

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

RHODA
FLEMING,
VOLUME 1

George Meredith
Rhoda Fleming. Volume 1

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George Meredith

Rhoda Fleming – Volume 1

CHAPTER I

Remains of our good yeomanry blood will be found in Kent, developing stiff, solid, unobtrusive men, and very personable women. The distinction survives there between Kentish women and women of Kent, as a true South-eastern dame will let you know, if it is her fortune to belong to that favoured portion of the county where the great battle was fought, in which the gentler sex performed manful work, but on what luckless heads we hear not; and when garrulous tradition is discreet, the severe historic Muse declines to hazard a guess. Saxon, one would presume, since it is thought something to have broken them.

My plain story is of two Kentish damsels, and runs from a home of flowers into regions where flowers are few and sickly, on to where the flowers which breathe sweet breath have been proved in mortal fire.

Mrs. Fleming, of Queen Anne's Farm, was the wife of a yeoman-farmer of the county. Both were of sound Kentish extraction, albeit varieties of the breed. The farm had its name from a tradition, common to many other farmhouses within a circuit of the metropolis, that the ante-Hanoverian lady had used the place in her day as a nursery-hospital for the royal little ones. It was a square three-storied building of red brick, much beaten and stained by the weather, with an ivied side, up which the ivy grew stoutly, topping the roof in triumphant lumps. The house could hardly be termed picturesque. Its aspect had struck many eyes as being very much that of a red-coat sentinel grenadier, battered with service, and standing firmly enough, though not at ease. Surrounding it was a high wall, built partly of flint and partly of brick, and ringed all over with grey lichen and brown spots of bearded moss, that bore witness to the touch of many winds and rains. Tufts of pale grass, and gilliflowers, and travelling stone-crop, hung from the wall, and driblets of ivy ran broadening to the outer ground. The royal Arms were said to have surmounted the great iron gateway; but they had vanished, either with the family, or at the indications of an approaching rust. Rust defiled its bars; but, when you looked through them, the splendour of an unrivalled garden gave vivid signs of youth, and of the taste of an orderly, laborious, and cunning hand.

The garden was under Mrs. Fleming's charge. The joy of her love for it was written on its lustrous beds, as poets write. She had the poetic passion for flowers. Perhaps her taste may now seem questionable. She cherished the old-fashioned delight in tulips; the house was reached on a gravel-path between rows of tulips, rich with one natural blush, or freaked by art. She liked a bulk of colour; and when the dahlia dawned upon our gardens, she gave her heart to dahlias. By good desert, the fervent woman gained a prize at a flower-show for one of her dahlias, and 'Dahlia' was the name uttered at the christening of her eldest daughter, at which all Wrexby parish laughed as long as the joke could last. There was laughter also when Mrs. Fleming's second daughter received the name of 'Rhoda;' but it did not endure for so long a space, as it was known that she had taken more to the solitary and reflective reading of her Bible, and to thoughts upon flowers eternal. Country people are not inclined to tolerate the display of a passion for anything. They find it as intrusive and exasperating as is, in the midst of larger congregations, what we call genius. For some years, Mrs. Fleming's proceedings were simply a theme for gossips, and her vanity was openly pardoned, until that delusively prosperous appearance which her labour lent to the house, was worn through by the enforced confession of there being poverty in the household. The ragged elbow was then projected in the face of Wrexby in a manner to preclude it from a sober appreciation of the fairness of the face.

Critically, moreover, her admission of great poppy-heads into her garden was objected to. She would squander her care on poppies, and she had been heard to say that, while she lived, her children should be fully fed. The encouragement of flaunting weeds in a decent garden was indicative of a moral twist that the expressed resolution to supply her table with plentiful nourishment, no matter whence it came, or how provided, sufficiently confirmed. The reason with which she was stated to have fortified her stern resolve was of the irritating order, right in the abstract, and utterly unprincipled in the application. She said, 'Good bread, and good beef, and enough of both, make good blood; and my children shall be stout.' This is such a thing as maybe announced by foreign princesses and rulers over serfs; but English Wrexby, in cogitative mood, demanded an equivalent for its beef and divers economies consumed by the hungry children of the authoritative woman. Practically it was obedient, for it had got the habit of supplying her. Though payment was long in arrear, the arrears were not treated as lost ones by Mrs. Fleming, who, without knowing it, possessed one main secret for mastering the custodians of credit. She had a considerate remembrance and regard for the most distant of her debts, so that she seemed to be only always a little late, and exceptionally wrongheaded in theory. Wrexby, therefore, acquiesced in helping to build up her children to stoutness, and but for the blindness of all people, save artists, poets, novelists, to the grandeur of their own creations, the inhabitants of this Kentish village might have had an enjoyable pride in the beauty and robust grace of the young girls,—fair-haired, black-haired girls, a kindred contrast, like fire and smoke, to look upon. In stature, in bearing, and in expression, they were, if I may adopt the eloquent modern manner of eulogy, strikingly above their class. They carried erect shoulders, like creatures not ashamed of showing a merely animal pride, which is never quite apart from the pride of developed beauty. They were as upright as Oriental girls, whose heads are nobly poised from carrying the pitcher to the well. Dark Rhoda might have passed for Rachel, and Dahlia called her Rachel. They tossed one another their mutual compliments, drawn from the chief book of their reading. Queen of Sheba was Dahlia's title. No master of callisthenics could have set them up better than their mother's receipt for making good blood, combined with a certain harmony of their systems, had done; nor could a schoolmistress have taught them correcter speaking. The characteristic of girls having a disposition to rise, is to be cravingly mimetic; and they remembered, and crooned over, till by degrees they adopted the phrases and manner of speech of highly grammatical people, such as the rector and his lady, and of people in story-books, especially of the courtly French fairy-books, wherein the princes talk in periods as sweetly rounded as are their silken calves; nothing less than angelically, so as to be a model to ordinary men.

The idea of love upon the lips of ordinary men, provoked Dahlia's irony; and the youths of Wrexby and Fenhurst had no chance against her secret Prince Florizels. Them she endowed with no pastoral qualities; on the contrary, she conceived that such pure young gentlemen were only to be seen, and perhaps met, in the great and mystic City of London. Naturally, the girls dreamed of London. To educate themselves, they copied out whole pages of a book called the 'Field of Mars,' which was next to the family Bible in size among the volumes of the farmer's small library. The deeds of the heroes of this book, and the talk of the fairy princes, were assimilated in their minds; and as they looked around them upon millers', farmers', maltsters', and tradesmen's sons, the thought of what manner of youth would propose to marry them became a precocious tribulation. Rhoda, at the age of fifteen, was distracted by it, owing to her sister's habit of masking her own dismal internal forebodings on the subject, under the guise of a settled anxiety concerning her sad chance.

In dress, the wife of the rector of Wrexby was their model. There came once to Squire Blancove's unoccupied pew a dazzling vision of a fair lady. They heard that she was a cousin of his third wife, and a widow, Mrs. Lovell by name. They looked at her all through the service, and the lady certainly looked at them in return; nor could they, with any distinctness, imagine why, but the look dwelt long in their hearts, and often afterward, when Dahlia, upon taking her seat in church, shut her eyes, according to custom, she strove to conjure up the image of herself, as she had appeared to the

beautiful woman in the dress of grey-shot silk, with violet mantle and green bonnet, rose-trimmed; and the picture she conceived was the one she knew herself by, for many ensuing years.

Mrs. Fleming fought her battle with a heart worthy of her countrywomen, and with as much success as the burden of a despondent husband would allow to her. William John Fleming was simply a poor farmer, for whom the wheels of the world went too fast:—a big man, appearing to be difficult to kill, though deeply smitten. His cheeks bloomed in spite of lines and stains, and his large, quietly dilated, brown ox-eyes, that never gave out a meaning, seldom showed as if they had taken one from what they saw. Until his wife was lost to him, he believed that he had a mighty grievance against her; but as he was not wordy, and was by nature kind, it was her comfort to die and not to know it. This grievance was rooted in the idea that she was ruinously extravagant. The sight of the plentiful table was sore to him; the hungry mouths, though he grudged to his offspring nothing that he could pay for, were an afflicting prospect. "Plump 'em up, and make 'em dainty," he advanced in contravention of his wife's talk of bread and beef.

But he did not complain. If it came to an argument, the farmer sidled into a secure corner of prophecy, and bade his wife to see what would come of having dainty children. He could not deny that bread and beef made blood, and were cheaper than the port-wine which doctors were in the habit of ordering for this and that delicate person in the neighbourhood; so he was compelled to have recourse to secret discontent. The attention, the time, and the trifles of money shed upon the flower garden, were hardships easier to bear. He liked flowers, and he liked to hear the praise of his wife's horticultural skill. The garden was a distinguishing thing to the farm, and when on a Sunday he walked home from church among full June roses, he felt the odour of them to be so like his imagined sensations of prosperity, that the deception was worth its cost. Yet the garden in its bloom revived a cruel blow. His wife had once wounded his vanity. The massed vanity of a silent man, when it does take a wound, desires a giant's vengeance; but as one can scarcely seek to enjoy that monstrous gratification when one's wife is the offender, the farmer escaped from his dilemma by going apart into a turnip-field, and swearing, with his fist outstretched, never to forget it. His wife had asked him, seeing that the garden flourished and the farm decayed, to yield the labour of the farm to the garden; in fact, to turn nurseryman under his wife's direction. The woman could not see that her garden drained the farm already, distracted the farm, and most evidently impoverished him. She could not understand, that in permitting her, while he sweated fruitlessly, to give herself up to the occupation of a lady, he had followed the promptings of his native kindness, and certainly not of his native wisdom. That she should deem herself 'best man' of the two, and suggest his stamping his name to such an opinion before the world, was an outrage.

Mrs. Fleming was failing in health. On that plea, with the solemnity suited to the autumn of her allotted days, she persuaded her husband to advertise for an assistant, who would pay a small sum of money to learn sound farming, and hear arguments in favour of the Corn Laws. To please her, he threw seven shillings away upon an advertisement, and laughed when the advertisement was answered, remarking that he doubted much whether good would come of dealings with strangers. A young man, calling himself Robert Armstrong, underwent a presentation to the family. He paid the stipulated sum, and was soon enrolled as one of them. He was of a guardsman's height and a cricketer's suppleness, a drinker of water, and apparently the victim of a dislike of his species; for he spoke of the great night-lighted city with a horror that did not seem to be an estimable point in him, as judged by a pair of damsels for whom the mysterious metropolis flew with fiery fringes through dark space, in their dreams.

In other respects, the stranger was well thought of, as being handsome and sedate. He talked fondly of one friend that he had, an officer in the army, which was considered pardonably vain. He did not reach to the ideal of his sex which had been formed by the sisters; but Mrs. Fleming, trusting to her divination of his sex's character, whispered a mother's word about him to her husband a little while before her death.

It was her prayer to heaven that she might save a doctor's bill. She died, without lingering illness, in her own beloved month of June; the roses of her tending at the open window, and a soft breath floating up to her from the garden. On the foregoing May-day, she had sat on the green that fronted the iron gateway, when Dahlia and Rhoda dressed the children of the village in garlands, and crowned the fairest little one queen of May: a sight that revived in Mrs. Fleming's recollection the time of her own eldest and fairest taking homage, shy in her white smock and light thick curls. The gathering was large, and the day was of the old nature of May, before tyrannous Eastwinds had captured it and spoiled its consecration. The mill-stream of the neighbouring mill ran blue among the broad green pastures; the air smelt of cream-bowls and wheaten loaves; the firs on the beacon-ridge, far southward, over Fenhurst and Helm villages, were transported nearer to see the show, and stood like friends anxious to renew acquaintance. Dahlia and Rhoda taught the children to perceive how they resembled bent old beggar-men. The two stone-pines in the miller's grounds were likened by them to Adam and Eve turning away from the blaze of Paradise; and the saying of one receptive child, that they had nothing but hair on, made the illustration undying both to Dahlia and Rhoda.

The magic of the weather brought numerous butterflies afield, and one fiddler, to whose tuning the little women danced; others closer upon womanhood would have danced likewise, if the sisters had taken partners; but Dahlia was restrained by the sudden consciousness that she was under the immediate observation of two manifestly London gentlemen, and she declined to be led forth by Robert Armstrong. The intruders were youths of good countenance, known to be the son and the nephew of Squire Blancove of Wrexby Hall. They remained for some time watching the scene, and destroyed Dahlia's single-mindedness. Like many days of gaiety, the Gods consenting, this one had its human shadow. There appeared on the borders of the festivity a young woman, the daughter of a Wrexby cottager, who had left her home and but lately returned to it, with a spotted name. No one addressed her, and she stood humbly apart. Dahlia, seeing that every one moved away from her, whispering with satisfied noddings, wished to draw her in among the groups. She mentioned the name of Mary Burt to her father, supposing that so kind a man would not fail to sanction her going up to the neglected young woman. To her surprise, her father became violently enraged, and uttered a stern prohibition, speaking a word that stained her cheeks. Rhoda was by her side, and she wilfully, without asking leave, went straight over to Mary, and stood with her under the shadow of the Adam and Eve, until the farmer sent a messenger to say that he was about to enter the house. Her punishment for the act of sinfulness was a week of severe silence; and the farmer would have kept her to it longer, but for her mother's ominously growing weakness. The sisters were strangely overclouded by this incident. They could not fathom the meaning of their father's unkindness, coarseness, and indignation. Why, and why? they asked one another, blankly. The Scriptures were harsh in one part, but was the teaching to continue so after the Atonement? By degrees they came to reflect, and not in a mild spirit, that the kindest of men can be cruel, and will forget their Christianity toward offending and repentant women.

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Fleming had a brother in London, who had run away from his Kentish home when a small boy, and found refuge at a Bank. The position of Anthony Hackbut in that celebrated establishment, and the degree of influence exercised by him there, were things unknown; but he had stuck to the Bank for a great number of years, and he had once confessed to his sister that he was not a beggar. Upon these joint facts the farmer speculated, deducing from them that a man in a London Bank, holding money of his own, must have learnt the ways of turning it over—farming golden ground, as it were; consequently, that amount must now have increased to a very considerable sum. You ask, What amount? But one who sits brooding upon a pair of facts for years, with the imperturbable gravity of creation upon chaos, will be as successful in evoking the concrete from the abstract. The farmer saw round figures among the possessions of the family, and he assisted mentally in this money-turning of Anthony's, counted his gains for him, disposed his risks, and eyed the pile of visionary gold with an interest so remote, that he was almost correct in calling it disinterested. The brothers-in-law had a mutual plea of expense that kept them separate. When Anthony refused, on petition, to advance one hundred pounds to the farmer, there was ill blood to divide them. Queen Anne's Farm missed the flourishing point by one hundred pounds exactly. With that addition to its exchequer, it would have made head against its old enemy, Taxation, and started rejuvenescent. But the Radicals were in power to legislate and crush agriculture, and "I've got a miser for my brother-in-law," said the farmer. Alas! the hundred pounds to back him, he could have sowed what he pleased, and when it pleased him, partially defying the capricious clouds and their treasures, and playing tunefully upon his land, his own land. Instead of which, and while too keenly aware that the one hundred would have made excesses in any direction tributary to his pocket, the poor man groaned at continuous falls of moisture, and when rain was prayed for in church, he had to be down on his knees, praying heartily with the rest of the congregation. It was done, and bitter reproaches were cast upon Anthony for the enforced necessity to do it.

On the occasion of his sister's death, Anthony informed his bereaved brother-in-law that he could not come down to follow the hearse as a mourner. "My place is one of great trust;" he said, "and I cannot be spared." He offered, however, voluntarily to pay half the expenses of the funeral, stating the limit of the cost. It is unfair to sound any man's springs of action critically while he is being tried by a sorrow; and the farmer's angry rejection of Anthony's offer of aid must pass. He remarked in his letter of reply, that his wife's funeral should cost no less than he chose to expend on it. He breathed indignant fumes against "interferences." He desired Anthony to know that he also was "not a beggar," and that he would not be treated as one. The letter showed a solid yeoman's fist. Farmer Fleming told his chums, and the shopkeeper of Wrexby, with whom he came into converse, that he would honour his dead wife up to his last penny. Some month or so afterward it was generally conjectured that he had kept his word.

Anthony's rejoinder was characterized by a marked humility. He expressed contrition for the farmer's misunderstanding of his motives. His fathomless conscience had plainly been reached. He wrote again, without waiting for an answer, speaking of the Funds indeed, but only to pronounce them worldly things, and hoping that they all might meet in heaven, where brotherly love, as well as money, was ready made, and not always in the next street. A hint occurred that it would be a gratification to him to be invited down, whether he could come or no; for holidays were expensive, and journeys by rail had to be thought over before they were undertaken; and when you are away from your post, you never knew who maybe supplanting you. He did not promise that he could come, but frankly stated his susceptibility to the friendliness of an invitation. The feeling indulged by Farmer Fleming in refusing to notice Anthony's advance toward a reconciliation, was, on the whole, not creditable to him. Spite is more often fattened than propitiated by penitence. He may have thought besides (policy

not being always a vacant space in revengeful acts) that Anthony was capable of something stronger and warmer, now that his humanity had been aroused. The speculation is commonly perilous; but Farmer Fleming had the desperation of a man who has run slightly into debt, and has heard the first din of dunning, which to the unaccustomed imagination is fearful as bankruptcy (shorn of the horror of the word). And, moreover, it was so wonderful to find Anthony displaying humanity at all, that anything might be expected of him. "Let's see what he will do," thought the farmer in an interval of his wrath; and the wrath is very new which has none of these cool intervals. The passions, do but watch them, are all more or less intermittent.

As it chanced, he acted sagaciously, for Anthony at last wrote to say that his home in London was cheerless, and that he intended to move into fresh and airier lodgings, where the presence of a discreet young housekeeper, who might wish to see London, and make acquaintance with the world, would be agreeable to him. His project was that one of his nieces should fill this office, and he requested his brother-in-law to reflect on it, and to think of him as of a friend of the family, now and in the time to come. Anthony spoke of the seductions of London quite unctuously. Who could imagine this to be the letter of an old crabbed miser? "Tell her," he said, "there's fruit at stalls at every street-corner all the year through—oysters and whelks, if she likes—winkles, lots of pictures in shops—a sight of muslin and silks, and rides on omnibuses—bands of all sorts, and now and then we can take a walk to see the military on horseback, if she's for soldiers." Indeed, he joked quite comically in speaking of the famous horse-guards—warriors who sit on their horses to be looked at, and do not mind it, because they are trained so thoroughly. "Horse-guards blue, and horse-guards red," he wrote—"the blue only want boiling." There is reason to suppose that his disrespectful joke was not original in him, but it displayed his character in a fresh light. Of course, if either of the girls was to go, Dahlia was the person. The farmer commenced his usual process of sitting upon the idea. That it would be policy to attach one of the family to this chirping old miser, he thought incontestable. On the other hand, he had a dread of London, and Dahlia was surpassingly fair. He put the case to Robert, in remembrance of what his wife had spoken, hoping that Robert would amorously stop his painful efforts to think fast enough for the occasion. Robert, however, had nothing to say, and seemed willing to let Dahlia depart. The only opponents to the plan were Mrs. Sumfit, a kindly, humble relative of the farmer's, widowed out of Sussex, very loving and fat; the cook to the household, whose waist was dimly indicated by her apron-string; and, to aid her outcries, the silently-protesting Master Gammon, an old man with the cast of eye of an antediluvian lizard, the slowest old man of his time—a sort of foreman of the farm before Robert had come to take matters in hand, and thrust both him and his master into the background. Master Gammon remarked emphatically, once and for all, that "he never had much opinion of London." As he had never visited London, his opinion was considered the less weighty, but, as he advanced no further speech, the sins and backslidings of the metropolis were strongly brought to mind by his condemnatory utterance. Policy and Dahlia's entreaties at last prevailed with the farmer, and so the fair girl went up to the great city.

After months of a division that was like the division of her living veins, and when the comfort of letters was getting cold, Rhoda, having previously pledged herself to secrecy, though she could not guess why it was commanded, received a miniature portrait of Dahlia, so beautiful that her envy of London for holding her sister away from her, melted in gratitude. She had permission to keep the portrait a week; it was impossible to forbear from showing it to Mrs. Sumfit, who peeped in awe, and that emotion subsiding, shed tears abundantly. Why it was to be kept secret, they failed to inquire; the mystery was possibly not without its delights to them. Tears were shed again when the portrait had to be packed up and despatched. Rhoda lived on abashed by the adorable new refinement of Dahlia's features, and her heart yearned to her uncle for so caring to decorate the lovely face.

One day Rhoda was at her bed-room window, on the point of descending to encounter the daily dumpling, which was the principal and the unvarying item of the midday meal of the house, when she beheld a stranger trying to turn the handle of the iron gate. Her heart thumped. She divined

correctly that it was her uncle. Dahlia had now been absent for very many months, and Rhoda's growing fretfulness sprang the conviction in her mind that something closer than letters must soon be coming. She ran downstairs, and along the gravel-path. He was a little man, square-built, and looking as if he had worn to toughness; with an evident Sunday suit on: black, and black gloves, though the day was only antecedent to Sunday.

"Let me help you, sir," she said, and her hands came in contact with his, and were squeezed.

"How is my sister?" She had no longer any fear in asking.

"Now, you let me through, first," he replied, imitating an arbitrary juvenile. "You're as tight locked in as if you was in dread of all the thieves of London. You ain't afraid o' me, miss? I'm not the party generally outside of a fortification; I ain't, I can assure you. I'm a defence party, and a reg'lar lion when I've got the law backing me."

He spoke in a queer, wheezy voice, like a cracked flute, combined with the effect of an ill-resined fiddle-bow.

"You are in the garden of Queen Anne's Farm," said Rhoda.

"And you're my pretty little niece, are you? 'the darkie lass,' as your father says. "Little," says I; why, you needn't be ashamed to stand beside a grenadier. Trust the country for growing fine gals."

"You are my uncle, then?" said Rhoda. "Tell me how my sister is. Is she well? Is she quite happy?"

"Dahly?" returned old Anthony, slowly.

"Yes, yes; my sister!" Rhoda looked at him with distressful eagerness.

"Now, don't you be uneasy about your sister Dahly." Old Anthony, as he spoke, fixed his small brown eyes on the girl, and seemed immediately to have departed far away in speculation. A question recalled him.

"Is her health good?"

"Ay; stomach's good, head's good, lungs, brain, what not, all good.

She's a bit giddy, that's all."

"In her head?"

"Ay; and on her pins. Never you mind. You look a steady one, my dear.

I shall take to you, I think."

"But my sister—" Rhoda was saying, when the farmer came out, and sent a greeting from the threshold,—

"Brother Tony!"

"Here he is, brother William John."

"Surely, and so he is, at last." The farmer walked up to him with his hand out.

"And it ain't too late, I hope. Eh?"

"It's never too late—to mend," said the farmer.

"Eh? not my manners, eh?" Anthony struggled to keep up the ball; and in this way they got over the confusion of the meeting after many years and some differences.

"Made acquaintance with Rhoda, I see," said the farmer, as they turned to go in.

"The 'darkie lass' you write of. She's like a coal nigh a candle. She looks, as you'd say, 't' other side of her sister.' Yes, we've had a talk."

"Just in time for dinner, brother Tony. We ain't got much to offer, but what there is, is at your service. Step aside with me."

The farmer got Anthony out of hearing a moment, questioned, and was answered: after which he looked less anxious, but a trifle perplexed, and nodded his head as Anthony occasionally lifted his, to enforce certain points in some halting explanation. You would have said that a debtor was humbly putting his case in his creditor's ear, and could only now and then summon courage to meet the censorious eyes. They went in to Mrs. Sumfit's shout that the dumplings were out of the pot: old

Anthony bowed upon the announcement of his name, and all took seats. But it was not the same sort of dinner-hour as that which the inhabitants of the house were accustomed to; there was conversation.

The farmer asked Anthony by what conveyance he had come. Anthony shyly, but not without evident self-approbation, related how, having come by the train, he got into conversation with the driver of a fly at a station, who advised him of a cart that would be passing near Wrexby. For threepennyworth of beer, he had got a friendly introduction to the carman, who took him within two miles of the farm for one shilling, a distance of fifteen miles. That was pretty good!

"Home pork, brother Tony," said the farmer, approvingly.

"And home-made bread, too, brother William John," said Anthony, becoming brisk.

"Ay, and the beer, such as it is." The farmer drank and sighed.

Anthony tried the beer, remarking, "That's good beer; it don't cost much."

"It ain't adulterated. By what I read of your London beer, this stuff's not so bad, if you bear in mind it's pure. Pure's my motto. 'Pure, though poor!'"

"Up there, you pay for rank poison," said Anthony. "So, what do I do? I drink water and thank 'em, that's wise."

"Saves stomach and purse." The farmer put a little stress on 'purse.'

"Yes, I calculate I save threepence a day in beer alone," said Anthony.

"Three times seven's twenty-one, ain't it?"

Mr. Fleming said this, and let out his elbow in a small perplexity, as

Anthony took him up: "And fifty-two times twenty-one?"

"Well, that's, that's—how much is that, Mas' Gammon?" the farmer asked in a bellow.

Master Gammon was laboriously and steadily engaged in tightening himself with dumpling. He relaxed his exertions sufficiently to take this new burden on his brain, and immediately cast it off.

"Ah never thinks when I feeds—Ah was al'ays a bad hand at 'counts.

Gi'es it up."

"Why, you're like a horse that never was rode! Try again, old man," said the farmer.

"If I drags a cart," Master Gammon replied, "that ain't no reason why I should leap a gate."

The farmer felt that he was worsted as regarded the illustration, and with a bit of the boy's fear of the pedagogue, he fought Anthony off by still pressing the arithmetical problem upon Master Gammon; until the old man, goaded to exasperation, rolled out thunderingly,—

"If I works fer ye, that ain't no reason why I should think fer ye," which caused him to be left in peace.

"Eh, Robert?" the farmer transferred the question; "Come! what is it?"

Robert begged a minute's delay, while Anthony watched him with hawk eyes.

"I tell you what it is—it's pounds," said Robert.

This tickled Anthony, who let him escape, crying: "Capital! Pounds it is in your pocket, sir, and you hit that neatly, I will say. Let it be five. You out with your five at interest, compound interest; soon comes another five; treat it the same: in ten years—eh? and then you get into figures; you swim in figures!"

"I should think you did!" said the farmer, winking slyly.

Anthony caught the smile, hesitated and looked shrewd, and then covered his confusion by holding his plate to Mrs. Sumfit for a help. The manifest evasion and mute declaration that dumpling said "mum" on that head, gave the farmer a quiet glow.

"When you are ready to tell me all about my darlin', sir," Mrs. Sumfit suggested, coaxingly.

"After dinner, mother—after dinner," said the farmer.

"And we're waitin', are we, till them dumplings is finished?" she exclaimed, piteously, with a glance at Master Gammon's plate.

"After dinner we'll have a talk, mother."

Mrs. Sumfit feared from this delay that there was queer news to be told of Dahlia's temper; but she longed for the narrative no whit the less, and again cast a sad eye on the leisurely proceedings of Master Gammon. The veteran was still calmly tightening. His fork was on end, with a vast mouthful impaled on the prongs. Master Gammon, a thoughtful eater, was always last at the meal, and a latent, deep-lying irritation at Mrs. Sumfit for her fidgetiness, day after day, toward the finish of the dish, added a relish to his engulfing of the monstrous morsel. He looked at her steadily, like an ox of the fields, and consumed it, and then holding his plate out, in a remorseless way, said, "You make 'em so good, marm."

Mrs. Sumfit, fretted as she was, was not impervious to the sound sense of the remark, as well as to the compliment.

"I don't want to hurry you, Mas' Gammon," she said; "Lord knows, I like to see you and everybody eat his full and be thankful; but, all about my Dahly waitin',—I feel pricked wi' a pin all over, I do; and there's my blessed in London," she answered, "and we knowin' nothin' of her, and one close by to tell me! I never did feel what slow things dumplin's was, afore now!"

The kettle simmered gently on the hob. Every other knife and fork was silent; so was every tongue. Master Gammon ate and the kettle hummed. Twice Mrs. Sumfit sounded a despairing, "Oh, deary me!" but it was useless. No human power had ever yet driven Master Gammon to a demonstration of haste or to any acceleration of the pace he had chosen for himself. At last, she was not to be restrained from crying out, almost tearfully,—

"When do you think you'll have done, Mas' Gammon?"

Thus pointedly addressed, Master Gammon laid down his knife and fork. He half raised his ponderous, curtaining eyelids, and replied,—

"When I feels my buttons, marm."

After which he deliberately fell to work again.

Mrs. Sumfit dropped back in her chair as from a blow.

But even dumplings, though they resist so doggedly for a space, do ultimately submit to the majestic march of Time, and move. Master Gammon cleared his plate. There stood in the dish still half a dumpling. The farmer and Rhoda, deeming that there had been a show of inhospitality, pressed him to make away with this forlorn remainder.

The vindictive old man, who was as tight as dumpling and buttons could make him, refused it in a drooping tone, and went forth, looking at none. Mrs. Sumfit turned to all parties, and begged them to say what more, to please Master Gammon, she could have done? When Anthony was ready to speak of her Dahlia, she obtruded this question in utter dolefulness. Robert was kindly asked by the farmer to take a pipe among them. Rhoda put a chair for him, but he thanked them both, and said he could not neglect some work to be done in the fields. She thought that he feared pain from hearing Dahlia's name, and followed him with her eyes commiseratingly.

"Does that young fellow attend to business?" said Anthony.

The farmer praised Robert as a rare hand, but one affected with bees in his nightcap,—who had ideas of his own about farming, and was obstinate with them; "pays you due respect, but's got a notion as how his way of thinking's better 'n his seniors. It's the style now with all young folks. Makes a butt of old Mas' Gammon; laughs at the old man. It ain't respectful t' age, I say. Gammon don't understand nothing about new feeds for sheep, and dam nonsense about growing such things as melons, fiddle-faddle, for 'em. Robert's a beginner. What he knows, I taugt the young fellow. Then, my question is, where's his ideas come from, if they're contrary to mine? If they're contrary to mine, they're contrary to my teaching. Well, then, what are they worth? He can't see that. He's a good one at work—I'll say so much for him."

Old Anthony gave Rhoda a pat on the shoulder.

CHAPTER III

"Pipes in the middle of the day's regular revelry," ejaculated Anthony, whose way of holding the curved pipe-stem displayed a mind bent on reckless enjoyment, and said as much as a label issuing from his mouth, like a figure in a comic woodcut of the old style:—"that's," he pursued, "that's if you haven't got to look up at the clock every two minutes, as if the devil was after you. But, sitting here, you know, the afternoon's a long evening; nobody's your master. You can on wi' your slippers, up wi' your legs, talk, or go for'ard, counting, twicing, and three- timesing; by George! I should take to drinking beer if I had my afternoons to myself in the city, just for the sake of sitting and doing sums in a tap-room; if it's a big tap-room, with pew sort o' places, and dark red curtains, a fire, and a smell of sawdust; ale, and tobacco, and a boy going by outside whistling a tune of the day. Somebody comes in. "Ah, there's an idle old chap," he says to himself, (meaning me), and where, I should like to ask him, 'd his head be if he sat there dividing two hundred and fifty thousand by forty-five and a half!"

The farmer nodded encouragingly. He thought it not improbable that a short operation with these numbers would give the sum in Anthony's possession, the exact calculation of his secret hoard, and he set to work to stamp them on his brain, which rendered him absent in manner, while Mrs. Sumfit mixed liquor with hot water, and pushed at his knee, doubling in her enduring lips, and lengthening her eyes to aim a side-glance of reprehension at Anthony's wandering loquacity.

Rhoda could bear it no more.

"Now let me hear of my sister, uncle," she said.

"I'll tell you what," Anthony responded, "she hasn't got such a pretty sort of a sweet blackbirdy voice as you've got."

The girl blushed scarlet.

"Oh, she can mount them colours, too," said Anthony.

His way of speaking of Dahlia indicated that he and she had enough of one another; but of the peculiar object of his extraordinary visit not even the farmer had received a hint. Mrs. Sumfit ventured to think aloud that his grog was not stiff enough, but he took a gulp under her eyes, and smacked his lips after it in a most convincing manner.

"Ah! that stuff wouldn't do for me in London, half-holiday or no half-holiday," said Anthony.

"Why not?" the farmer asked.

"I should be speculating—deep—couldn't hold myself in: Mexicans, Peroovians, Venzeshoolians, Spaniards, at 'em I should go. I see bonds in all sorts of colours, Spaniards in black and white, Peruvians—orange, Mexicans—red as the British army. Well, it's just my whim. If I like red, I go at red. I ain't a bit of reason. What's more, I never speculate."

"Why, that's safest, brother Tony," said the farmer.

"And safe's my game—always was, always will be! Do you think"—Anthony sucked his grog to the sugar-dregs, till the spoon settled on his nose— "do you think I should hold the position I do hold, be trusted as I am trusted? Ah! you don't know much about that. Should I have money placed in my hands, do you think—and it's thousands at a time, gold, and notes, and cheques—if I was a risky chap? I'm known to be thoroughly respectable. Five and forty years I've been in Boyne's Bank, and thank ye, ma'am, grog don't do no harm down here. And I will take another glass. 'When the heart of a man!'—but I'm no singer."

Mrs. Sumfit simpered, "Hem; it's the heart of a woman, too: and she have one, and it's dying to hear of her darlin' blessed in town, and of who cuts her hair, and where she gets her gownds, and whose pills—"

The farmer interrupted her irritably.

"Divide a couple o' hundred thousand and more by forty-five and a half," he said. "Do wait, mother; all in good time. Forty-five and a-half, brother Tony; that was your sum—ah!—you

mentioned it some time back— half of what? Is that half a fraction, as they call it? I haven't forgot fractions, and logareems, and practice, and so on to algebrae, where it always seems to me to blow hard, for, whizz goes my head in a jiffy, as soon as I've mounted the ladder to look into that country. How 'bout that forty-five and a half, brother Tony, if you don't mind condescending to explain?"

"Forty-five and a half?" muttered Anthony, mystified.

"Oh, never mind, you know, if you don't like to say, brother Tony." The farmer touched him up with his pipe-stem.

"Five and a half," Anthony speculated. "That's a fraction you got hold of, brother William John,—I remember the parson calling out those names at your wedding: 'I, William John, take thee, Susan;' yes, that's a fraction, but what's the good of it?"

"What I mean is, it ain't forty-five and half of forty-five. Half of one, eh? That's identical with a fraction. One—a stroke—and two under it."

"You've got it correct," Anthony assented.

"How many thousand divide it by?"

"Divide what by, brother William John? I'm beat."

"Ah! out comes the keys: lockup everything; it's time!" the farmer laughed, rather proud of his brother-in-law's perfect wakefulness after two stiff tumblers. He saw that Anthony was determined with all due friendly feeling to let no one know the sum in his possession.

"If it's four o'clock, it is time to lock up," said Anthony, "and bang to go the doors, and there's the money for thieves to dream of—they can't get a-nigh it, let them dream as they like. What's the hour, ma'am?"

"Not three, it ain't," returned Mrs. Sumfit; "and do be good creatures, and begin about my Dahly, and where she got that Bumptious gownd, and the bonnet with blue flowers lyin' by on the table: now, do!"

Rhoda coughed.

"And she wears lavender gloves like a lady," Mrs. Sumfit was continuing.

Rhoda stamped on her foot.

"Oh! cruel!" the comfortable old woman snapped in pain, as she applied her hand to the inconsolable fat foot, and nursed it. "What's roused ye, you tiger girl? I shan't be able to get about, I shan't, and then who's to cook for ye all? For you're as ignorant as a raw kitchen wench, and knows nothing."

"Come, Dody, you're careless," the farmer spoke chidingly through Mrs. Sumfit's lamentations.

"She stops uncle Anthony when he's just ready, father," said Rhoda.

"Do you want to know?" Anthony set his small eyes on her: "do you want to know, my dear?" He paused, fingering his glass, and went on: "I, Susan, take thee, William John, and you've come of it. Says I to myself, when I hung sheepish by your mother and by your father, my dear, says I to myself, I ain't a marrying man: and if these two, says I, if any progeny comes to 'em—to bless them, some people'd say, but I know what life is, and what young ones are—if—where was I? Liquor makes you talk, brother William John, but where's your ideas? Gone, like hard cash! What I meant was, I felt I might some day come for'ard and help the issue of your wife's weddin', and wasn't such a shady object among you, after all. My pipe's out."

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