Hornung Ernest William

The Unbidden Guest

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I. – THE GIRL FROM HOME

Arabella was the first at the farm to become aware of Mr. Teesdale's return from Melbourne. She was reading in the parlour, with her plump elbows planted upon the faded green table-cloth, and an untidy head of light-coloured hair between her hands; looking up from her book by chance, she saw through the closed window her father and the buggy climbing the hill at the old mare's own pace. Arabella went on reading until the buggy had drawn up within a few feet of the verandah posts and a few more of the parlour window. Then she sat in doubt, with her finger on the place; but before it appeared absolutely necessary to jump up and run out, one of the men had come up to take charge of the mare, and Arabella was enabled to remove her finger and read on.

The parlour was neither very large nor at all lofty, and the shut window and fire-place closely covered by a green gauze screen, to keep the flies out, made it disagreeably stuffy. There were two doors, but both of these were shut also, though the one at

the far end of the room, facing the hearth, nearly always stood wide open. It led down a step into a very little room where the guns were kept and old newspapers thrown, and where somebody was whistling rather sweetly as the other door opened and Mr. Teesdale entered, buggy-whip in hand.

He was a frail, tallish old gentleman, with a venerable forehead, a thin white beard, very little hair to his pate, and clear brown eyes that shone kindly upon all the world. He had on the old tall hat he always wore when driving into Melbourne, and the yellow silk dust-coat which had served him for many a red-hot summer, and was still not unpresentable. Arabella was racing to the end of a paragraph when he entered, and her father had stolen forward and kissed her untidy head before she looked up.

"Bad girl," said he, playfully, "to let your old father get home without ever coming out to meet him!"

"I was trying to finish this chapter," said Arabella. She went on trying.

"I know, I know! I know you of old, my dear. Yet I can't talk, because I am as bad as you are; only I should like to see you reading something better than the *Family Cherub*." There were better things in the little room adjoining, where behind the shooting lumber was some motley reading, on two long sagging shelves; but that room was known as the gun-room, and half those books were hidden away behind powder-canisters, cartridge-cases, and the like, while all were deep in dust.

"You read it yourself, father," said Arabella as she turned over

a leaf of her *Family Cherub*.

"I read it myself. More shame for me! But then I've read all them books in the little gun-room, and that's what I should like to see you reading now and then. Now why have you got yon door shut, Arabella, and who's that whistling in there?"

"It's our John William," Miss Teesdale said; and even as she spoke the door in question was thrown open by a stalwart fellow in a Crimean shirt, with the sleeves rolled up from arms as brown and hard-looking as mellow oak. He had a breech-loader in one hand and a greasy rag in the other.

"Holloa, father!" cried he, boisterously.

"Well, John William, what are you doing?"

"Cleaning my gun. What have you been doing, that's more like it? What took you trapesing into Melbourne the moment I got my back turned this morning?"

"Why, hasn't your mother told you?"

"Haven't seen her since I came in."

"Well, but Arabella – "

"Arabella! I'm full up of Arabella," said John William contemptuously; but the girl was still too deep in the *Family Cherub* to heed him. "There's no getting a word out of Arabella when she's on the read; so what's it all about, father?"

"I'll tell you; but you'd better shut yon window, John William, or I don't know what your mother 'll say when she comes in and finds the place full o' flies."

It was the gun-room window that broke the law of no fresh air,

causing Mr. Teesdale uneasiness until John William shut it with a grumble; for in this homestead the mistress was law-maker, and indeed master, with man-servant and maid-servant, husband and daughter, and a particularly headstrong son, after her own heart, all under her thumb together.

"Now then, father, what was it took you into Melbourne all of a sudden like that?"

"A letter by the English mail, from my old friend Mr. Oliver."

"Never heard tell of him," said John William, making spectacles of his burnished bores, and looking through them into the sunlight. Already he had lost interest.

Mr. Teesdale was also occupied, having taken from his pocket a very large red cotton handkerchief, with which he was wiping alternately the dust from his tall hat and the perspiration from the forehead whereon the hat had left a fiery rim. Now, however, he nodded his bald head and clicked his lips, as one who gives another up.

"Well, well! Never heard tell of him – you who've heard me tell of him time out o' mind! Nay, come; why, you're called after him yourself! Ay, we called you after John William Oliver because he was the best friend that ever we had in old Yorkshire or anywhere else; the very best; and you pretend you've never heard tell of him."

"What had he got to say for himself?" said Mr. Oliver's namesake, with a final examination of the outside of his barrels.

"Plenty; he's sent one of his daughters out in the *Parramatta*,

that got in with the mail yesterday afternoon; and of course he had given her an introduction to me."

"What's that?" exclaimed John William, looking up sharply, as he ran over the words in his ear. "I say, father, we don't want her here," he added earnestly.

"Oh, did you find out where she was? Have you seen her? What is she like?" cried Arabella, jumping up from the table and joining the others with a face full of questions. She had that instant finished her chapter.

"I don't know what she's like; I didn't see her; I couldn't even find out where she was, though I tried at half a dozen hotels and both coffee-palaces," said the farmer with a crestfallen air.

"All the better!" cried John William, grounding his gun with a bang. "We don't want none of your stuck-up new chums or chumesses here, father."

"I don't know that; for my part, I should love to have a chance of talking to an English young lady," Arabella said, with a backward glance at her *Family Cherub*. "They're very rich, the Olivers," she added for her brother's benefit; "that's their house in the gilt frame in the best parlour, the house with the tower; and the group in the frame to match, that *is* the Olivers, isn't it, father?"

"It is, my dear; that's to say, it was, some sixteen years ago. We must get yon group and see which one it is that has come out, and then I'll read you Mr. Oliver's letter, John William. If only he'd written a mail or two before the child started! However, if

we've everything made snug for her to-night, I'll lay hands on her to-morrow if she's in Melbourne; and then she shall come out here for a month or two to start with, just to see how she likes it."

"How d'ye know she'll want to come out here at all?" asked John William. "Don't you believe it, father; she wouldn't care for it a little bit."

"Not care for it? Not want to come out and make her home with her parents' old friends? Then she's not her father's daughter," cried Mr. Teesdale indignantly; "she's no child of our good old friends. Why, it was Mr. Oliver who gave me the watch I – hush! Was that your mother calling?"

It was. "David! David! Have you got back, David?" the harsh voice came crying through the lath-and-plaster walls.

Mr. Teesdale scuttled to the door. "Yes, my dear, I've just got in. No, I'm not smoking. Where are you, then? In the spare room? All right, I'm coming, I'm coming." And he was gone.

"Mother's putting the spare room to rights already," Arabella explained.

"I'm sorry to hear it; let's hope it won't be wanted."

"Why, John William? It would be such fun to have a young lady from Home to stay with us!"

"I'm full up o' young ladies, and I'm just sick of the sound of Home. She'll be a deal too grand for us, and there won't be much fun in that. What's the use o' talking? If it was a son of this here old Oliver's it'd be a different thing; we'd precious soon knock the nonsense out of him; I'd undertake to do it myself; but a girl's

different, and I jolly well hope she'll stop away. We don't want her here, I tell you. We haven't even invited her. It's a piece of cheek, is the whole thing!"

John William was in the parlour now, sitting on the horse-hair sofa, and laying down the law with freckled fist and blusterous voice, as his habit was. It was a good-humoured sort of bluster, however, and indeed John William seldom opened his mouth without displaying his excellent downright nature in one good light or another. He had inherited his mother's qualities along with her sharp, decided features, which in the son were set off by a strong black beard and bristling moustache. He managed the farm, the men, Arabella, and his father; but all under Mrs. Teesdale, who managed him. Not that this masterful young man was so young in years as you might well suppose; neither John William nor Arabella was under thirty; but their lives had been so simple and so hard-working that, going by their conversation merely, you would have placed the two of them in their teens. For her part, too, Arabella looked much younger than she was, with her wholesome, attractive face and dreamy, inquisitive eyes; and as for the brother, he was but a boy with a beard, still primed with rude health and strength, and still loaded with all the assorted possibilities of budding manhood.

"I've taken down the group," said Mr. Teesdale, returning with a large photograph in a gilt frame; "and here is the letter on the chimney-piece. We'll have a look at them both again."

On the chimney-piece also were the old man's spectacles,

which he proceeded to put on, and a tobacco jar and long clay pipe, at which he merely looked lovingly; for Mrs. Teesdale would have no smoking in the house. His own chair stood in the cosy corner between the window and the hearth; and he now proceeded to pull it up to his own place at the head of the table as though it were a meal-time, and that gilt-framed photograph the only dish. Certainly he sat down to it with an appetite never felt during the years it had hung in the unused, ornamental next room, without the least prospect of the Teesdales ever more seeing any member of that group in the flesh. But now that such a prospect was directly at hand, there was some sense in studying the old photograph. It was of eight persons: the parents, a grandparent, and five children. Three of the latter were little girls, in white stockings and hideous boots with low heels and elastic sides; and to the youngest of these three, a fair-haired child whose features, like those of the whole family, were screwed up by a strong light and an exposure of the ancient length, Mr. Teesdale pointed with his finger-nail.

"That's the one," said he. "She now is a young lady of five or six and twenty."

"Don't think much of her looks," observed John William.

"Oh, you can't tell what she may be like from this," Arabella said, justly. "She may be beautiful now; besides, look how the sun must have been in her eyes, poor little thing! What's her name again, father?"

"Miriam, my dear."

"Miriam! I call it a jolly name, don't you, Jack?"

"It's a beast of a name," said John William.

"Stop while I read you a bit of the letter," cried the old man, smiling indulgently. "I won't give you all of it, but just this little bit at the end. He's been telling me that Miriam has her own ideas about things, has already seen something of the world, and isn't perhaps quite like the girls I may remember when we were both young men – "

"Didn't I tell you?" interrupted John William, banging the table with his big fist. "She's stuck-up! We don't want her here."

"But just hark how he ends up. I want you both to listen to these few lines: – 'It may even be that she has formed habits and ways which were not the habits and ways of young girls in our day, and that you may like some of these no better than I do. Yet her heart, my dear Teesdale, is as pure and as innocent as her mother's was before her, and I know that my old friend will let no mere modern mannerisms prejudice him against my darling child, who is going so far from us all. It has been a rather sudden arrangement, and though the doctors ordered it, and Miriam can take care of herself as only the girls nowadays can, still I would never have parted with her had I not known of one tried friend to meet and welcome her at the other end. Keep her at your station, my dear Teesdale, as long as you can, for an open-air life is, I am convinced, what she wants above all things. If she should need money, an accident which may always happen, let her have whatever she wants, advising me of the amount immediately.

I have told her to apply to you in such an extremity, which, however, I regard as very unlikely to occur. I have also provided her with a little note of introduction, with which she will find her way to you as soon as possible after landing. And into your kind old hands, and those of your warm-hearted wife, I cheerfully commend my girl, with the most affectionate remembrances to you both, and only regretting that business will not allow me to come out with her and see you both once more.' Then he finishes – calls himself my affectionate friend, same as when we were boys together. And it's two-and-thirty years since we said good-bye!" added Mr. Teesdale as he folded up the letter and put it away.

He pushed his spectacles on to his forehead, for they were dim, and sat gazing straight ahead, through the inner door that stood now wide open, and out of the gun-room window. This overlooked a sunburnt decline, finishing, perhaps a furlong from the house, at the crests of the river timber, that stood out of it like a hedge, by reason of the very deep cut made by the Yarra, where it formed the farm boundary on that side. And across the top of the window (to one sitting in Mr. Teesdale's place) was stretched, like a faded mauve ribbon, a strip of the distant Dandenong Ranges; and this and the timber were the favourite haunts of the old man's eyes, for thither they strayed of their own accord whenever his mind got absent elsewhere, as was continually happening, and had happened now.

"It's a beautiful letter!" exclaimed Arabella warmly.

"I like it, too," John William admitted; "but I shan't like the girl. That kind don't suit me at all; but I'll try to be civil to her on account of the old man, for his letter is right enough."

Mr. Teesdale looked pleased, though he left his eyes where they were.

"Ay, ay, my dears, I thought you would like it. Ah, but all his letters are the same! Two-and-thirty years, and never a year without at least three letters from Mr. Oliver. He's a business man, and he always answers promptly. He's a rich man now, my dears, but he doesn't forget the early friends, not he, though they're at the other end of the earth, and as poor as he's rich."

"Yet he doesn't seem to know how we're situated, for all that," remarked John William thoughtfully. "Look how he talks about our 'station,' and of your advancing money to the girl, as though we were rolling in it like him! Have you never told him our circumstances, father?"

At the question, Mr. Teesdale's eyes fell twenty miles, and rested guiltily upon the old green tablecloth.

"I doubt a station and a farm convey much the same thing in the old country," he answered crookedly.

"That you may bet they do!" cried the son, with a laugh; but he went on delivering himself of the most discouraging prophecies touching the case in point. The girl would come out with false ideas; would prove too fine by half for plain people like themselves; and at the best was certain to expect much more than they could possibly give her.

"Well, as to that," said the farmer, who thought himself lucky to have escaped a scolding for never having told an old friend how poor he was – "as to that, we can but give her the best we've got, with mebbe a little extra here and there, such as we wouldn't have if we were by ourselves. The eggs 'll be fresh, at any rate, and I think that she'll like her sheets, for your mother is getting out them 'at we brought with us from Home in '51. There was just two pairs, and she's had 'em laid by in lavender ever since. We can give her a good cup o' tea, an' all; and you can take her out 'possum-shooting, John William, and teach her how to ride. Yes, we'll make a regular bush-girl of her in a month, and send her back to Yorkshire the picture of health; though as yet I'm not very clear what's been the matter with her. But if she takes after her parents ever so little she'll see that we're doing our best, and that'll be good enough for any child of theirs."

From such a shabby waistcoat pocket Mr. Tees-dale took so handsome a gold watch, it was like a ring on a beggar's finger; and he fondled it between his worn hands, but without a word.

"Mr. Oliver gave you that watch, didn't he, father?" Arabella said, watching him.

"He did, my dear," said the old man proudly. "He came and saw us off at the Docks, and he gave me the watch on board, just as we were saying good-bye; and he gave your mother a gold brooch which neither of you have ever seen, for I've never known her wear it myself."

Arabella said she had seen it.

"Now his watch," continued Mr. Teesdale, "has hardly ever left my pocket – save to go under my pillow – since he put it in my hands on July 3, 1851. Here's the date and our initials inside the case; but you've seen them before. Ay, but there are few who came out in '51 – and stopped out – who have done as poorly as me. The day after we dropped anchor in Hobson's Bay there wasn't a living soul aboard our ship; captain, mates, passengers and crew, all gone to the diggings. Every man Jack but me! It was just before you were born, John William, and I wasn't going. It may have been a mistake, but the Lord knows best. To be sure, we had our hard times when the diggers were coming into Melbourne and shoeing their horses with gold, and filling buckets with champagne, and standing by with a pannikin to make everybody drink that passed; if you wouldn't, you'd got to take off your coat and show why. I remember one of them offering me a hundred pounds for this very watch, and precious hard up I was, but I wouldn't take it, not I, though I didn't refuse a sovereign for telling him the time. Ay, sovereigns were the pennies of them days; not that I fingered many; but I never got so poor as to part with Mr. Oliver's watch, and you never must either, John William, when it's yours. Ay, ay," chuckled Mr. Teesdale, as he snapped-to the case and replaced the watch in his pocket, "and it's gone like a book for over thirty years, with nothing worse than a cleaning the whole time."

"You must mind and tell that to Miriam, father," said Arabella, smiling.

"I must so. Ah, my dear, I shall have two daughters, not one, and you'll have a sister while Miriam is here."

"That depends what Miriam is like," said John William, getting up from the sofa with a Hugh and going back idly to the little room and his cleaned gun.

"I know what she will be like," said Arabella, placing the group in front of her on the table. "She will be delicate and fair, and rather small; and I shall have to show her everything, and take tremendous care of her."

"I wonder if she'll have her mother's hazel eyes and gentle voice?" mused the farmer aloud, with his eyes on their way back to the Dandenong Ranges.

"I should like her to take after her mother; she was one of the gentlest little women that ever I knew, was Mrs. Oliver, and I never clapped eyes – "

The speaker suddenly turned his head; there had been a step in the verandah, and some person had passed the window too quick for recognition.

"Who was that?" said Mr. Teesdale.

"I hardly saw," said Arabella, pushing back her chair. "It was a woman."

"And now she's knocking! Run and see who it is, my dear."

Arabella rose and ran. Then followed such an outcry in the passage that Mr. Teesdale rose also. He was on his legs in time to see the door flung wide open, and the excited eyes of Arabella reaching over the shoulder of the tall young woman whom she

was pushing into the room.

"Here *is* Miriam," she cried. "Here's Miriam found her way out all by herself!"

CHAPTER II. – A BAD BEGINNING

At the sound of the voices outside, John William, for his part, had slipped behind the gun-room door; but he had the presence of mind not to shut it quite, and this enabled him to peer through the crack and take deliberate stock of the fair visitant.

She was a well-built young woman, with a bold, free carriage and a very daring smile. That was John William's first impression when he came to think of it in words a little later. His eyes then fastened upon her hair. The poor colour of her face and lips did not strike him at the time any more than the smudges under the merry eyes. The common stamp of the regular features never struck him at all, for of such matters old Mr. Teesdale himself was hardly a judge; but the girl's hair took John William's fancy on the spot. It was the most wonderful hair: red, and yet beautiful. There was plenty of it to be seen, too, for the straw hat that hid the rest had a backward tilt to it, while an exuberant fringe came down within an inch of the light eyebrows. John William could have borne it lower still. He watched and listened with a smile upon his own hairy visage, of which he was totally unaware.

"So this is my old friend's daughter!" the farmer had cried out.

"And you're Mr. Scarsdale, are you?" answered the girl, between fits of intermittent, almost hysterical laughter.

"Eh? Yes, yes; I'm Mr. Teesdale, and this is my daughter Arabella. You are to be sisters, you two."

The visitor turned to Arabella and gave her a sounding kiss upon the lips.

"And mayn't I have one too?" old Teesdale asked. "I'm that glad to see you, my dear, and you know you're to look upon me like a father as long as you stay in Australia. Thank you, Miriam. Now I feel as if you'd been here a week already!"

Mr. Teesdale had received as prompt and as hearty a kiss as his daughter before him.

"Mrs. Teesdale is busy, but she'll come directly," he went on to explain. "Do you know what she's doing? She's getting your room ready, Miriam. We knew that you had landed, and I've spent the whole day hunting for you in town. Just to think that you should have come out by yourself after all! But our John William was here a minute ago. John William, what are you doing?"

"Cleaning my gun," said the young man, coming from behind his door, greasy rag in hand.

"Nay, come! You finished that job long ago. Come and shake hands with Miriam. Look, here she is, safe and sound, and come out all by herself!"

"I'm very glad to see you," said the son of the house, advancing, dirty palms foremost, "but I'm sorry I can't shake hands!"

"Then I'd better kiss you too!"

She had taken a swinging step forward, and the red fringe was within a foot of his startled face, when she tossed back her head with a hearty laugh.

"No, I think I won't. You're too old and you're not old enough – see?"

"John William 'll be three-and-thirty come January," said Mr. Teesdale gratuitously.

"Yes? That's ten years older than me," answered the visitor with equal candour. "Exactly ten!"

"Nay, come – not exactly ten," the old gentleman said, with some gravity, for he was a great stickler for the literal truth; "only seven or eight, I understood from your father?"

The visitor coloured, then pouted, and then burst out laughing as she exclaimed, "You oughtn't to be so particular about ladies' ages! Surely two or three years is near enough, isn't it? I'm ashamed of you, Mr. Teesdale; I really am!" And David received such a glance that he became exceedingly ashamed of himself; but the smile that followed it warmed his old heart through and through, and reminded him, he thought, of Miriam's mother.

Meantime, the younger Teesdale remained rooted to the spot where he had been very nearly kissed. He was still sufficiently abashed, but perhaps on that very account a plain speech came from him too.

"You're not like what I expected. No, I'm bothered if you are!"

"Much worse?" asked the girl, with a scared look.

"No, much better. Ten thousand times better!" cried the young man. Then his shyness overtook him, and, though he joined in the general laughter, he ventured no further remarks. As to the laughter, the visitor's was the most infectious ever

heard in the weather-board farmhouse. Arabella shook within the comfortable covering with which nature had upholstered her, and old David had to apply the large red handkerchief to his furrowed cheeks before he could give her the message to Mrs. Teesdale, for which there had not been a moment to spare out of the crowded minute or two which had elapsed since the visitor's unforeseen arrival.

"Go, my dear," he said now, "and tell your mother that Miriam is here. That's it. Mrs. T. will be with us directly, Miriam. Ah, I thought this photograph'd catch your eye sooner or later. You'll have seen it once or twice before, eh? Just once or twice, I'm thinking." The group still lay on the table at Mr. Teesdale's end.

"Who are they?" asked the visitor, very carelessly; indeed, she had but given the photograph a glance, and that from a distance.

"Who? Why, yourselves; your own family. All the lot of you when you were little," cried David, snatching up the picture and handing it across. "We were just looking at it when you came, Miriam; and I made you out to be this one, look – this poor little thing with the sun in her eyes."

The old man was pointing with his finger, the girl examining closely. Their heads were together. Suddenly she raised hers, looked him in the eyes, and burst out laughing.

"How clever you are!" she said. "I'm not a bit like that now, now am I?"

She made him look well at her before answering. And in all his after knowledge of it, he never again saw quite so bold

and *dibonnaire* an expression upon that cool face framed in so much hot hair. But from a mistaken sense of politeness, Mr. Teesdale made a disingenuous answer after all, and the subject of conversation veered from the girl who had come out to Australia to those she had left behind her in the old country.

That conversation would recur to Mr. Teesdale in after days. It contained surprises for him at the time. Later, he ceased to wonder at what he had heard. Indeed, there was nothing wonderful in his having nourished quite a number of misconceptions concerning a family of whom he had set eyes on no member for upwards of thirty years. It was those misconceptions which the red-haired member of that family now removed. They were all very natural in the circumstances. And yet, to give an instance, Mr. Teesdale was momentarily startled to ascertain that Mrs. Oliver had never been so well in her life as when her daughter sailed. He had understood from Mr. Oliver that his wife was in a very serious state with diabetes. When he now said so, the innocent remark made Miss Oliver to blush and bite her lips. Then she explained. Her mother had been threatened with the disease in question, but that was all. The real fact was, her father was morbidly anxious about her mother, and to such an extent that it appeared the anxiety amounted to mania.

She put it in her own way.

"Pa's mad on ma," she said. "You can't believe a word he says about her."

Mr. Teesdale found this difficult to believe of his old friend,

who seemed to him to write so sensibly about the matter. It made him look out of the gun-room window. Then he recollected that the girl herself lacked health, for which cause she had come abroad.

"And what was the matter with you, Miriam," said he, "for your father only says that the doctors recommended the voyage?"

"Oh, that's all he said, was it?"

"Yes, that's all."

"And you want to know what was the matter with me, do you?"

"No, I was only wondering. It's no business of mine."

"Oh, but I'll tell you. Bless your life, I'm not ashamed of it. It was late nights – it was late nights that was the matter with me."

"Nay, come," cried the farmer; yet, as he peered through his spectacles into the bright eyes sheltered by the fiery fringe, he surmised a deep-lying heaviness in the brain behind them; and he noticed now for the first time how pale a face they were set in, and how gray the marks were underneath them.

"The voyage hasn't done you much good, either," he said. "Why, you aren't even sunburnt."

"No? Well, you see, I'm such a bad sailor. I spent all my time in the cabin, that's how it was."

"Yet the *Argus* says you had such a good voyage?"

"Yes? I expect they always say that. It was a beast of a voyage, if you ask me, and quite as bad as late nights for you, though not nearly so nice."

"Ah, well, we'll soon set you up, my dear. This is the place

to make a good job of you, if ever there was one. But where have you been staying since you landed, Miriam? It's upwards of twenty-four hours now."

The guest smiled.

"Ah, that's tellings. With some people who came out with me – some swells that I knew in the West End, if you particularly want to know; not that I'm much nuts on 'em, either."

"Don't you be inquisitive, father," broke in John William from the sofa. It was his first remark since he had sat down.

"Well, perhaps I mustn't bother you with any more questions now," said Mr. Teesdale to the girl; "but I shall have a hundred to ask you later on. To think that you're Mr. Oliver's daughter after all! Ay, and I see a look of your mother and all now and then. They did well to send you out to us, and get you right away from them late hours and that nasty society – though here comes one that'll want you to tell her all about that by-and-by."

The person in question was Arabella, who had just re-entered.

"Society?" said she. "My word, yes, I shall want you to tell me all about society, Miriam."

"Do you hear that, Miriam?" said Mr. Teesdale after some moments. She had taken no notice.

"What's that? Oh yes, I heard; but I shan't tell anybody anything more unless you all stop calling me Miriam."

This surprised them; it had the air of a sudden thought as suddenly spoken.

"But Miriam's your name," said Arabella, laughing.

"Your father has never spoken of you as anything else," remarked Mr. Teesdale.

"All the same, I'm not used to being called by it," replied their visitor, who for the first time was exhibiting signs of confusion. "I like people to call me what I'm accustomed to being called. You may say it's a pet name, but it's what I'm used to, and I like it best."

"What is, missy?" said old Teesdale kindly; for the girl was staring absently at the opposite wall.

"Tell us, and we'll call you nothing else," Arabella promised.

The girl suddenly swept her eyes from the wall to Mr. Teesdale's inquiring face. "You said it just now," she told him, with a nod and her brightest smile. "You said it without knowing when you called me 'Missy.' That's what they always call me at home – Missy or the Miss. You pays your money and you takes your choice."

"Then I choose Missy," said Arabella. "And now, father, I came with a message from my mother; she wants you to take Missy out into the verandah while we get the tea ready. She wasn't tidy enough to come and see you at once, Missy, but she sends you her love to go on with, and she hopes that you'll excuse her."

"Of course she will," answered Mr. Teesdale for the girl; "but will you excuse me, Missy, if I bring my pipe out with me? I'm just wearying for a smoke."

"Excuse you?" cried Missy, taking the old man's arm as she

accompanied him to the door. “Why, bless your life, I love a smoke myself.”

John William had jumped up to follow them; had hesitated; and was left behind.

“There!” said Arabella, turning a shocked face upon him the instant they were quite alone.

“She was joking,” said John William.

“I don’t think it.”

“Then you must be a fool, Arabella. Of course she was only in fun.”

“But she said so many queer things; and oh, John William, she seems to me so queer altogether!”

“Well, what the deuce did you expect?” cried the other in a temper. “Didn’t her own father say that she was something out of the common? What do you know about it, anyway? What do you know about ‘modern mannerisms’. Didn’t her own father let on that she had some? Even if she *did* smoke, I shouldn’t be surprised or think anything of it; depend upon it they smoke in society, whether they do or they don’t in your rotten *Family Cherub*. But she was only joking when she said that; and I never saw the like of you, Arabella, not to know a joke when you hear one.” And John William stamped away to his room; to reappear in a white shirt and his drab tweed suit, exactly as though he had been going into Melbourne for the day.

It was Mrs. Teesdale, perhaps, who put this measure into her son’s head; for, as he quitted the parlour, she pushed past

him to enter it, in the act of fastening the final buttons of her gray-stuff chapel-going bodice. "Now, then, Arabella," she cried sharply, "let blind down and get them things off table." And on to it, as she spoke, Mrs. Teesdale flung a clean white folded table-cloth which she had carried between elbow and ribs while busy buttoning her dress. As for Arabella, she obeyed each order instantly, displaying an amount of bustling activity which only showed itself on occasions when her mother was particularly hot and irritable; the present was one.

Mrs. Teesdale was a tall, strong woman who at sixty struck one first of all with her strength, activity, and hard, solid pluck. Her courage and her hardness too were written in every wrinkle of a bloodless, weather-beaten face that must have been sharp and pointed even in girlhood; and those same dominant qualities shone continually in a pair of eyes like cold steel – the eyes of a woman who had never given in. The woman had not her husband's heart full of sympathy and affection for all but the very worst who came his way. She had neither his moderately good education, nor his immoderately ready and helping hand even for the worst. Least of all had she his simple but adequate sense of humour; of this quality and all its illuminating satellites Mrs. Teesdale was totally devoid. Yet, but for his wife, old David would probably have found himself facing his latter end in one or other of the Benevolent Asylums of that Colony; whereas with the wife's character inside the husband's skin, it is not improbable that the name of David Teesdale would have been known and

honoured in the land where his days had been long indeed, but sadly unprofitable.

Arabella, then, who had inherited some of David's weak points, just as John William possessed his mother's strong ones, could work with the best of them when she liked and Mrs. Teesdale drove. In ten minutes the tea was ready; and it was a more elaborate tea than usual, for there was quince jam as well as honey, and, by great good luck, cold boiled ham in addition to hot boiled eggs. Last of all, John William, when he was ready, picked a posy of geraniums from the bed outside the gun-room outer door (which was invisible from the verandah, where David and the visitor could be heard chatting), and placed them in the centre of the clean table-cloth. Then Mrs. Teesdale drew up the blind; and a nice sight met their eyes.

Mr. Teesdale was discovered in earnest expostulation with the girl from England, who was smoking his pipe. She had jumped on to the wooden armchair upon which, a moment ago, she had no doubt been seated; now she was dancing upon it, slowly and rhythmically, from one foot to the other, and while holding the long clay well above the old man's reach, she kept puffing at it with such immense energy that the smoke hung in a cloud about her rakish fringe and wicked smile, under the verandah slates. A smile flickered also across the entreating face of David Teesdale; and it was this his unpardonable show of taking the outrage in good part, that made away with the wife's modicum of self-control. Doubling a hard-working fist, she was on the point

of knocking at the window with all the might that it would bear, when her wrist was held and the blind let down. And it was John William who faced her indignation with the firm front which she herself had given him.

"I am very sorry, mother," said he quietly, "but you are not going to make a scene."

Such was the power of Mrs. Teesdale in her own home, she could scarcely credit her hearing. "Not going to?" she cried, for the words had been tuned neither to question nor entreaty, but a command. "Let go my hands this moment, sir!"

"Then don't knock," said John William, complying; and there was never a knock; but the woman was blazing.

"How dare you?" she said; and indeed, man and boy, he had never dared so much before.

"You were going to make a scene," said he, as kindly as ever; "and though we didn't invite her, she is our guest – "

"You may be ashamed of yourself! I don't care who she is; she shan't smoke here."

"She is also the daughter of your oldest friends; and hasn't her own father written to say she has ways and habits which the girls hadn't when you were one? Not that smoking's a habit of hers: not likely. I'll bet she's only done this for a lark. And you're to say nothing more about it, mother, do you see?"

"Draw up the blind," said Mrs. Teesdale, speaking to her son as she had spoken to him all his life, but, for the first time, without confidence. "Draw up the blind, and disobey me at your

peril."

"Then promise to say nothing about it to the girl."

They eyed each other for a minute. In the end the mother said: "To the girl? No, of course I won't say anything to her – unless it happens again." It was not even happening when the blind was drawn up, and it never did happen again. But Mrs. Teesdale had given in, for once in her life, and to one of her own children. Moreover, there was an alien in the case, who was also a girl; and this was the beginning between these three.

CHAPTER III. – AU REVOIR

It was not a very good beginning, and the first to feel that was John William himself. He felt it at tea. During the meal his mouth never opened, except on business; but his eyes made up for it.

He saw everything. He saw that his mother and Missy would never get on; he knew it the moment they kissed. There was no sounding smack that time. The visitor, for her part, seemed anxious to show that even she could be shy if she tried; and as for Mrs. Teesdale and her warm greeting, it was very badly done. The tone was peevish, and her son, for one, could hear between the words. "You're our old friends' child," he heard her saying in her heart, "but I don't think I shall like you; for you've come without letting me know, you've smoked, and you've set my own son against me – already." He was half sorry that he had checked, what is as necessary to some as the breath they draw, a little plain speaking at the outset. But sooner or later, about one thing or another, this was bound to come; and come it did.

"I can't think, Miriam," said Mrs. Teesdale, "how you came by that red hair o' yours! Your father's was very near black, and your mother's a light brown wi' a streak o' gold in it; but there wasn't a red hair in either o' their heads that *I* can remember."

At this speech John William bit off an oath under his beard, while David looked miserably at his wife, and Arabella at their visitor, who first turned as red as her hair, and then burst into a

fit of her merriest laughter.

"Well, I can't help it, can I?" cried she, with a good-nature that won two hearts, at any rate. "I didn't choose my hair; it grew its own colour – all I've got to do is to keep it on!"

"Yes, but it's that red!" exclaimed Mrs. Teesdale stolidly, while John William chuckled and looked less savage.

"Ah, you could light your old pipe at it," said Missy to the farmer, making the chuckler laugh outright.

Not so Mr. Teesdale. "My dear," he said to his wife; "my dear!"

"Well, but I could understand it, David, if her parents' hairs had any red in 'em. In the only photograph we have of you, Miriam, which is that group there taken when you were all little, you look to have your mother's fair hair. I can't make it out."

"No?" said Missy, sweetly. "Then you didn't know that red always comes out light in a photograph?"

"Oh, I know nothing at all about that," said Mrs. Teesdale, with the proper disregard for a lost point. "Then have the others all got red hair too?"

"N – no, I'm the only one."

"Well, that's a good thing, Miriam, I'm sure it is!"

"Nay, come, my dear, that'll do," whispered David; while John William said loudly, to change the subject, "You're not to call her Miriam, mother."

"And why not, I wonder?"

"Because she's not used to it. She says they call her Missy

at home; and we want to make her at home here, surely to goodness!"

Missy had smiled gratefully on John William and nodded confirmation of his statement to Mrs. Teesdale, who, however, shook her head.

"Ay, but I don't care for nicknames at all," said she, without the shadow of a smile; "I never did and I never shall, John William. So, Miriam, you'll have to put up with your proper name from me, for I'm too old to change. And I'm sure it's not an ugly one," added the dour woman, less harshly. "Is your cup off, Miriam?" she added to that; she did not mean to be quite as she was.

It was at this point, however, that the visitor asked Mr. Teesdale the time, and that Mr. Teesdale, with a sudden eloquence in his kind old eyes, showed her the watch which Mr. Oliver had given him; speaking most touchingly of her father's goodness, and kindness, and generosity, and of their lifelong friendship. Thus the long hand marked some minutes while the watch was still out before it appeared why Missy wanted to know the time. She then declared she must get back to Melbourne before dark, a statement which provoked some brisk opposition, notably on the part of Mr. Teesdale. But the girl showed commendable firmness. She would go back as she had come, by the six o'clock 'bus from the township. None of them, however, would hear of the 'bus, and John William waited until a compromise had been effected by her giving way on this

point; then he went out to put-to.

This proved a business. The old mare had already made one journey into Melbourne and back; and that was some nine miles each way. There was another buggy-horse, but it had to be run up from the paddock. Thus twenty minutes elapsed before John William led horse and trap round to the front of the house. He found the party he had left mildly arguing round the tea-table, now assembled on the grass below the red-brick verandah. They were arguing still, it seemed, and not quite so mildly. Missy was buttoning a yellow glove, the worse for wear, and she was standing like a rock, with her mouth shut tight. Mr. Teesdale had on his tall hat and his dust-coat, and the whip was once more in his hand; at the sight of him his son's heel went an inch into the ground.

"Only fancy!" cried the old man in explanation. "She says she's not coming back to us any more. She doesn't want to come out and stay with us!"

Arabella echoed the "Only fancy!" while Mrs. Teesdale thought of the old folks who had been young when she was, and said decisively, "But she'll have to."

John William said nothing at all; but it was to him the visitor now looked appealingly.

"It isn't that I shouldn't like it – that isn't it at all – it's that *you* wouldn't like *me!* Oh, you don't know what I am. You don't, I tell you straight. I'm not fit to come and stay here – I should put you all about so – there's no saying what I shouldn't do. You can't

think how glad I am to have seen you all. It's a jolly old place, and I shall be able to tell 'em all at home just what it's like. But you'd far better let me rest where I am – you – you – you really had."

She had given way, not to tears, indeed, but to the slightly hysterical laughter which had characterised her entry into the parlour when John William was looking through the crack. Now she once more made her laughter loud, and it seemed particularly inconsequent. Yet here was a sign of irresolution which old David, as the wisest of the Teesdales, was the first to recognise. Moreover, her eyes were flying from the weather-board farmhouse to the river timber down the hill, from the soft cool grass to the peaceful sky, and from hay-stack to hen-yard, as though the whole simple scene were a temptation to her; and David saw this also.

"Nonsense," said he firmly; and to the others, "She'll come back and stay with us till she's tired of us – we'll never be tired of you, Missy. Ay, of course she will. You leave her to me, Mrs. T."

"Then," said Missy, snatching her eyes from their last fascination, a wattle-bush in bloom, "will you take all the blame if I turn out a bad egg?"

"A what?" said Mrs. Teesdale.

"Of course we will," cried her husband, turning a deaf ear to John William, who was trying to speak to him.

"You promise, all of you!"

"Of course we do," answered the farmer again; but he had not answered John William.

"Then I'll come, and your blood be on your own heads."

For a moment she stood smiling at them all in turn; and not a soul of them saw her next going without thinking of this one. The low sun struck full upon the heavy red fringe, and on the pale face and the devil-may-care smile which it over-hung just then. At the back of that smile there was a something which seemed to be coming up swiftly like a squall at sea; but only for one moment; the next, she had kissed the women, shaken hands with the young man, mounted into the buggy beside Mr. Teesdale, and the two of them were driving slowly down the slope.

"I think, John William," said his mother, "that you might have driven in this time, instead o' letting your father go twice."

"Didn't I want to?" replied John William, in a bellow which made Missy turn her head at thirty yards. "He was bent on going. He's the most pig-headed old man in the Colony. He wouldn't even answer me when I spoke to him about it just now."

He turned on his heel, and mother and daughter were at last alone, and free to criticise.

"For a young lady fresh from England," began the former, "I must say I thought it was a shabby dress – didn't you?"

"Shabby isn't the word," said Arabella; "if you ask me, I call her whole style flashy – as flashy as it can stick."

CHAPTER IV. – A MATTER OF TWENTY POUNDS

This is jolly!" exclaimed Missy, settling herself comfortably at the old man's side as she handed him back the reins. They had just jogged out of the lowest paddock, and Mr. Teesdale had been down to remove the slip-rails and to replace them after Missy had driven through.

"Very nicely done," the farmer said, in his playful, kindly fashion. "I see you've handled the ribbons before."

"Never in my life!"

"Indeed? I should have thought that with all them horses and carriages every one of you would have learnt to ride and drive."

"Yes, you would think so," Missy said, after a pause; "but in my case you'd think wrong. I can't bear horses, so I tell you straight. One flew at me when I was a little girl, and I've never gone near 'em since."

"Flew at you!" exclaimed Mr. Teesdale. "Nay, come!"

"Well, you know what I mean. I'd show you the bite – "

"Oh, it bit you? Now I see, now I see."

"You saw all along!"

"No, it was such a funny way of putting it."

"You knew what I meant," persisted Missy. "If you're going to make game of me, I'll get down and walk. Shall we be back

in Melbourne by seven?"

Mr. Teesdale drew out his watch with a proud smile and a tender hand. He loved consulting it before anybody, but Missy's presence gave the act a special charm. He shook his head, however, in answer to her question.

"We'll not do it," said he; "it's ten past six already."

"Then how long is it going to take us?"

"Well, not much under the hour; you see – "

A groan at his side made Mr. Teesdale look quickly round; and there was trouble under the heavy fringe.

"I *must* be there soon after seven!" cried the girl petulantly.

"Ay, but where, Missy? I'll do my best," said David, snatching up the whip, "if you'll tell me where it is you want to be."

"It's the Bijou Theatre – I'm supposed to be there by seven – to meet the people I'm staying with, you know."

David had begun to use the whip vigorously, but now he hesitated and looked pained. "I am sorry to hear it's a theatre you want to get to," said he gravely.

"Why, do you think them such sinks of iniquity – is that it?" asked the girl, laughing.

"I never was in a theatre in my life, Missy; I don't approve of them, my dear."

"No more do I – no more do I! But when you're staying with people you can't always be your own boss, now can you?"

"You could with us, Missy."

"Well, that's bully; but I can't with these folks. They're regular

terrors for the theatre, the folks I'm staying with now, and I don't know what they'll say if I keep 'em waiting long. Think you can do it?"

"Not by seven; but I think we might get there between five and ten minutes past."

"Thank God!"

Mr. Teesdale wrinkled his forehead, but said nothing. Evidently it was of the first importance that Missy should not keep her friends waiting. Of these people, however, she had already spoken so lightly that David was pleased to fancy her as not caring very much about them. He was pleased, not only because they took her to the theatre, but because he wanted no rival Australian friends for his old friend's child; the farm, if possible, must be her only home so long as she remained in the Colony. When, therefore, the girl herself confirmed his hopes the very next time she opened her mouth, the old man beamed with satisfaction.

"These folks I'm staying with," said Missy – "I'm not what you call dead nuts on 'em, as I said before."

"I'm glad to hear it," chuckled David, "because we want you all to ourselves, my dear."

"So you think! Some day you'll be sorry you spoke."

"Nonsense, child. What makes you talk such rubbish? You've got to come and make your home with us until you're tired of us, as I've told you already. Where is it they live, these friends of yours?"

"Where do they live?" repeated Missy. "Oh, in Kew."

"Ah – Kew."

The name was spoken in a queer, noticeable tone, as of philosophic reflection. Then the farmer smiled and went on driving in silence; they were progressing at a good speed now. But Missy had looked up anxiously.

"What do you know about Kew?" said she.

"Not much," replied David, with a laugh; "only once upon a time I had a chance of buying it – and had the money too!"

"You had the money to buy Kew?"

"Yes, I had it. There was a man who took me on to a hill and showed me a hollow full of scrub and offered to get me the refusal of it for an old song. I had the money and all, as it happened, but I wasn't going to throw it away. The place looked a howling wilderness; but it is now the suburb of Kew."

"Think of that. Aren't you sorry you didn't buy it?"

"Oh, it makes no difference."

"But you'd be so rich if you had!"

"I should be a millionaire twice over," said the farmer, complacently, as he removed his ruin of a top-hat to let in the breeze upon his venerable pate. Missy sat aghast at him.

"It makes me sick to think of it," she exclaimed. "I don't know what I couldn't do to you! If I'd been you I'd have cut my throat years ago. To think of the high old time you could have had!"

"I never had that much desire for a high old time," said Mr. Teesdale with gentle exaltation.

"Haven't I, then, that's all!" cried his companion in considerable excitement. "It makes a poor girl feel bad to hear you go on like that."

"But you're not a poor girl."

Missy was silenced.

"Yes, I am," she said at last, with an air of resolution. It was not, however, until they were the better part of a mile nearer Melbourne.

"You are what?"

"A poor girl."

"Nonsense, my dear. I wonder what your father would say if he heard you talk like that."

"He's got nothing to do with it."

"Not when he's worth thousands, Missy?"

"Not when he's thousands of miles away, Mr. Teesdale."

Mr. Teesdale raised his wrinkled forehead and drove on. A look of mingled anxiety and pain aged him years in a minute. Soon the country roads were left behind, and the houses began closing up on either side of a very long and broad high road. It was ten minutes to seven by Mr. Teesdale's watch when he looked at it again. It was time for him to say the difficult thing which had occurred to him two or three miles back, and he said it in the gentlest tones imaginable from an old man of nearly seventy.

"Missy, my dear, is it possible" (so he put it) "that you have run short of the needful?"

"It's a fact," said Missy light-heartedly.

"But how, my dear, have you managed to do that?"

"How? Let's see. I gave a lot away – to a woman in the steerage – whose husband went and died at sea. He died of dropsy. I nursed him, I did. Rather! I helped lay him out when he was dead. But don't go telling anybody – please."

Mr. Teesdale had shuddered uncontrollably; now, however, he shifted the reins to his right hand in order to pat Missy with his left.

"You're a noble girl. You are that! Yet it's only what I should have expected of their child. I might ha' known you'd be a noble girl."

"But you won't tell anybody?"

"Not if you'd rather I didn't. That proves your nobility! About how much would you like, my dear, to go on with?"

"Oh, twenty pounds."

Mr. Teesdale drew the breeze in through the broken ranks of his teeth.

"Wouldn't – wouldn't ten do, my dear?"

"Ten? Let's think. No, I don't think I could do with a penny less than twenty. You see, a wave came into the cabin and spoilt all my things. I want everything new."

"But I understood you had such a good voyage, Missy?"

"Not from me you didn't! Besides, it was my own fault: I gone and left the window open, and in came a sea. Didn't the captain kick up a shine! But I told him it was worse for me than for him; and look at the old duds I've got to go about in all because! Why,

I look quite common – I know I do. No; I must have new before I come out to stay at the farm."

"I'm sure our Arabella dresses simple," the farmer was beginning; but Missy cut him short, and there was a spot of anger on each of her pale cheeks as she broke out:

"But this ain't simple – it's common! I had to borrow the most of it. All my things were spoilt. I can't get a new rig-out for less than twenty pounds, and without everything new – "

"Nay, come!" cried old David, in some trouble. "Of course I'll let you have anything you want – I have your father's instructions to do so. But – but there are difficulties. It's difficult at this moment. You see the banks are closed, and – and – "

"Oh, don't you be in any hurry. Send it when you can; then I'll get the things and come out afterwards. Why, here we are at Lonsdale Street!"

"But I want you to come out soon. How long would it take you to get everything?"

"To-day's Thursday. If I had it to-morrow I could come out on Monday."

"Then you shall have it to-morrow," said David, closing his lips firmly. "Though the banks are closed, there's the man we send our milk to, and he owes me a lump more than twenty pound. I'll go to him now and get the twenty from him, or I'll know the reason why! Yes, and I'll post it to you before I go back home at all! What address must I send it to, Missy?"

"What address? Oh, to the General Post Office. I don't want

the folks I am staying with to know. They offered to lend me, and I wouldn't. Will you stop, please?"

"Quite right, my dear, quite right. I was the one to come to. You'll find it at the – "

"Do you mind stopping?"

"Why, we're not there yet. We're not even in Bourke Street."

"No, but *please* stop here."

"Very well. Here we are, then, and it's only six past. But why not drive right on to the theatre – that's what I want to know?"

Missy hesitated, and hesitated, until she saw the old man peering into her face through the darkness that seemed to have fallen during the last five minutes. Then she dropped her eyes. They had pulled up alongside the deep-cut channel between road-metal and curb-stone, whereby you shall remember the streets of Melbourne. Nobody appeared to be taking any notice of them.

"I see," said David very gently. "And I don't wonder at it. No, Missy, it's not at all the sort of turn-out for your friends to see you in. Jump down, my dear, and I'll just drive alongside to see that nothing happens you. But I won't seem to know you, Missy – I won't seem to know you!"

Lower and lower, as the old man spoke, the girl had been hanging her head; until now he could see nothing of her face on account of her fringe; when suddenly she raised it and kissed his cheek. She was out of the buggy next moment.

She walked at a great rate, but David kept up with her by trotting his horse, and they exchanged signals the whole way.

Close to the theatre she beckoned to him to pull up again. He did so, and she came to the wheel with one of her queer, inscrutable smiles.

"How do you know," said she, "that I'm Miriam Oliver at all?"

The rays from a gas-lamp cut between their faces as she looked him full in the eyes.

"Why, of course you are!"

"But how do you *know?*"

"Nay, come, what a question! What makes you ask it, Missy?"

"Because I've given you no proof. I brought an introduction with me and I went and forgot to give it to you. However, here it is, so you may as well put it in your pipe and smoke it."

She took some letters out of her pocket as she spoke, and shifted the top one to the bottom until she came to an envelope that had never been through the post. This she handed up to David, who recognised his old friend's writing, which indeed had caught his eye on most of the other envelopes also. And when she had put these back in her pocket she held out her dirty-gloved hand.

"So long," she said. "You won't know me when I turn up on Monday."

"Stop!" cried David. "You must let me know when to send the buggy for you, and where to. It'll never do to have you coming out in the 'bus again."

"Right you are. I'll let you know. So long again – and see here. I think you're the sweetest and trustingest old man in the world!"

She was far ahead, this time, before the buggy was under way again.

"Naturally," chuckled David, following her hair through the crowd. "I should hope so, indeed, when it's a child of John William Oliver, and one that you can love for her own sake an' all! But what made her look so sorry when she gave me the kiss? And what's this? Nay, come, I must have made a mistake!"

He had flattered himself that his eyes never left the portals where they had lost sight of the red hair, and when he got up to it what should it be but the *stage door?* The words were painted over it as plain as that. The mistake might be Missy's; but a little waiting by the curb convinced Mr. Teesdale that it was his own; for Missy never came back, as he argued she must have done if she really had gone in at the stage door.

CHAPTER V. – A WATCH AND A PIPE

Mr. Teesdale drove on to the inn at which he was in the habit of putting up when in town with the buggy. His connection with the house was very characteristic. Many years before the landlord had served him in a menial capacity, but for nearly as many that worthy had been infinitely more prosperous than poor David, who, indeed, had never prospered at all. They were good friends, however, for the farmer had a soul too serene for envy, and a heart too simple to be over-sensitive concerning his own treatment at the hands of others. Thus he never resented his old hand's way with him, which would have cut envy, vanity, or touchiness, to the quick. He came to this inn for the sake of old acquaintance; it never occurred to him to go elsewhere; nor had he ever been short or sharp with his landlord before this evening, when, instead of answering questions and explaining what had brought him into Melbourne twice in one day, Mr. Teesdale flung the reins to the ostler, and himself out of the yard, with the rather forbidding reply that he was there on business. He was, indeed; though the business was the birth of the last half-hour.

It led him first to a little bare office overlooking a yard where many milk-carts stood at ease with their shafts resting upon the ground; and the other party to it was a man for whom Mr.

Teesdale was no match.

"I must have twenty pounds," said David, beginning firmly.

"When?" replied the other coolly.

"Now. I shan't go home without it."

"I am very sorry, Mr. Teesdale, but I'm afraid that you'll have to."

"Why should I," cried David, smacking his hand down on the table, "when you owe me a hundred and thirty? Twenty is all I ask, for I know how you are situated; but twenty I must and shall have."

"We simply haven't it in the bank."

"Nay, come, I can't believe that."

"I'll show you the pass-book."

"I won't look at it. No, I shall put the matter into the hands of a solicitor. Good evening to you. I dare say it isn't your fault; but I must have some satisfaction, one way or the other. I am not going on like this a single day longer."

"Good evening, then, Mr. Teesdale. If you do what you say, we shall have to liquidate; and then you will get nothing at all, or very little." David had heard this story before. "It was an evil day for me when I sent you my first load of milk," he cried out bitterly; but in the other's words there had been such a ring of truth as took all the sting out of his own.

"It will be a worse one for us when you send me your last," replied the man of business. "That would be enough to finish us in itself, without your solicitor, in our present state; whereas, if

you give us time – ”

“I have given you too much time already,” said the farmer, heaving the sigh which was ever the end of all his threats; and with a sudden good-humoured resignation (which put his nature in a nutshell), he got up and went away, after an amicable discussion on the exceeding earliness of summer with the man for whom he was no match at all. Throughout his life there had been far too many men who were more than a match for poor David in all such matters.

But the getting of the twenty pounds was a matter apart. He did not want it for himself; the person in need of the money was the child of his dear old friend, who had charged her to apply to him, David, in precisely that kind of difficulty which had already arisen. The fact made the old man’s heart hot on one side and cold on the other; for while it glowed with pride at the trust reposed in him, it froze within his breast at the thought of his own helplessness to fulfil that trust. This, however, was a thought which he obstinately refused to entertain. He had not twenty pounds in the bank; on the contrary, his account was overdrawn to the utmost limit. For himself, he would have starved rather than borrow from his friend the innkeeper; but he could have brought himself to do so for Miriam, had he not been perfectly certain that his old servant would refuse to lend. In all Melbourne there was no other to whom he could go for the twenty pounds; yet have it he must, by hook or crook, that night; and ten minutes after his fruitless interview with the middleman who sold his

milk, a way was shown him.

He was hanging about the corner of Bourke and Elizabeth Streets, watching the multitude with an absent, lack-lustre eye; the post-office clock had chimed the hour overhead, and David, still absently, had taken his own cherished watch from his waistcoat pocket to check its time. It was not on his last day in Melbourne, nor on his last but one, that the watch had been set by the post-office clock, yet it was still right to the minute; and before the eighth clang from above had been swallowed in the city's hum, David had got his idea. He closed the gold case with a decisive snap, and next moment went in feverish quest of the nearest pawnbroker.

It was with a face strangely drawn between joy and regret, between guilt and triumph, that Mr. Teesdale at length returned to his inn. Here, in the writing-room, now with the scared frown of a forger, and now with a senile giggle, he cowered over a blotting-pad for some minutes; and thereafter returned to the post-office with a sealed envelope, which he shot into safety with his own hands. It was well after nine before the horse was put to, and David seated once more in the buggy, with the collar of his dust-coat turned up about his ears and the apron over his long lean legs.

"Never knew you so late before, old man," said his former servant, who was smoking a cigar in the yard, and perhaps still thinking of his first snub from David Teesdale.

"No, I don't think you ever did," replied David, blandly.

"Second time in to-day, too."

"Second time in," repeated Mr. Teesdale, drawing the reins through his fingers.

"And it'll take you a good hour to get home. I say, you'll be getting into trouble. You won't be there before – What time is it now, old man?"

"Look at the post-office," said David, as he took up his whip.

"I can't see it without going out into the street; besides, I always thought they took their time from that wonderful watch of yours?"

"You're a clever fellow!" cried David, as the other had never heard him speak in the whole course of their previous acquaintance; and he was gone without another word.

He drove away with a troubled face; but the Melbourne street-lamps showed deeper furrows under the old tall hat than David carried with him into the darkness beyond the city, for the more he thought of it, the surer did he become that his late action was not only defensible, but rather praiseworthy into the bargain. There was about it, moreover, a dramatic fitness which charmed him no less because he did not know the name for it. Throughout his unsuccessful manhood he had treasured a watch, which was as absurd in his pocket as a gold-headed cane in a beggarman's hand, because Oliver had given it to him. For years it must have mocked him whenever he took it from his shabby pocket, but in the narrowest straits he had never parted with it, nor had his gold watch ever ceased to be David Teesdale's most precious

possession. And now, after two-and-thirty years, he had calmly pawned it, on the spur of the moment, and, as it seemed to himself, for the most extraordinary and beautiful reason in the world; for what he could never bring himself to do in his own need he had done in a moment for the extravagant behoof of his friend's daughter; and his heart beat higher than for many a year in the joy of his deed. So puffed up was he, indeed, that he forgot the fear of Mrs. Teesdale, and some other things besides; for at the foot of the last hill, within a mile of the farm, the horse shied so suddenly that David, taken off his guard, found his near wheels in the ditch before he could haul in the slack of the reins; and when another plunge might have overturned the buggy, a man ran out of the darkness to the horse's head, and before David could realise what had happened his ship had righted itself and was at anchor in the middle of the road.

"My fault, as I'm a sinner!" cried a rich voice from near the horse's ears.

"Nay, I'm very much obliged to you," said Mr. Teesdale, with a laugh, for he made no work of a bit of danger, much less when past.

"But it was me your horse shied at," returned the other, and fell to petting the frightened animal with soft words and a soothing hand. "I was going to take the liberty of stopping you for a moment."

"I never saw you," said David; "it was that dark, and I was that busy thinking. What is it I can do for you? The horse 'll stand

steady now, thank you, if you'll come this way."

The wayfarer came round to the buggy wheels and stood still, feeling in all his pockets before answering questions. The near lamp shot its rays upon a broad, deep chest, and showed a pair of hairy hands searching one pocket after another. The rays reached as high as a scarlet neckcloth, but no higher, so that the man's face was not very easily visible; and David was only beginning to pick out of the night a heavy moustache, and a still heavier jaw, when from between the two there came the gleam of teeth, and the fellow was laughing a little and swearing more. He had given up his search, and stood empty-handed under the lamp.

"I'm not a bushranger," said he, "but you might easily think me one."

"Why so?" asked David.

"Because I stopped you to ask for a match to light my pipe, and now I'm hanged if I can find my pipe in any of my pockets; and it was the best one ever I smoked," said the man, with more of his oaths.

"That's a bad job," said David, sympathetically, in spite of a personal horror of bad language, which was one of his better peculiarities.

"A bad job?" cried the man. "It would be that if I'd lost my pipe, but it's a damned sight worse when it's a girl that goes and shakes it from you, and she the biggest little innocent you ever clapped eyes on. Yet she *must* have shook it. Confound her face!"

He was feeling in his pockets again, but as unsuccessfully as

before. The farmer inquired whether he was on his way back to Melbourne, and suggested it was a long walk.

"It is so," said the man; "but it's a gay little town when you get there, is Melbourne – what?"

"Very," said Mr. Teesdale, to be civil; but he was beginning to find this difficult.

"You prefer the country – what?" continued the other, who was now leaning on the wheel, and showing a face which the old man liked even less than the rest of him, it was so handsome and yet so coarse. "Well, so do I, for a change. And talk of the girls!" The fellow winked. "Old Country or Colonies, it's all the same – you give me a country lass for a lark that's worth having. But damn their souls when they lose your favourite pipe!"

"What sort of a pipe was it?" asked David, to change a conversation which he disliked. "If I come across it I'll send it to you, if you tell me where to."

"Good, old man!" cried the stranger. "It was a meerschaum, with a lady's hand holding of the bowl, and coloured better than any pipe ever you saw in your life. If you do find it, you leave it with the boss of the 'Bushman's Rest'. then I'll get it again when next I come this way – to see my girl. For I can't quite think she's the one to have touched it, when all's skid and done."

"Very good," said David, coldly, because both look and word of this roadside acquaintance were equally undesirable in his eyes. "Very good, if I find it. And now, if you'll allow me, I'll push on home."

The other showed himself as ready with a sneer as with an oath. “You are in a desperate hurry!” said he.

“I am,” said David; “nevertheless, I’m much obliged to you for being so clever with the horse just now, and I wish you a very good night.” And with that, showing for once some little decision, because this kind of man repelled him, old Tees-dale cracked his whip and drove on without more ado.

Nor is it likely he would have thought any more about so trifling an incident, but for another which occurred before he finally reached home. It was at his own slip-rails, not many minutes later; he had got down and taken them out, and was in the act of leading through, when his foot kicked something hard and small, so that it rattled against one of the rails, and shone in the light of the buggy lamp at the same instant. The farmer stopped to pick it up, found it a meerschaum pipe, and pulled a grave face over it for several moments. Then he slipped it into his pocket, and after putting up the rails behind him, was in his own yard in three minutes. Here one of the men took charge of horse and buggy, and the master went round to the front of the house, but must needs stand in the verandah to spy on Arabella, who was sitting with her *Family Cherub* under the lamp and the blind never drawn. She was not reading; her head was lifted, and she was gazing at the window – at himself, David imagined; but he was wrong, for she never saw him. Her face was flushed, and there was in it a wonder and a stealthy joy, born of the romantic reading under her nose, as the father thought; but he was wrong

again; for Arabella had finished one chapter before the coming of Missy, and had sat an hour over the next without taking in a word.

"So you've got back, father?" she was saying presently, in an absent, mechanical sort of voice.

"Here I am," said Mr. Teesdale; "and I left Missy at the theatre, where it appears she had to meet – "

"Missy!" exclaimed Arabella, remembering very suddenly. "Oh yes! Of course. Where do you say you left her, father?"

"At the Bijou Theatre, my dear, I am sorry to say; but it wasn't her fault; it was the friends she is staying with whom she had to meet there. Well, let's hope it won't do her any harm just once in a way. And what have you been doing, my dear, all the evening?"

"I? Oh, after milking I had a bit of a stroll outside."

"A stroll, eh? Then you didn't happen to see a man hanging about our slip-rails, did you?"

Mr. Teesdale was emptying his pockets, with his back to Arabella, so he never knew how his question affected her.

"I wasn't near the slip-rails, I was in the opposite direction," she said presently. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I found this right under them," said Mr. Teesdale, showing her the meerschaum pipe before laying it down on the chimney-piece; "and as I was getting near the township, I met a man who told me he'd lost just such a pipe. And I didn't like him, my dear, so I only hope he's not coming after our Mary Jane, that's all."

Mary Jane was the farm-servant. She had not been out of the kitchen since milking-time, said Arabella; and her father was remarking that he was glad to hear this, when the door flew open, and Mrs. Teesdale whistled into the room like a squall of wind.

"At last!" she cried. "Do you know how long you've been, David? Do you know what time it is?"

"I don't, my dear," said he.

"Then look at your watch."

"My dear," he said, "I've left my watch in Melbourne."

"In Melbourne!" cried Mrs. Teesdale among her top notes. "And what's the meaning of that?"

"It means," said Mr. Teesdale, struggling to avoid the lie direct, "that it hasn't been cleaned for years, and that it needed cleaning very badly indeed."

"But you told Miriam how well it was going; time we were having our teas!"

"Yes, I know, and – that's the curious thing, my dear. It went and stopped on our way in." For there was no avoiding it, after all; yet in all the long years of their married life, it was his first.

CHAPTER VI. – THE WAYS OF SOCIETY

The Monday following was the first and the best of some bad days at the farm; for Missy had never written to tell Mr. Teesdale when and where he might call for her, so he could not call at all, and she did not come out by herself. This they now firmly expected her to do, and David wasted much time in meeting every omnibus; but when the last one had come in without Missy, even he was forced to give her up for that day. There would be a letter of explanation in the morning, said David, and shut his ears to his wife's answer. She had been on tenter-hooks all day, for ever diving into the spare room with a duster, dodging out again to inquire what time it was *now*, and then scolding David because he had not his watch – a circumstance for which that simpleton was reproaching himself before long.

For there was no letter in the morning, and no Missy next day, or the next, or the next after that. It was then that Mr. Teesdale took to lying awake and thinking much of the friendly ticking that had cheered his wakefulness for thirty years, and even more of a few words in the Thursday's *Argus*, which he had not shown to a soul. And strange ideas concerning the English girl were bandied across the family board; but the strangest of all were John William's, who would not hear a word against her; on the

contrary, it was his father, in his opinion, who was to blame for the whole matter, which the son of the house declared to be a mere confusion of one Monday with another.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.