

## CHAPTER XI

### AN OLD MAN OF THE HILLS, AND THE SCHOOLMASTER'S STORY

While occupying myself with these no doubt wanton reflections on the unfair division of opportunities in human life, I was leisurely crossing the common, and presently I came up with a pedestrian who, though I had little suspected it as I caught sight of him ahead, was destined by a kind providence to make more entertaining talk for me in half an hour than most people provide in a lifetime.

He was an oldish man, turned sixty, one would say, and belonging, to judge from his dress and general appearance, to what one might call the upper labouring class. He wore a decent square felt hat, a shabby respectable overcoat, a workman's knitted waistcoat, and workman's corduroys, and he carried an umbrella. His upper part might have belonged to a small well-to-do tradesman, while his lower bore marks of recent bricklaying. Without its being remarkable, he had what one calls a good face, somewhat aquiline in character, with a refined forehead and nose.

His cheeks were shaved, and his whitening beard and moustache were worn somewhat after the fashion of Charles Dickens. This gave a slight touch of severity to a face that was full of quiet strength.

Passing the time of day to each other, we were soon in conversation, I asking him this and that question about the neighbouring country-side, of which I gathered he was an old inhabitant.

"Yes," he said presently, "I was the first to put stick or stone on Whortleberry Common yonder. Fifteen years ago I built my own wood cottage there, and now I'm rebuilding it of good Surrey stone."

"Do you mean that you are building it yourself, with your own hands, no one to help you?" I asked.

"Not so much as to carry a pail of water," he replied. "I'm my own contractor, my own carpenter, and my own bricklayer, and I shall be sixty-seven come Michaelmas," he added, by no means irrelevantly.

There was pride in his voice,—pardonable pride, I thought, for who of us would not be proud to be able to build his own house from floor to chimney?

"Sixty-seven,—a man can see and do a good deal in that time," I said, not flattering myself on the originality of the remark, but desiring to set him talking. In the country, as elsewhere, we must forego profundity if we wish to be understood.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I have been about a good deal in my time. I have seen pretty well all of the world there is to see, and sailed as far as ship could take me."

"Indeed, you have been a sailor too?"

"Twenty-two thousand miles of sea," he continued, without directly answering my remark. "Yes, Vancouver's about as far as any vessel need want to go; and then I have caught seals off the coast of Labrador, and walked my way through the raspberry plains at the back of the White Mountains."

"Vancouver," "Labrador," "The White Mountains," the very names, thus casually mentioned on a Surrey heath, seemed full of the sounding sea. Like talismans they whisked one away to strange lands, across vast distances of space imagination refused to span. Strange to think that the shabby little man at my side had them all fast locked, pictures upon pictures, in his brain, and as we were talking was back again in goodness knows what remote latitude.

I kept looking at him and saying, "Twenty-two thousand miles of sea! sixty-seven! and builds his own cottage!"

In addition to all this he had found time to be twenty-one years a policeman, and to beget and rear successfully twelve children. He was now, I gathered, living partly on his pension, and spoke of this daughter married, this daughter in service here, and that daughter in service there, one son settled in London and another in the States, with something of a patriarchal pride, with the independent air too of a man who could honestly say to himself that, with few advantages from fortune, having had, so to say, to work his passage, every foot and hour of it, across those twenty-two thousand miles and those sixty-seven years, he had made a thoroughly creditable job of his life.

As we walked along I caught glimpses in his vivid and ever-varying talk of the qualities that had made his success possible. They are always the same qualities!

A little pile of half-hewn stones, the remains of a ruined wall, scattered by the roadside caught his eye.

"I've seen the time when I wouldn't have left them stones lying out there," he said, and presently, "Why, God bless you, I've made my own boots before to-day. Give me the tops and I'll soon rig up a pair still."

And with all his success, and his evident satisfaction with his lot, the man was neither a prig nor a teetotaller. He had probably seen too much of the world to be either. Yet he had, he said, been too busy all his life to spend much time in public-houses, as we drank a pint of ale together in the inn which stood at the end of the common.

"No, it's all well enough in its way, but it swallows time," he remarked. "You see, my wife and I have our own pin at home, and when I'm a bit tired, I just draw a glass for myself, and smoke a pipe, and there's no time wasted coming and going, and drinking first with this and then with the other."

A little way past the inn we came upon a notice-board whereon the lord of the manor warned all wayfarers against trespassing on the common by making encampments, lighting fires or cutting firewood thereon, and to this fortunate circumstance I owe the most interesting story my companion had to tell.

We had mentioned the lord of the manor as we crossed the common, and the notice-board brought him once more to the old man's mind.

"Poor gentleman!" he said, pointing to the board as though it was the lord of the manor himself standing there, "I shouldn't like to have had the trouble he's had on my shoulders."

"Indeed?" I said interrogatively.

"Well, you see, sir," he continued, instinctively lowering his voice to a confidential impressiveness, "he married an actress; a noble lady too she was, a fine dashing merry lady as ever you saw. All went well for a time, and then it suddenly got whispered about that she and the village schoolmaster were meeting each other at nights, in the meadow-bottom at the end of her own park. It lies over that way,—I could take you to the very place. The schoolmaster was a noble-looking young man too, a devil-me-care blade of a fellow, with a turn for poetry, they said, and a merry man too, and much in request for a song at The Moonrakers of an evening. Many 's the night I've heard the windows rattling with the good company gathered round him. Yes, he was a noble-looking man, a noble-looking man," he repeated wistfully, and with an evident sympathy for the lovers which, I need hardly say, won my heart.

"But how, I wonder, did they come to know each other?" I interrupted, anxious to learn all I could, even if I had to ask stupid questions to learn it.

"Well, of course, no one can say how these things come about. She was the lady of the manor and the patroness of his school; and then, as I say, he was a very noble-looking man, and probably took her fancy; and, sir, whenever some women set their hearts on a man there's no stopping them. Have him they will, whatever happens. They can't help it, poor things! It's just a freak of nature."

"Well, and how was it found out?" I again jogged him.

"One of Sir William's keepers played the spy on them. He spread it all over the place how he had seen them on moonlight nights sitting together in the dingle, drinking champagne, and laughing and talking as merry as you please; and, of course, it came in time to Sir William—"

"You see that green lane there," he broke off, pointing to a romantic path winding along the heath side; "it was along there he used to go of a night to meet her after every one was in bed; and when it all came out there was a regular cartload of bottles found there. The squire had them all broken up, but the pieces are there to this day."

"Yes," he again proceeded, "it hit Sir William very hard. He's never been the same man since."

I am afraid that my sympathies were less with Sir William than better regulated sympathies would have been. I confess that my imagination was more occupied with that picture of the two lovers making merry together in the moonlit dingle.

Is it not, indeed, a fascinating little story, with its piquant contrasts and its wild love-at-all-costs? And how many such stories are hidden about the country, lying carelessly in rustic memories, if one only knew where to find them!

At this point my companion left me, and I—well, I confess that I retraced my steps to the common and rambled up that green lane, along which the romantic schoolmaster used to steal in the moonlight to the warm arms of his love. How eagerly he had trodden the very turf I was treading,—we never know at what moment we are treading sacred earth! But for that old man, I had passed along this path without a thrill. Had I not but an hour ago stood upon this very common, vainly, so it seemed, invoking the spirits of passion and romance, and the grim old common had never made a sign. And now I stood in the very dingle where they had so often and so wildly met; and it was all gone, quite gone away for ever. The hours that had seemed so real, the kisses that had seemed like to last for ever, the vows, the tears, all now as if they had never been, gone on the four winds, lost in the abysses of time and space.

And to think of all the thousands and thousands of lovers who had loved no less wildly and tenderly, made sweet these lanes with their vows, made green these meadows with their feet; and they, too, all gone, their bright eyes fallen to dust, their sweet voices for ever put to silence.

To which I would add, for the benefit of the profane, that I sought in vain for those broken bottles.