where she was he knew not, but he thought of her day and night, and as he went about his work he offered up many a plea for her

return.

"The Squire 'll be thinking of Ulick to-night," he muttered, as he rose from his chair, went to the door, and looked out into the night.

Snow was still falling softly, and the moon bathed the landscape in silvery splendour. As he looked, he heard the faint, dull sound of a horse's hoofs on the snow, and the rumble of clogged wheels.

"Where can they be going from the house to-night?" he thought, and then recognised Bob Heather, seated in "the tub," and almost smothered in wraps.

"Hallo, Eli, that you? A nice job I've got, fetching Mrs. Courtly's maid, and a heap of luggage, from Anselm a night like this."

"Going to Anselm!" exclaimed Eli. "What's up there?"

"Seems to me everything's up. Mr. Courtly's gone up to London on most important business, and left Mrs. Courtly alone. He's always got business in London. I'd know what it was if I was her. She came over to see the Squire, and he's made her stop with him. I say, Eli, don't you think she'd have been a lot better off if she'd married Mr. Ulick?"

"Mind your own business," growled Eli. "It don't concern you; and as to what I think, I'll keep it to myself."

"It's two years since he left us, and the Squire's been thinking about it all night. He's got a notion Mr. Ulick will come back at this time of year."

"So he will, and I hope my lass will come too," said Eli.

"You still think they did not go away together?" asked Bob.

"I don't say that, but I'll swear Mr. Ulick never harmed a hair of her head," said Eli.

"He's a rum 'un," thought Bob. "Why, everybody knows they ran off together; that's what made the Squire so bitter."

"Have a glass of ale?" said Eli.

"Thanks, you keep a better tap than they have at Hazelwell."

"I drink it myself," said Eli, smiling, "and order it myself. I expect it's not the Squire's fault if you don't get the best."

"No, it's not. Old Josh knows how many beans make five, and I'll bet he charges top price for the stuff he gets in for us," said Bob.

Eli went indoors and came out with a foaming tankard of ale, which Bob Heather made short work of.

"That will keep me warm," he said, with a sigh of satisfaction.

"You have plenty of rugs, are you afraid the luggage will catch cold?" said Eli, slyly.

"Luggage be blowed," said Bob. "These things are for Mary; she'd never forgive me if she caught a cold," and he shook the reins and proceeded on his journey.

CHAPTER III
RANDOM

Squire Maynard remained in the dining-room throughout the night. Towards morning he fell asleep in his arm-chair, Bersak watching on the rug at his feet. It would have gone ill with the man who attempted to touch the Squire with Bersak on guard. More than one poacher had felt the hound's teeth in his calf, and howled for mercy, and been forgiven on account of the punishment received.

Bersak once saved Ulick's life, or if not his life, at any rate rescued him from being maimed.

A three-year-old bull attacked him, and there was no chance of escape. The furious beast had Ulick at his feet, and was bellowing over him, as a preliminary to goring him, when Bersak came to the rescue. The wolf-hound tore across the field in a direct line for the bull, who, seeing him, raised his head and bellowed forth defiance. On came Bersak, and flew straight at the bull's throat. He tore him terribly, but the animal could not rid himself of his fierce enemy. Never had bull such a mauling, and when Ulick came to himself he saw the dog still dragging his enemy down. It was a long struggle, but Bersak won, and the bull was shot to end his misery.

Bersak's fame spread far and wide, and he had the honour of

having several attempts made upon his life by the bad characters in the district.

So, while his master slept, Bersak kept watch; and when the door was opened by Bob Heather in the morning a faint growl warned the intruder that his master still slept. He closed the door and went quietly away, thinking it was a blessing the Squire had not kept awake all night.

A faint light stole into the room as Redmond Maynard awoke, and at first he looked round, hardly realising where he was. Then, as he thought over the events of the previous day, he said to himself, "Not this year. I must be patient; perhaps it will be in the next." Then he drew aside the curtains and looked again upon the wintry scene. A good deal of snow had fallen during the night, and the wind drifted it against the hedges and the trunks of the huge oak trees. There was no sign of life until a hare ran across the lawn into the garden, where there was a plentiful supply of winter vegetables. Presently stealing along with his tail out, head down, and glancing from side to side with a cunning look, came a fox. He, too, crossed the lawn in the track of the hare, and the Squire smiled as he watched him.

"You are having a rest, my friend," he said; "but I think you would prefer the hounds at your heels, and an open country before you, in preference to all the snow. No hunting for weeks, that is what it looks like. Deuce take Warren, I wonder why he always goes to town when there is an excuse handy. Was I right in advising Irene to marry him. I think so, I hope so; but yet I

doubt. He is good-looking, has money, a fine estate adjoining mine, bears a good character, as young men go, and yet there is something wanting about him. He must love Irene, no one could help it, but he has no business to leave her alone to her own devices. She is young, has no children yet, nothing to occupy her mind; no, it is not fair to her. In a hunting country like this the free-and-easy intercourse at the meets sometimes leads to danger. Nothing is meant at first, but gradually acquaintance ripens into intimacy, and one cannot well decline to put up a fellow sportsman, even if one's husband be absent. Irene is to be trusted, I know, but she is remarkably handsome, and her good nature is apt to carry her too far in her efforts to please. If only Ulick had – but there, he didn't, so what is the use of thinking about it. Stupid fellow, not to see his way clear, and then to disgrace our name beyond all redemption. I wonder where he is, and where she is?" He stopped soliloquising, and went to the bath-room, from whence, in about half-an-hour, he emerged refreshed and in a more amiable frame of mind. In the breakfast-room he found Irene.

She came forward smiling, and kissed him.

"There, was not that nice? You do not deserve it though, for you sat up all night."

"Who has been telling tales?" he asked.

"Bersak."

He laughed as be said, "And, pray, how is Bersak to be held responsible?"

"He took me into the dining-room, and I followed him to your chair. He stood looking at it so comically that I had to laugh. He said as plainly as though he had spoken, 'That's where he sat all night, and I watched him. No fear of anyone touching him with me on guard.'"

"Wonderful," laughed the Squire. "Irene, with Bersak as your instructor and guide, you would quickly find out all my secrets."

"I did not know you had any."

"They are not very terrible, but I possess a few; I must be in the fashion," he said.

"I have no secrets from Warren. I tell him everything."

"I wonder if he tells you everything," thought Redmond Maynard, and said aloud, "That's right, my dear, never have any secrets from your husband."

She poured out his coffee for him, and handed it herself. She tempted him with a dainty portion of pigeon pie, and then insisted upon some anchovy paste.

"I'll tell you what it is, Irene; I have not made such a good breakfast for many a day. Your presence is appetising."

She was pleased to hear him talk in this strain, more like his old self. Somehow, she did not miss Warren; she hardly gave him a thought. As for Anselm Manor, she much preferred Hazelwell, as it was more like home.

At the Manor she often felt nervous and depressed when alone, peopling the old place with the figures of clean-shaven monks in long brown gowns, pacing up and down the corridors, Bible in

hand or telling their beads, and thinking of things earthly while engaged spiritually.

Anselm Manor, in the centuries gone by, had been a monastery, and it was an ancestor of Warren Courtly who founded it. Harry the Eighth upset many monkish arrangements, but, strange to say, he allowed Anselm to exist. The much-married monarch never even visited the place on a monk hunt, although it contained much valuable plate, and the eighth Henry had a penchant for other people's property.

In Anselm Manor Irene had come across an old deed, or she fancied it a deed. It looked dirty and musty, and smelt abominably enough to be such a document, which, after much labour in deciphering, she found was a gift in perpetuity from Henry the Eighth, by the Grace of God, to one Anselm Courtly, of the monastery and all the lands belonging to it.

She thought it highly probable that the King had secured the said Anselm's good offices, at a price, when some of his numerous matrimonial troubles arose.

Irene thought the Manor a fine old place, but she preferred to see its rooms filled with scarlet coats to imaginary monkish habits. It was to get rid of morbid fancies she walked over to Hazelwell when her husband took his departure for London. They got on well together, seldom quarrelled, although there was very little genuine love on her side.

About six months after Ulick Maynard left Hazelwell, Warren Courtly proposed to Irene. She declined the offer,

but subsequently, acting mainly on her guardian's advice, she accepted him, and they were married the same year.

Redmond Maynard watched her moving about the room, and noticed how daintily she rearranged the various ornaments and chairs.

"There," she said, "that looks much better."

"I agree with you," he replied. "You have the artistic temperament strongly developed. By the way, have you done much painting during the past few months?"

"Yes, I have painted several pictures, but three out of every four I destroyed."

"They did not come up to your expectations?"

"No, and I do not care to keep inferior work. I think I have painted one that will please you."

"What is it – the subject?"

"A new departure for me. I have painted Random; I mean to give it you if you will accept it."

"That is good of you. I shall be delighted. Random shall have a prominent place in my study."

Random was a bright bay horse Redmond Maynard had given Irene on her marriage. He was a splendid hunter, either for lady or gentleman, and before Ulick left the horse had been his favourite.

Irene had been given the pick of the Hazelwell stable, and she selected Random because he had been Ulick's horse, and she thought, perhaps, his father would sell him now he was gone.

Random was duly sent over to Anselm Manor, and Irene

vowed she would not part with him until Ulick came home, when she would hand him back to his rightful owner. She had ridden the horse in many a fast burst across country, and he carried her well. He was a safe, fearless jumper, and Irene was a splendid rider. When she appeared at a meet on Random, Sam Lane, the huntsman, thought, "We're in for it to-day; it will take the best of us all our time to keep up with Mrs. Courtly on Random." His surmise generally turned out correct, and on more than one occasion he and Irene were the only two in at the death. Many attempts had been made by sporting millionaires, American and otherwise, to secure Random, and a big figure would have been given for him, but Irene laughed at their offers, and said a shipload of gold would not buy him.

Random was sometimes the cause of dispute between Irene and her husband. Warren Courtly was ridiculously jealous of the horse. He would have scouted the idea that this feeling was engendered because Random had been Ulick Maynard's favourite horse, and yet Irene knew such to be the case. On more than one occasion he had suggested Random should be sold, or the Squire persuaded to make an exchange for him. His excuse was that the horse was not safe for a lady to ride, too much of a puller, and so on. Irene remained firm, and declined to entertain any ideas suggesting a parting with her favourite.

"You seem to care more for the horse than you do for me," he said, angrily.

She laughed, and said he must have a very poor opinion of

himself if he thought she preferred Random.

"Mr. Maynard was kind enough to give him to me, and I mean to keep him. Don't let us quarrel about such a trifle. You would not like it if I asked you to give up your favourite hunter for a mere whim of mine."

"Has Warren become reconciled to Random?" asked the Squire. "I cannot understand his antipathy to the horse. Of course, he is anxious you should not run into danger, but Random is a very safe horse to ride – a more perfect fencer I have seldom seen."

"Warren has his likes and dislikes, and when he makes up his mind he seldom gives in. Random seems to have been his pet aversion ever since you gave him to me, and I do not think even now he would be at all sorry if he met with an accident, provided I came off scot free," laughed Irene.

"It is ridiculous. I begin to think I urged you to marry a monument of selfishness; I hope you will forgive me."

"You require no forgiveness. You provided me with a suitable husband and a good home. Warren is kind to me, and I have everything my own way. He is not a demonstrative man, but I feel sure he loves me, and he is not responsible for his restless disposition – that is inherited."

"And do you love him, Irene?" he asked.

She momentarily hesitated, and then said —

"Yes, I love him. We seem to understand each other now, although at first there was some restraint between us. I think we

are quite as happy as the majority of married couples."

He was only half satisfied with her answer, but did not pursue the subject further.

"Is the painting of Random finished?" he asked.

"Yes, but not framed."

"May I send Bob over for it?"

"I will ride over myself if you will give me a mount," she said.

"The roads are very bad, will it be safe?"

"The horse can be 'roughed,' and I shall enjoy a ride in the keen morning air, it will brace me up."

"Very well, Irene. I will order Rupert to be saddled, he is the safest conveyance you can have in this weather."

CHAPTER IV
IRENE'S PAINTING

Irene mounted Rupert, and the Squire stood on the steps in front of the hall-door admiring the picture. The horse was a dark brown, nearly black, and stood out prominently against the snowy background. It was a sharp, crisp morning, the atmosphere clear, with a touch of frost in the air, and the sun shone brightly, the snow quivering in the light, glittering like myriads of crystals.

Rupert pawed the gravel in his eagerness to be going, and the Squire remarked, as he shook hands with Irene —

"You must come back as soon as you can. If you find the picture too cumbersome to carry leave it and we will send Bob for it."

"I can strap it on my back, I have a case made for the purpose. I often ride out with my sketching materials strapped on. You would take me for a tramp if you saw me walking about in my artist's costume," said Irene, laughing.

"A remarkably pretty tramp," said the Squire.

"Thanks, I will turn that compliment over in my mind as I ride to the Manor; it will be pleasant company for me."

Rupert set off at a brisk trot. He was at all times a sure-footed horse, and being roughed he had no difficulty in keeping his feet.

Irene's colour rose as the sharp breeze fanned her cheeks, and

she was thoroughly enjoying her ride.

She went past the stud farm, and came across Eli Todd, who had been going his rounds.

Next to his runaway daughter, Janet, Eli Todd was devoted to Irene. He had known her from a child, had taught her to ride, and was proud of her accomplishment. He stood admiring her as she rode up.

"Good-morning, Eli; how are all your pets? I expect this weather does not suit some of them, but, of course, you have no foals yet?" said Irene.

"Everything is going on well," he replied; "but I am a bit anxious about old Honeysuckle."

"She must be getting on for twenty?" said Irene.

"Not far off that, Mrs. Courtly; in fact, I feel sure she is twenty, only it would not do to tell the Squire so, because he vows she is only eighteen, he won't hear of her being more," replied Eli, smiling.

"There is not much difference between eighteen and twenty; but why are you anxious about Honeysuckle, is there anything seriously amiss with her? I am going through Helton, and can ask Bard to call."

James Bard was the well-known county vet., and he lived at the little village of Helton, giving as his reason, "I prefer Helton; if I had my residence in the county town, people would be always demanding my services for all kinds of frivolous cases; it is a far way to Helton, and when they take the trouble to come for me I

know the case is worth going to."

"No, thank you," replied Eli. "It is not necessary for Jim Bard to be called in, and I hope it will not be."

"Then what is it?" asked Irene.

"The old mare is very heavy in foal, and I'm mightily afraid the youngster will come into the world before the first of January, and there's no need to tell you that would be a misfortune," replied Eli.

"If he was born on December 31st it would mean he would be a year old on January 1st," said Irene, smiling.

"That's just it, and look what a disadvantage he would be at all his life. I may be wrong, but I assure you I am having a very anxious time."

"Have you told Mr. Maynard?"

"No, and please say nothing about it to him. He would only worry, and be constantly backwards and forwards between the house and the stables. You know how fond he is of the old mare."

"Honeysuckle is one of his great favourites, and no wonder; it is a good many years since she won the Oaks and the St. Leger for him. That is a fine painting he has of her in his study. I am afraid my poor effort will look very paltry beside it."

"Have you taken to painting horses?" asked Eli. He believed Irene capable of doing almost anything she put her hand to.

"I have tried to paint Random, and I am riding over to the Manor for the painting, as the Squire is anxious to see it."

"He'll make a grand picture; he's a fine subject to work on.

There are not many hunters like him in the county. He was Mr. Ulick's favourite, and I was precious glad when you got him, for I was very much afraid the Squire would have sold him."

"You were very fond of Ulick, were you not, Eli?" she asked, in a soft tone of voice.

"To my mind there's not a man round these parts to compare with him."

"And you do not believe he ran away with Janet?"

"He never did that, I'll swear. You know he was not a man of that sort."

"Suspicion was, and still is, strong against him," she said.

"You cannot judge a man on suspicion, and in your heart you do not believe him guilty," he said.

"How can I believe otherwise? Who else could have done it?"

"I wish I could find out," he answered, vehemently. "I will some day, and then – "

"What then?"

"Something will happen. When I stand face to face with the man who stole my girl, he'll have to look to himself," said Eli, sternly.

"Do you think Janet will ever come back?" she asked.

"Yes, as sure as I believe Mr. Ulick will."

"I hope you will prove a true prophet," she replied. "If Ulick came back to Hazelwell and cleared himself, it would make a young man of the Squire. I should like to look round the stables, but I have no time now."

"Come when you like, I shall be only too pleased to show you the mares. Don't say anything to the Squire about Honeysuckle, please, Mrs. Courtly."

"I will not; I am discretion itself in such matters," laughed Irene, as she rode away.

It was four miles to the Manor, and when she arrived there she thought how cold and forbidding the old place looked when compared with Hazelwell.

The housekeeper was surprised to see her, and bustled about briskly.

"I am not going to remain long," said Irene. "I have merely come for a picture. I suppose Mr. Courtly has not returned?"

"No, but there is a letter for you, and it is his handwriting on the envelope."

Irene went into the morning-room and found some letters in the basket on the table.

She opened the one from her husband first. It was brief and to the point.

> "Dear Irene, – I shall not be home for a week. If you feel lonely, go over to Hazelwell; I am sure the Squire will give you a warm welcome. Business must be attended to, you know, and the Anselm Estate takes a good deal of looking after. With love, I am, &c., Warren."

"Et cetera," said Irene to herself, smiling. "That's so like Warren. He is made up of et ceteras – it may mean much or little – it is so delightfully vague."

A faint odour of perfume was perceptible, and she wondered where it came from. The letter was still in her hand, and as she wafted it carelessly about she discovered the paper was highly scented.

"That's not club paper," she thought. "Clubs are too prosaic to have scented paper about, besides, there is no heading; he must have written it at some friend's house. But why should it be a plain sheet with no address? And what a peculiar scent. My dear Warren, this requires some explanation; I will carefully preserve your eloquent epistle. Scented paper and legal affairs do not go well together, not in the management of estates, although I have no doubt breach of promise cases agree with it."

She folded the letter, and put it in the drawer of her writing-desk.

Two letters were addressed to Warren, and these she placed on one side; the fourth bore the London postmark, and she did not know the writing. The contents puzzled her. The letter was a request for money to enable the writer to tide over temporary difficulties. It was signed Felix Hoffman. She had never heard the name before. Why did the man write to her? How came he to know her address? It was a strange begging-letter, for no hint was given as to the writer's position, how he came to be in distress, why he wrote to her, or any information that was likely to induce her to accede to his request. The strangeness of the letter appealed to her. She firmly believed the man wanted money, also that he would repay her. There was no whining about it, none of

the professional begging-letter writer's ways. Half-a-dozen lines, and no sum mentioned. The address sounded genuine – 25, Main Street, Feltham, Middlesex. Where was Feltham? She took up Bradshaw's Guide, and found it was on the London and South-Western line, between Waterloo and Windsor. She had never heard of the place before, although she must have passed it on her way to Sunningdale for the Ascot week. Irene was given to making up her mind on the spur of the moment, and she did so in this case. She sat down at her desk, took her private cheque-book out, and sent the unknown and mysterious Felix Hoffman a cheque for five pounds.

"Easily imposed upon, I suppose that is what the majority of people would say; at any rate, if it is an imposition it is an uncommon one. I have a good mind to go up to London and on to Feltham just to spy out the land. I will ask the Squire about it. He will not call me a fool, he is far too polite, but he'll probably think I am one."

She sealed the letter and placed it in the postbag, locking it, and thus hiding her missive from prying eyes. Irene trusted her servants, but she understood human nature, and knew curiosity was well developed in the domestic maiden.

Passing into the room she used as a studio, she took the painting of Random from the easel and placed it in a more favourable light.

She criticised it, and was more than satisfied she had done the horse justice. The colouring was right, not hard, or harsh;

the coat was not too glossy, yet it showed signs of health. The head was as perfect as it well could be. The left eye – the horse had his head turned three-parts round – was perhaps a shade too dull. She took up her palette, and with a couple of light touches altered it to her satisfaction.

"I think he will like it, and not merely because I have done it, but because it has merit."

She placed it in her portfolio, and adjusted the straps to suit her shoulders, so that it would not interfere with her riding. She rang the bell, and Mrs. Dixon, the housekeeper, appeared.

"Has anyone called, Dixon?"

"No; we need not look out for visitors in this weather."

Dixon was a privileged person; she had been in command at Anselm Manor long before Warren Courtly's mother died, and Irene declined to have her removed, although her husband would have been pleased to see the back of her.

Martha Dixon had a strong affection for Irene, although she would not abate a jot of her sternness or abrupt manner under any consideration. She also knew that Warren Courtly had been anything but a saint before he married, but that was none of her business.

"I suppose this is a gentle hint that I ought not to be riding about this weather?" said Irene, smiling.

Martha Dixon smiled back at her mistress and said, in a soft tone —

"If you take care of yourself it will do you no harm, and I know

it's precious lonely at the Manor. How did you find the Squire?"

"He looks wonderfully well, but it was a bad night for him last night."

"Then he remembers; he has forgotten nothing?"

"And never will. He thinks Ulick will come back on the anniversary of the night he left home, and he has steeled himself to wait another year," said Irene.

"That minx Janet is at the bottom of it all. A regular little flirt; I have no patience with 'em," said Martha.

"Poor Janet, she has suffered for her wrongdoing, perhaps she is not to blame."

"Mr. Ulick ought to have packed her off somewhere and remained at home," she said.

"He was too much of a man to do that," said Irene. "Do you know, Dixon, I met Eli as I came here, and his faith in Ulick is as strong as ever?"

"It does him credit, but he knows different in his heart."

"You are mistaken; he believes Ulick is not guilty of wronging his daughter, I am sure of it."

"I wish it would come true," said Martha.

"I must go now," said Irene. "Please order my horse."

This being done, Martha Dixon fixed the picture firmly on Irene's back, and fastened the straps.

"The Squire will be pleased with that; it was Mr. Ulick's favourite horse."

"I believe that is why he was glad when I chose Random," said

Irene, as she walked to the door and quickly mounted Rupert.

"If any letters come, shall I send them to Hazelwell?" asked Martha.

"No," replied Irene; then added quickly, as she thought of the mysterious Felix Hoffman, "on second thoughts, perhaps you had better do so, but I may ride over again in a day or two. Mr. Courtly writes that he will not be back for a week."

She rode quickly away, and Martha Dixon watched her until she was out of sight.

"I have nothing to say against Mr. Warren," muttered Martha, as she shut the door, "but I wish Mr. Ulick had not got into a mess. She'd have been happier with him, although I say it, as shouldn't."

CHAPTER V
HONEYSUCKLE'S FOAL

It was New Year's Eve, and Eli Todd was passing through a series of varying emotions. A stranger watching him might, with considerable excuse, have put him down as a lunatic. No sooner was he comfortably seated in his armchair by the cosy fire than he jumped up again suddenly, seized his hat, and dashed out into the wintry night.

After a quarter of an hour's absence he returned, settled down again, commenced to doze and, waking with a start, rushed out of the house in the same erratic manner as before.

The cause of these proceedings on the part of Eli was the mare, Honeysuckle. Never was a man placed in such a predicament, all on account of a mare, as Eli Todd on this occasion. It wanted four hours to midnight, and every moment the studmaster expected Honeysuckle's foal would come forth into the cold and heartless world an hour or two before the New Year. It was enough to drive him to despair. This would in all probability be Honeysuckle's last foal, but the Squire had already made up his mind that "what's last is best."

Blissfully ignorant was the Squire of the throes of anxiety his trusty servant was enduring. It was his firm belief that Honeysuckle would not foal until the middle of January at the

earliest, and Eli had not undeceived him.

"I do wish you would keep still and not worry yourself," said Mrs. Marley. "It can do no good, the mare will get on quite as well without you; leave it to nature."

"Much you know about it," grumbled Eli. "Leaving it to nature is all very well, but you ought to know that nature requires a little assistance at times."

"You never take advice," she replied.

"I do when it is good," was the effectual reply.

Again Eli Todd opened the door, and a cold blast struck him in the face. A light was burning in Honeysuckle's box across the yard, and he plodded through the snow to it.

His head man was inside sitting in a chair, looking drowsy, and nodding.

Eli thought he had better go to bed, and said he would take his place.

"I'll call you if I want you," he said, and the man thanked him as he went out.

Eli sat in the chair watching the old mare and frequently looking at his watch. He had never wished time to fly so rapidly before.

Honeysuckle was restless, and from time to time looked at him with her big, soft eyes in a most pathetic way.

"I can't do anything for you, old girl," he said. "But you can oblige me very much by staving off the great event until the clock has struck twelve. After that the sooner you are over your trouble

the better."

Another half hour passed, and still found Eli wakeful and on guard.

A slight noise outside aroused him, and he listened attentively. "It sounded like a man walking, perhaps Joe has come back. I know he is as anxious as I am about her," muttered Eli.

A knock on the door made him start, and he said —

"Who's there?"

No answer. It was mysterious at this hour of the night.

He asked the question again, and the reply was another rap.

Picking up his stick, he cautiously opened the door and peered out. He saw a man, muffled up; standing a yard or two away. Something about the figure seemed familiar to him, and a peculiar sensation passed through his body, making his pulses tingle with anticipation.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Have you forgotten me, Eli?"

The studmaster started back, exclaiming —

"My God, it's Mr. Ulick!"

"Yes, it's me, none other; may I come in?"

For answer Eli dropped his stick, took him by both hands, and dragged him into the box.

Ulick Maynard unbuttoned his coat and unwound the scarf around his neck. He was a tall, handsome man, with a clear, open countenance. It was the face of a man to be trusted, if ever there was one.

"I am glad to see you, but it's a strange time to come," said Eli. "Are you going up to the house?"

"No," was the emphatic reply. "I shall never go back to Hazelwell until my father asks my pardon for the insult he put upon me."

"You don't know how he has suffered since you left," said Eli. "He sat up all night on Tuesday. You know what date it was?"

"Yes; I left home on that night two years ago."

"And Mrs. Courtly came over from the Manor and stayed with him," said Eli.

"Irene," he said softly.

"Yes, and she told me the Squire would be a young man again if you came back."

"Do they still believe I wronged your daughter?"

Eli made no reply, he thought it better to keep silent, for he would not tell a lie or deceive him.

"I see," said Ulick, bitterly. "I am still the black sheep, a disgrace to the name. And you, what do you think?"

"No need to ask me, Mr. Ulick. You know what I think. I never believed you guilty, and I never will, no, not even if Janet accused you, because she would be forced to it by the man who led her astray," said Eli.

Ulick took his hand and shook it heartily.

"Thank you, Eli," he said. "I give you my solemn word I did not wrong Janet. We may have flirted a trifle, as a man will do with a pretty girl, but I never injured her by word or deed. Is she

at home still?"

Eli looked at him curiously. He evidently had no idea Janet left her home the same night he went away from Hazelwell.

"My girl has been away from me for two years."

It was Ulick's turn to look surprised.

"You thought it better to send her away, no doubt?"

"I did not send her away."

"She left her home, ran away from you?"

"That's what happened."

"When did she go?"

"The same night you did."

"Good heavens! No wonder my father still believes me guilty. No doubt he thinks I went with her," said Ulick.

"He came to my house in a towering passion the morning after she left, and when he found out she had gone he was very bitter against you both. He said words he ought not to have said, but I am sure he repented them afterwards."

"Have you heard anything of her?"

"No," replied Eli. "Not a line from her."

"I wonder who took her away? I'd give a good deal to find out," said Ulick.

"And so would I. She must be in London, I think; it is a good place to hide in," said Eli.

"So I find. A man can bury himself in London without much fear of recognition."

"Have you been in London since you left Hazelwell?" asked

Eli.

"Most of the time. I very seldom came across anyone I know. You see, I have money of my own, independent of my father, so it enables me to live comfortably."

"And what has brought you down here?" asked Eli.

"Curiosity, a desire to see the old place, call it what you will. I wanted to have a chat with you, and hear how my father was going on," said Ulick.

"You had better go and see him. I am sure he has suffered enough by your absence."

"And do you not think I have suffered? And it makes it none the easier to bear because it is unjust. Have you ever suspected any one?"

"You mean about Janet?"

"Yes."

"I would rather not say. I have no proof, and if I am right it would cause even more trouble than the suspicion about you did."

"Then you have some idea who the man is?"

"I have, but we will not talk of that. If everything comes to light, well and good, but I am not going to be the one to cause more unhappiness."

"You ought to tell me. I have a right to know."

"Granted, but you must forgive me if I decline to say anything. This much I may tell you, that if what I suspect is true it will bring shame and disgrace upon someone who is very dear to you," said Eli.

Ulick was astonished, and wondered if Eli really had any grounds for suspicion. He would think the matter over on his return to London; it might possibly afford him some clue. If he found out the real culprit he would be able to judge what was best to be done. It was no use questioning Eli further.

"Old Honeysuckle looks in rather a bad way," he said, changing the subject, for which Eli was very thankful.

Eli explained the situation to him, and Ulick, looking at his watch, said —

"It only wants half an hour to midnight; we have been talking a long time. I'll stay with you and see it through. There is no danger of the Squire suddenly coming down?"

"Not at this hour, I am glad to say. He thinks there is no cause for anxiety. But will you not come into the house? Mrs. Marley has gone to bed, and we shall not be disturbed," said Eli.

"Let us remain here until it is all over," replied Ulick, and he sat down on the straw.

"Take this chair," said Eli.

"I prefer to be here, it is more comfortable."

It was a quiet night, and the light wind was blowing from the village of Helton.

Honeysuckle was in considerable pain, and they both watched her with anxious eyes, knowing what a vast difference a few minutes would make.

"There's the church clock at Helton striking," said Eli, as he opened the door of the box. He gave a sigh of relief when the

last stroke of twelve came. The bells pealed forth a welcome to the New Year, and the old year, with all its joys and sorrows, was gone for ever. What would the New Year bring forth?

"This was a curious way of seeing the Old Year out and the New Year in," said Ulick, smiling.

A quarter of an hour after midnight Honeysuckle's troubles were over, and a fine colt foal had come into the world almost at the sound of the church bells.

"We must make a note of this," said Eli, putting down the date and hour of foaling.

"I shall not forget it," said Ulick. "If there happened to be any dispute my father would be rather surprised if I was called as a witness."

"Go across to my cottage," said Eli. "I'll ring Joe up, there is no occasion for you to see him."

"I will wait outside the gate for you," said Ulick, as he went across the yard.

Leaving Joe in charge, with strict injunctions to call him at once if wanted, Eli hurried after Ulick, and, opening the door, led him into the room where he had an interview with Janet the night they both left home.

Ulick sank into a chair tired out, and soon fell asleep.

Eli stood looking on him with a sorrowful expression on his face.

"I wish he'd go and see the Squire," he said to himself. "There would be a reconciliation between them, I am sure; but Mr. Ulick

is as proud and stubborn as his father when he knows he is in the right. He looks a trifle older, but not much. It's a blessing he does not lack for money. I wonder what he has been doing with his time, racing probably – it runs in the blood. He never was a great gambler; I hope he has not taken to it to kill time and drown his feelings."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.