

Dowling Richard

Miracle Gold: A Novel (Vol. 2 of 3)



Richard Dowling

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CHAPTER XIV

SPIRIT AND FLESH

The folding-doors between the back and front drawing-rooms at Mrs. Ashton's were thrown open, and both rooms were full that Thursday afternoon. Some of the visitors were standing, some sitting, and many ladies and gentlemen were moving about. A few had cups of tea, and all seemed to wish to appear pleased and pleasant. If serious matters were mentioned or discussed, it was in a light and desultory way. It was impossible to plan ground for the foundation of enduring structures in politics, or taste, or art, or science, or polemics, when a humourist might come up and regard what you were saying as the suggestion for a burlesque opera or harlequinade. All the talk was touch-and-go, and as bright and witty as the speakers could make it. There was an unceasing clatter of tongues and ripple of laughter, which had not time to gather volume. Most of the people were serious and earnest, but the great bulk of the dialogue was artificial, designedly and deliberately artificial, for the purpose of affording relief to the speakers. Mrs. Ashton held that the most foolish way to spend life is to be always wise. These At homes were for recreation, not for the solemnities of work. People took no liberties, but all were free. Even such sacred subjects as the franchise, drainage, compound interest, the rights of the subject, and oysters, were dealt with lightly on Thursdays in Curzon Street.

As Oscar Leigh followed John Hanbury slowly from the immediate vicinity of Mrs. Ashton, his ears were aware of many and various voices saying many and various things, but he paid no attention to voices or words. He was all eyes. Miss Ashton was moving away to her former place by the window. She was accompanied by a tall, grizzled, military-looking man, who, to judge by her quick glances and laughing replies, was amusing and interesting her very much.

"That was a wild prank of yours," said Hanbury, bending over the little man and laying admonitory emphasis on his words. "You ought not to play tricks like that in a place like this. Everyone who saw and heard, Mrs. Ashton of course among the number, must have noticed your manner and the effect your words had upon-" He paused. They were standing in the second window-place. He did not like to say "upon me," for that would be an admission he had felt alarmed or frightened; it would also imply a suspicion of Leigh's trustworthiness in keeping his word and the secret.

The clockmaker did not say anything for a moment. He had no intention of helping Hanbury over the pause. It was his design, on the contrary, to embarrass the other as much as he could. He looked up with an innocent expression of face, and asked, "The effect of my manner on what, or whom?"

"Well," said Hanbury, with hesitation, "upon anyone who heard. Tricks of that kind may be amusing, but I am afraid you did not improve your credit for sense with Miss Ashton by what you said and your way of saying it. For a moment I felt afraid she might be surprised into an expression that would betray all."

"*You!*" cried Leigh in a low tone of wild amazement. "*You* were afraid Miss Ashton might have been surprised into an expression that would have betrayed all?"

"Yes. She was not prepared for your little sally and your subtlety," said Hanbury with a frown. It was intolerable to have to speak of Dora Ashton, his Dora, his wife that was to be, to

this mechanic, or mechanist, or mechanician, or whatever he happened to be. "Miss Ashton might have been taken off her guard."

"Bah, sir! *You* might have been surprised and taken off *your* guard by what I said, but not *she*! Hah!" He said this with a secret mocking laugh. "I am fairly astonished at a man of your intelligence, Mr. Hanbury, mistaking me for a fool. I *never* make mistakes about people. I never make wrong estimates of the *men* or *women* I meet. I would trust Miss Ashton in any position of danger or difficulty, any situation requiring courage or tact."

"I am sure if she knew your high estimate of her she would be enormously flattered," said Hanbury, with a sneer.

"No, she would not. She is not the woman to be flattered by anything, and certainly not by any such trifle as my opinion of her good sense. *You* ought to know as much by this time. You and she are engaged?"

The cool assurance of the dwarf's manner, and the simple directness of the question with which he finished his speech, had the effect of numbing Hanbury's faculties, and confusing his purpose. "The relations between Miss Ashton and me are not a subject I care to speak of, and I beg of you to say no more of the matter," said he, with clumsiness, arising from disgust and annoyance, and the sense of helplessness.

"Hah! I thought so. Now if you were only as clever as Miss Ashton, you would not allow me to find out how matters stood between you and her, as you have plainly done by your answer. You are a young man, and in life many things are against a young man. In an encounter of this kind his bad temper is his chief foe. Hah!"

Hanbury's head was fiery hot, and his mind in a whirl. Things and people around him were blurred and dim to his eyes. "I have performed my part of the contract," he said, with impotent fury, "had we not better go now? This is no place for scenes or lectures, for lectures by even the most able and best qualified."

This conversation had been conducted in suppressed voices, inaudible to all ears but those of the speakers, and most of it by the open window, Miss Ashton being at her former position in the other one looking into the street.

"Yes, you have done your part. You have introduced me to Miss Ashton, or rather Mrs. Ashton has done so, and that is the same thing. I am perfectly satisfied so far. I do not ask you to do any more. I am not a levier of blackmail. I, too, have performed my part of the contract. So far we are quits. We are as though we had never met. If you have any engagement or wish that draws you away from this place I do not see why you should remain. If you want to go, by all means go. I shall stay. Hah!"

"What! Mr. Leigh, you do not mean to say you intend using my introduction here, which I undertook in compliance with your whim, as the means of effecting a lodgment!"

Leigh sprinkled a few drops of eau-de-cologne from his little silver flask into the palms of his long brown-yellow hands and sniffed it up noisily. "You do not use eau-de-cologne? You are wrong. It is refreshing-most refreshing. If you had been poring over retorts and crucibles until your very marrow was turned to dust, burnt-up to powder, you'd appreciate eau-de-cologne. It's most refreshing. It is, indeed. I am not going away from this place yet; but do not let me detain you if business or pleasure is awaiting you anywhere else. Do not stand on ceremony with me, my dear sir."

Hanbury ground his teeth and groaned. Sinbad's Old Man of the Sea was pleasant company compared with this hideous monster. Go from this place leaving him behind! John Hanbury would sooner fling himself head-foremost from that window than walk down the stairs without this hateful incubus. He now knew Leigh too well to try and divert or win him from his purpose. The dwarf was one of those men who see the object they desire to the exclusion of all other objects, and never take their eyes off it until it is in their hands. Once having brought Leigh here, he must hold himself

at his mercy until it pleased the creature to take himself off. How deplorably helpless and mean and degraded he felt! He had never been in so exasperating and humiliating a position before, and to feel as he felt now, and be so circumstanced in this house above all other houses in London! It was not to be borne.

Then he reflected on the events which had drawn him into the predicament. He had gone down that atrocious Chetwynd Street at Dora's request, and against his own wish, conviction, instinct. They had seen the hateful place, and the odious people who lived there. That accident had befallen him, and while he was insensible Dora had given this man their names. He had come back to prevent their names getting into the newspapers, and found this man in the act of meditating a paragraph, with the "Post Office Directory" before him. He saw this man was not open to a money-bribe, but still he was open to a bribe, and the bribe was, to state it shortly, bringing him here, and introducing him to Dora. He introduced him to Mrs. Ashton, and, seeing that he brought Leigh to her house, she naturally thought he was a great friend of his! Good heavens, a great friend of his!

Only for Dora nothing of this would ever have happened. It all arose out of her foolish interest in the class of people of whom Leigh was a specimen. It was poetic justice on her that Leigh should insist upon coming here. Would it not be turning this visit into a useful lesson to her if she were allowed to see more of this specimen of the people? The kind of mind this man had? The kind of man he was? Yes, they should go to Dora.

During the progress of Leigh and Hanbury through the room to Mrs. Ashton, and on their way from her to the window, Hanbury had met a score of people he knew intimately, and several others with whom he was acquainted. He had nodded and spoken a few words of greeting right and left, and, when there was any likelihood of friends expecting more of him, had glanced at his companion to intimate that he was engaged and devoted to him. Whatever was to happen, it would not do to allow the clockmaker to break away from him, and mingle unaccompanied in the throng. While the two were at the window, Hanbury stood with his back to the room, in front of Leigh, so that he himself might not easily be accosted, and Leigh should be almost hidden from view.

He now made a violent effort to compose his mind and his features, and with an assumption of whimsical good humour turned round and faced the room. He had in a dismal and disagreeable way made up his mind to brazen out this affair. Let them both go to Dora, and when he was alone with her after dinner he could arrange that Leigh was not to come here again, for apart from Leigh's general objectionableness it would be like living in a powder magazine with a lunatic possessing flint and steel to be in Ashton's house with a man who held the secret of Chetwynd Street or Welbeck Place, or whatever the beastly region was called.

"I am not in the least hurry away from this, Mr. Leigh," said he, partly turning to the other. "It occurred to me that the place might be dull to you."

"On the contrary, the place and the people are most interesting to me. I am not, as you may fancy, much of a society man. I go out but little. I am not greatly sought after, Mr. Hanbury; and I do not think you can consider it unreasonable in me to wish to see this thing out." He was speaking suavely and pleasantly now, and when one was not looking at him there appeared nothing in his tone or manner to suggest disagreeableness, unless the heavy thick breathing, half wheeze, half gasp.

"But there is nothing to be seen out. There is no climax to these At homes. People come and chat and perhaps drink a cup of tea and go away. That is all. By the way, the servant has just set down some tea by Miss Ashton; perhaps you would like a cup."

"I have had no breakfast. I have eaten nothing to-day."

"I am sorry for that. I am greatly afraid they will not give you anything very substantial here; nothing but a cup of tea and a biscuit or wafery slice of bread. But let us get some. Half a loaf is better than no bread." He forced a smile, as pleasant a one as he could command.

"I shall be most grateful for a cup of tea from Miss Ashton's hands," said the dwarf graciously.

"He can," thought Hanbury, as they moved towards the other window, where Miss Ashton was now standing over a tiny inlaid table on which rested the tea equipage, "be quite human when he likes." Aloud he said, "I hope you will be more guarded this time?"

"I am always guarded-and armed. I shall be glad to take the useful olive from Pallas-Athena."

"And the olive bough too, I hope," said Hanbury under an impulse of generosity.

"It was a dove not a goddess brought the olive bough."

"But the dove was only a messenger."

"The olive bough was only a symbol; the olive itself was substantive good."

"But is not the symbol of peace better than an earthly meal?"

"Answer your own case out of your own mouth. I have never eaten to-day. I have never eaten yet in all my life. You are filled with divine luxuries. Go you your gait, I go mine. Tell me, Mr. Hanbury, would you rather have the spirit of my promise to you or the flesh of my promise?"

"I do not know exactly what you mean."

"Would you rather trust my word or see my dead body? If I were dead I could not speak."

"Trust your word beyond all doubt," said Hanbury with a perplexed and uneasy smile.

"Hah! I believe you believe what you say. But I am afraid your shoulders are not broad enough, your back is not strong enough for the faith you profess in me. I don't suppose you'd go to the extremity of murdering me, but at this moment you would not be sorry if I fell dead at your feet. Hah!"

"Pray do not say such a horrible thing. I assure you it is not true. Indeed you wrong me. I do not want the miserable thing talked about."

"Sir, are you referring to me? I am the only miserable thing here."

"You are incorrigible."

"You are mistaken, sir. I am as plastic as wax; but like wax, if the fingers that touch me are cold I become brittle."

"If you persist how are we to approach Miss Ashton?"

"Thus! Follow me!"

He threw back his head haughtily, and glancing with scorn from side to side, strode to the table over which bent the exquisite face and figure of Dora.

CHAPTER XV

A SUBSTITUTE FOR GOLD

The air of pleasant badinage which pervaded the room had no more effect on Oscar Leigh than on the gasnier. No one spoke to him, for no one knew him. Except what passed between Leigh and Hanbury all words were intended for any ears who might hear. Intensities of individuality were laid aside at the threshold. Those whose individuality pursued and tyrannized over them like a Frankenstein remained away. They did not put it to themselves in this way. They told themselves they found the place too mixed or too light or too frivolous or too distracting.

Oscar Leigh was in no degree influenced by the humour or manner of the people present. These chattering men and women were indifferent to him, so long as he did not see how to put them to any use or find them in his way. He was not accustomed to the society of ladies and gentlemen, and consequently he omitted little customary observances. But he was not inured to any society at all, and this saved him from vulgarities; and then he was much used to commune with himself, which gave him directness and simplicity of manner.

One of the things affording freshness and vitality to Leigh was that he did not feel the need of common-places. Common-places are the tribute which intelligence pays to stupidity. They are the inventions of a beneficent Satan in the interest of the self-respect of fools.

"Miss Ashton," said Leigh bowing without emphasis or a smile, "I have ventured to come to beg a cup of tea of you."

She looked at him with a smile and said, "You have chosen the right moment. I have just got a fresh supply."

"This is a very fortunate day for me. It may be the most fortunate day of my life."

"And what is the nature of the good fortune you have found to-day?" she asked, handing him a tiny cup, while the servant who still lingered near offered him some thin bread-and-butter. There were half-a-dozen films on an exquisite china dish. Leigh took one doubled it twice and ate it greedily.

"You will let me have all? I have tasted no food to-day."

"Oh, certainly. I am afraid all is very little. But James can get us more." A faint colour had come into Miss Ashton's face. James, the servant, who had been christened Wilfrid, passed his disengaged hand over his mouth to conceal a smile. Hanbury flushed purple. For a moment there was a pause in the talk of those within hearing.

"What's the matter?" asked a very young man with a very fresh healthy-looking face of a chatty dowager who was looking through a gold-rimmed eye-glass at the dwarf.

"Hanbury's friend, the dwarf, is *eating*!"

"Good Heavens!" cried the young man leaning against the wall at his back as in dismay.

Leigh went on eating.

"It is excellent bread-and-butter," said he when he had finished the last slice. "I have never tasted better."

Hanbury stooped to pick up nothing and whispered "This is not a restaurant," fiercely into Leigh's ear.

"Eh? No. I am well aware of that," said the other in an ordinary tone and quite audibly. "You would not find such good bread-and-butter as that in any restaurant I know of. Or it may be that I was very hungry."

"Shall I get some more?" asked Miss Ashton, who had by this time recovered from her surprise and was beaming with good-natured amusement.

"You are very kind, thank you. It was enough."

"I tell you what it is, Lady Forcar, that is a remarkable person," said the young man with the fresh complexion, to the dowager.

"If people hear of this it will become the fashion," said Lady Forcar, whose complexion never altered except in her dressing-room or when the weather was excessively hot.

"What?" asked the young man. "What will become the fashion?"

"Eating."

"How shocking!"

"If that man had only money and daring and a handsome young wife, he could do anything—anything. He could make pork sausages the rage. Have you ever eaten pork sausages, Sir Julius?"

"Thousands of times. They are often the only things I can eat for breakfast, but not in London. One should never eat anything they can make in London."

"Pork is a neglected animal," said Lady Forcar with a sigh. "It must be years since I tasted any."

"You know pork isn't exactly an animal?"

"No. Pork sausages are animalculæ of pork with bread and thyme and sweet marjoram and fennel and mint. Have you ever taken it into your mind, Sir Julius, to explain why it is that while a pig when alive is far from agreeable company, no sooner does he die than all the romantic herbs of the kitchen garden gather round him?"

"No doubt it comes under the head of natural selection."

"No doubt it does. Have you ever tried to account for the fact that there are no bones in pork sausages?"

"I fancy it may be explained by the same theory of natural selection. The bones select some other place."

"True. Very true. *That* never occurred to me before. Do you know I have often thought of giving up my intellect and devoting the remainder of my days to sensualism."

"Good gracious, Lady Forcar, that sounds appalling."

"It does. If I had as much genius as that humpbacked little man, I'd do it, but I feel my deficiency; I know I haven't the afflatus."

"The thing sounds very horrible as you put it. For what form of sensualism would you go in? climate? or soap? or chemical waters? or yachting?"

"None of them. Simply pork. You observe that the people who are nearest the sensible and uncorrupted beasts worship pork. If you hear anyone speak well of pork, that person is a sensualist at heart. I sigh continually for pork. The higher order of apes, including man, live in trees and on fruits that grow nearer to Heaven than any other thing. Cows and sheep and low types of man and brutes of moderate grossness eat things they find on the earth, such as grass and corn, and hares and deer and goats, but it is only pigs and men of the lowest types that burrow into the ground for food. The lowest creature of all is the sensualist, who not only eats potatoes and turnips and carrots but the very pigs that root for things nature has had the decency to hide away from the sight of the eyes of angels and of men. Can you conceive anything lower in the scale of sensual joy or more delicious than pork and onions? I tell you, Sir Julius, if this humpbacked dwarf only had money, a handsome wife and courage, he could popularize sausages being served before the soup. He is the only man since Napoleon the Great who has the manner of power sufficient for such a reform."

"Let us devoutly hope, Lady Forcar, that he may bring about the blessed change, that is if you wish it."

"Wish it! Good Heavens, Sir Julius, you don't for a moment fancy me capable of trifling with such a subject! I say to you deliberately, it is the only thing which would now save Society from ennui and its present awful anxiety about the temperature of the soup."

The dowager Lady Forcar was well known for her persiflage, her devotion to her young and plain daughter-in-law, the head now of her son's house, her inch-thick paint, of which she spoke

freely and explained on the grounds of keeping in the swim, and her intense interest in all that affected the welfare of the rural cottager.

Sir Julius Whinfield, in spite of his very fresh young face and affectation, was an excellent authority on Hebrew and the manufacture of silk, so that if he had only happened to live once upon a time he might have talked wisdom to Solomon and dresses with Solomon's wives. He was not a clever conversationalist, but when not under pressure could say sound things pithily. Of Lady Forcar he once declared that he never understood what a saint must have been like when living until he met her. This did not come to her ears and had nothing to do with her liking for the young man.

The tall, military-looking man who had been speaking to Miss Ashton, and who was not a soldier but a composer of music, now came up and said:

"I am in sore need of you, Lady Forcar. I am about to start a new crusade. I am going to try to depose the greatest tyrant of the time."

"And who is that? Wagner? Bismarck? The Russian Bear? The Higher Culture?"

"No. Soap. I am of opinion that this age can do no good so long as it is bound to the chariot wheels of soap. This is the age of science, and soap is its god. Old Q. once became impatient with the river Thames, and said he could see nothing in it."

"He was born too soon. In his time they had not begun to spy into the slums of nature. For my part I think the microscope is the tyrant of this age. What did old Q. say about our father Tiber?"

"He said he could see nothing in it, that it always went flow-flow-flow, and that was all."

"One must not expect too much of a river. A river is no more than human, after all. But what has soap been doing?"

"Nothing; and in the fact that it has been doing nothing lies one of my chief counts against it. Of old you judged a man by the club to which he belonged, the number of his quarterings, the tailor who made his clothes, the income he had, the wife he married, the horses he backed, or the wine he drank. Now we classify men according to the soap they use. There are more soaps now than patent medicines."

"Soaps are patent medicine for external use only," said Lady Forcar, touching her white plump wrist.

"There may be some sense in a pill against the earthquake, or against an unlucky star, but how on earth can soap be of any use? First you smear a horrid compound over you, and then you wash it off as quickly as possible. Can anything be more childish? It is even more childish than the Thames. It can't even flow of itself. It is a relic of barbarism."

"But are not we ourselves relics of barbarism? Suppose you were to abolish all relics of barbarism in man, you would have no man at all. Heads, and arms, and bodies, are relics of barbaric man. Had not barbaric man heads, and arms, and bodies? Are you going to abolish heads, and arms, and bodies?"

"Well," said Mr. Anstruther, the composer, "I don't know. I think they might be reduced. Anyway," dropping his voice, and bending over her ladyship, "our little friend here, whom Mr. Hanbury brought in, manages to hold his own, and more than hold his own, with less of such relics of barbarism than most of us."

"I was just saying to Sir Julius when you, Mr. Anstruther, came up, that I consider the stranger the most remarkable man I ever met in this house, and quite capable of undertaking and carrying out any social revolution, even to the discrediting of soap. If you have been introduced bring him to me."

"I haven't, unfortunately, but I'll tell Hanbury, who looks as black as thunder, that you would like to speak to him."

"I have scarcely seen Miss Ashton to-day. Let us go to them. That is the simplest way," said Lady Forcar, rising and moving towards the place where Dora, Hanbury, and Leigh stood.

When Leigh finished eating the bread-and-butter and drinking the tiny cup of tea, he said: "You wish, Miss Ashton, to know in what way I have been lucky to-day?"

She looked in perplexity at Hanbury, and then at the dwarf. She had no doubt he had alluded to her when he spoke of having found a model for the Pallas-Athena. An average man accustomed to ordinary social observances would not pursue that kind of flattery any further, but could this man be depended on? He certainly was not an ordinary man, and as certainly he was not accustomed to ordinary social observances. If he pursued that subject it would be embarrassing. It was quite plain John was in very bad humour. He deserved to be punished for his pusillanimous selfishness to-day, but there were limits beyond which punishment ought not to be pressed. She would forgive John now and try to make the best of the situation. She felt convinced that John would not have brought this man here except under great pressure. Let him be absolved from further penalties.

She said pleasantly: "One always likes to hear of good fortune coming to those in whom one is interested." Nothing could be more bald, or commonplace, or trite, yet in the heart of Leigh the words made joyous riot. She had implied, even if she did not mean her implication, that she took an interest in *him*.

"I was speaking a moment ago about the figures of time in my clock. I had the honour of telling Mrs. Ashton that there would be thousands of them, and that they would be modelled, not chiefly or at all for the display of mechanism, but in the first place as works of art; to these works of art mechanism would be adapted later."

"Which will make your clock the only one of the kind in the world," said she, much relieved to find no pointed reference to herself.

"Precisely. But I did not do myself the honour of telling Mrs. Ashton of what material the figures were to be composed."

"No. I do not think you said what they would be made of. Wax, is it not?" With the loss of apprehension on her own account, she had gained interest in this wonderful clock.

"The models will of course be made of wax, but the figures themselves, the figures which I intend to bequeath to posterity, will be made of gold."

"Gold! All those figures made of gold! Why, your clock will cost you a fortune."

"It will not cost *me* as much as it would cost any other man living. I am going to make the gold too." He drew himself up, and looked proudly round.

At this moment Lady Forcar and Mr. Anstruther came up, and introductions took place. Leigh submitted to the introductions as though he had no interest in them beyond the interruption they caused in what he was saying.

Miss Ashton briefly placed Lady Forcar and Mr. Anstruther in possession of the subject, and then Leigh went on. He no longer leant upon his stick. He straightened himself, threw back his head haughtily, and kept it back. He shifted his stout gnarled stick into his left hand and thrust the long, thin, sallow, hairy fingers of his right hand into the breast of his coat, and looked around as though challenging denial.

"I have," he said, "invented a metal, a compound which is absolutely indistinguishable from gold, which is in fact gold, and of which I shall make my figures. Mystery gold was a clumsy juggle that one found out in the fire. My gold is *bonâ fide* a miracle, and I have called it Miracle Gold. My gold will resist the acid, and the blow-pipe, and the crucible. As I live, if they provoke me, I will sell them not metal miracle gold, but perchloride of miracle gold. No one can doubt me then!"

"And will you be able, Mr. Leigh, to make not only enough for your figures but some for sale also?" asked Mr. Anstruther.

"I may be able to spare a little, but my gold cannot be sold for a chapman's price. It will cost me much in money and health and risk, and even then the yield will be small."

"In health and risk?" said Miss Ashton, in a tone of concern and sympathy. "How in health and risk?" He seemed even now to have but little store of health.

He lowered his head and abated the arrogance of his manner. "The steam of fusing metals and fumes of acids are not for men who would live long, Miss Ashton. They paralyse the muscles and eat into the wholesome flesh of those whose flesh is wholesome, while with one who is not fashioned fair to the four winds of attack, the end comes with insidious speed. Then for the risk, there are conjunctions of substances that, both in the dry and the wet, lead often to unexpected ebullitions and rancorous explosions of gas or mere forces that kill. There may spring out of experiments vapours more deadly than any known now, poisons that will slay like the sight of the angel of death."

"Then, Mr. Leigh," said the girl, with eyes fixed upon him, "why need you make these figures of time of such costly material?"

"Ah, there may be reasons too tedious to relate."

"And does the good fortune you speak of concern the manufacture of this miracle gold?" she asked with a faint flush, and eyes shining with anxiety.

"It does."

"A discovery which perhaps will make the manufacture less dangerous?"

"Which would make the manufacture unnecessary."

She clasped her hands before her with delight, and cried while her eyes shone joyously into his, "Oh, that would be lucky indeed. And how will you know if your augury of good fortune will come true?"

"You are interested?" He bent his head still lower, and his voice was neither so firm nor so harsh.

"Intensely. You tell us your life may be endangered if you go on. Tell us you think you can avoid the risk."

"I do not know yet."

"When can you know?"

"Would you care to hear as soon as I know?"

"Oh, yes."

"I shall, I think, be certain by this day week."

"Then come to us again next Thursday. We shall all be here as we are now?"

"Thank you, Miss Ashton, I will. Good day."

He backed a pace and bowed to her, and then turned round, and, with head erect and scornful eyes flashing right and left, but seeing nothing, strode out of the room.

"Dora," whispered Lady Forcar, "you have made another conquest. That little genius is in love with you."

The girl laughed, but did not look up for a moment. When she did so her eyes were full of tears.

CHAPTER XVI

RED HERRINGS

Dealers in marine stores generally select quiet by-ways, back-waters of traffic, for the scene of their trade. In the open high roads of business the current is too quick for them. They buy and sell substantial and weighty articles; their transactions are few and far between. Those who come to sell may be in haste; those who come to buy, never. No one ever yet rushed into a marine-store dealer's, and hammered with his money on a second-hand copper, in lieu of a counter, and shouted out that he could not wait a moment for a second-hand iron tripod. It is extremely doubtful if a marine-store dealer ever sells anything. Occasionally buying of ungainly, heavy, amorphous, valueless-looking bundles goes on, but a sale hardly ever. Who, for instance, could want an object visible in the business establishment of John Timmons, Tunbridge Street, London Road? The most important-looking article was a donkey-engine without a funnel, or any of its taps, and with a large rusty hole bulged in its knobby boiler. Then there lay a little distance from the engine the broken beam of a large pair of scales and the huge iron scoop of another pair. After this, looking along the left-hand side out of the gloom towards the door, lay three cannon-shot, for guns of different calibres; then the funnel of a locomotive, flat, and making a very respectable pretence of having been the barrel from which the cannon-shot had dribbled, instead of flown, because of the barrel's senile decay. After the funnel came a broken anvil, around the blockless and deposed body of which gathered-no doubt for the sake of old lang syne-two sledge-hammer heads, without handles, and the nozzle of a prodigious forge-bellows. Next appeared a heap of chunks of leaden pipe. Next, a patch of mutilated cylindrical half-hundred weights, like iron mushrooms growing up out of the ferruginous floor. The axle-tree and boxes of a cart stood against the wall, like the gingham umbrella of an antediluvian giant, and keeping them company the pillars and trough of a shower-bath, plainly the stand into which the umbrella ought to have been placed, if the dead Titan had had any notion of tidiness. Then appeared the cistern of the shower-bath, like the Roundhead iron cap of the cyclopean owner of the umbrella. Then spread what one might fancy to be the mouth of a mine of coffee mills, followed by a huge chaotic pile of rusty and broken guns and swords, and blunderbusses and pistols. Beyond this chaotic patch, a ton of nuts and screws and bolts; and, later, a bank of washers, a wire screen, five dejected chimney-jacks, the stock of an anchor, broken from the flukes, several hundred fathoms of short chains of assorted lengths, half a bundle of nailrod iron, three glassless ship's lamps, a pile of brazen miscellanies, a pile of iron miscellanies, a pile of copper miscellanies, and then the doorless opening into Tunbridge Street, and standing on the iron-grooved threshold, into which the shutters fitted at night, Mr. John Timmons in person, the owner of this flourishing establishment.

Mr. John Timmons was a tall and very thin man, of fifty years, or thereabouts. His face was dust-colour, with high, well-padded cheek bones, blue eyes and insignificant cocked nose. His hair was dark brown, touched here and there with grey, curly, short, thin. He wore a low-crowned brown felt hat and a suit of dark chocolate tweed, the trousers being half a span too short over his large shoes, and the waistcoat half a span too wide, half a span too long, and buttoned up to the deep-sunken hollow of his scraggy throat. His neck was extremely long and thin and wrinkled, and covered with sparse greyish hair. His ears were enormous, and stood out from his ill-shapen head like fins. They were iron-grey, the colour of the under surface of a bat's wing. The forehead was low, retreating, and creased with close parallel lines. The eyes were keen, furtive, suspicious. A hand's-breath below the sharp, large apple of his throat, and hanging loose upon the waistcoat, was the knot of a washed-out blue cotton neckerchief. He wore long mutton-chop whiskers. The rest of the face was covered with a short, grizzled stubble. When he was not using his hands, he

carried them thrust down to the utmost in his trousers' pockets, showing a wide strip of red sinewy arm between the sleeve of his coat and the pocket of the trousers. No shirt was visible, and the neckerchief touched the long, lank neck, there being no collar or trace of linen. Excepting the blue patch of neckerchief on his chest, and his blue eyes, no positive colour appeared anywhere about the man. No part of the man himself or of his clothes was clean.

Mr. Timmons was taking the air on his own threshold late in the afternoon of that last Thursday in June. It was now some hours since the dwarf had called and had held that conversation with him in the cellar. Not a human being had entered the marine store since. Mr. Timmons was gazing out of his watchet blue eyes in a stony and abstracted way at the dead brick wall opposite. He had been standing in this position for a good while, now shifting the weight of his body to one foot, now to the other. Occasionally he cleared his throat, which, being a supererogation, showed that he was in deep thought, for no man, in his waking moments, could think of clearing so long a throat without ample reason. The sound he made was so deep and sepulchral it seemed as though he had left his voice behind him in the cellar, and it was becoming impatient there.

Although it had not yet struck six o'clock, he was thinking of closing his establishment. At this time of the day very few people passed through Tunbridge Street; often a quarter of an hour went by bringing no visitor. But after six the street became busier, for with the end of the working day came more carts and vans and barrows to rest for the night with their shafts thrust up in the air, after their particular manner of sleeping. This parking of the peaceful artillery of the streets Mr. Timmons looked on with dislike, for it brought many people about the place and no grist to his mill. He shared with poets and aristocrats the desire for repose and privacy.

As he was about to retire for the long shutters that by night defended and veiled his treasure from predatory hands or prying eyes, his enormous left ear became aware that feet were approaching from the end of the street touching London Road. He turned his pale blue eyes in the direction of the sound and saw coming along close to the wall the figure of a low sized stout woman, wearing a black bonnet far off her forehead. She was apparently about his own age, but except in the matter of age there was no likeness in the appearance of the two. She was dressed in shabby black stuff which had long ago forgotten to what kind of material it belonged. Her appearance was what merciful newspaper reporters describe as "decent," that is, she was not old or in tatters, or young and attractive and gaudy in apparel; her clothes were black and whole, and she was sober. She looked like an humble monthly nurse or an ideal charwoman. She carried a fish-basket in her hand. Out of this basket projected the tails of half-a-dozen red herrings. She had, apparently, once been good-looking, and was now well-favoured. She had that smooth, cheesy, oily, colourless rounded face peculiar to well-fed women of the humbler class indigenous in London.

Mr. Timmons' forehead wrinkled upwards as he recognised the visitor to Tunbridge Street. He smiled, displaying an imperfect line of long discoloured teeth.

"Good afternoon," said John Timmons in a deep vibrating voice that sounded as though it had effected its escape from the cellar through a drum.

"Afternoon," said the woman entering the store without pausing. Then nodding her head back in the direction whence she had come she asked: "Anyone?"

"No," answered Timmons, after a long and careful scrutiny of the eastern half of Tunbridge Street. "Not a soul."

"I thought I'd never get here. It's mortal hot. Are you sure there is no one after me?" said the woman, sitting down on a broken fire-grate, in the rear of the pile of shutters standing up against the wall on the left. She began rubbing her perspiring glistening face with a handkerchief of a dun colour rolled up in a damp ball. Still she held her fish-bag in her hand.

"Certain. Which shows what bad taste the men have. Now, only for Tom I know you'd have one follower you could never shake off," said Timmons, with a gallant laugh that sounded

alarmingly deeper than his speaking voice. Timmons was at his ease and leisure, and he made it a point to be always polite to ladies.

"Tom's at home," said the woman, thrusting the handkerchief into her pocket and smiling briefly and mechanically in acknowledgment of the man's compliment to her charms. "I've brought you some fish for your tea."

"Herrings," he said, bending to examine the protruding tails. "Fresh herrings, or red?" he asked in a hushed significant voice. He did not follow the woman into the store, but still stood at the threshold, so that he could see up and down the street.

"Red," she whispered hoarsely, "and as fine as ever you saw. I thought you might like them for your tea."

By this time a man with a cart turned into the street, and, it just then striking six, the door of a factory poured out a living turbid stream of bedraggled, frowsy girls, some of whom went up and some down the street, noisily talking and laughing.

"Yes, There is nothing I am so fond of for my tea as red herrings," he said, with his face half turned to the store, half to the street. "And I shall like them particularly to-night."

"Eh! Particularly to-night? Are you alone? Are you going to have company at tea, Mr. Timmons?" asked the woman in a tone and manner of newly-awakened interest. She now held her fish basket with both hands in front of her fat body and resting on her shallow lap.

Timmons was standing half-a-dozen yards from her on the threshold. She could hear his voice quite plainly, notwithstanding the noise in the street and the fact that he spoke in a muffled tone. While he answered he kept his mouth partly open, and, because of so doing, spoke with some indistinctness. It was apparent he did not want people within sight or hearing to know he was speaking. "No; I am not expecting anyone to tea, and there is no one here. I am going to have my tea all by myself. I am very busy just now. I have had a visitor to-day-a few hours ago-

"Well," whispered the woman eagerly.

"And *I have the kettle on the boil*, and I am going to put those red herrings in it for my tea." He was looking with vacant blue eyes down the street as he spoke. He did not lay stress upon the words, "I have the kettle on the boil." He uttered them in a lower tone and more slowly than any others. The emphasis thus given them was very great. It seemed to startle the woman. She rose partly as if to go to him. She was fluttered and agreeably fluttered.

"Stay where you are," he said. He seemed to know she had attempted to rise without turning his eyes upon her. She was half hidden in the gloom of the store. No casual observer passing by would have noticed her. She was simply a black shapeless mass on the old fire-grate against a dingy dark wall in a half light. She might easily be taken for some of Timmons's stock.

"And," she said, "he'll do it!"

"He will. He's been to Birmingham and has arranged all. They'll take every bit they can get and pay a good price-twice as much as could be got otherwise-from anyone else."

"Fine! Fine! You know, Mr. Timmons, how hard it is to find a bit now, and to get so little for it as we have been handling is very bad-heartbreaking. It takes all the spirit out of Tom."

"Where did you buy the six herrings?"

"Well," said the woman, with a smile, "I didn't exactly buy them herrings, though they are as good ones as ever you saw. You see, my little boys went to the meeting about the votes, or the Niggers, or the Gospel, or something or other, and they found the herrings growing on the trees there, ha-ha-ha."

"I know. It was a meeting for trying to get some notion of Christianity into the heads of the African Blacks. I read about it in the newspaper this morning. The missionaries and ourselves are much beholden to the Blacks."

"It was something now I remember about the Blacks. Anyway, they're six beauties. And can you let me have a little money, Mr. Timmons, for I must hurry back to Tom with the good news."

"How is Tom? Is he on the drink?"

"No, he isn't."

"That's a bad sign. What's the matter?"

"I don't know, if it isn't going to them Christian meetings about the Blacks. It's my belief that he'll turn Christian in the end, and you know, Mr. Timmons, that won't pay *him*."

"Not at Tom's time of life. You must begin that kind of thing young. There are lots of converted-well sinners, but they don't often make bishops of even the best of them."

"Well, am I to go? What are you going to give me, Mr. Timmons? When Tom isn't in a reasonable state of drink there's no standing him. Make it as much as you can. Say a fiver for luck on the new-found-out."

"I'll give you an order on the Bank of England for a million if you like, but I can't give you more than ten thousand pounds in sovereigns, or even half sovereigns, just at this moment, even for the good of the unfortunate heathen Blacks. But here, anyway, take this just to keep you going. I haven't landed any fish myself yet."

The woman rose and he handed to her money. Then followed a long, good-humoured dialogue in which she begged for more, and he firmly, but playfully, refused her. Then she went away, and Mr. John Timmons was left once more alone.

He had taken the fish basket from the woman when giving her the money, and now carried it to the back of the store and descended with, it to the cellar. He did not remain long below, but soon came trotting up the ladder, humming a dull air in a deep growl. Then he set himself briskly to work putting up the shutters, taking them out of the pile in front of the old fire-grate on which the woman had sat, carrying each one separately to the front and running it home through the slot. When all were up, he opened the lower part of one, which hung on hinges serving as a wicket, and stepped out into the street full from end to end of the bright, warm evening sunlight.

He rubbed his forehead with the sleeve of his coat and took a leisurely survey of the street. The noisy girls from the factory had all disappeared, and the silence of evening was falling upon the place. A few men busied themselves among the carts and vans and a dull muffled sound told of the traffic in London Road. The hum of machinery had ceased, and, contrasted with the noise of an hour ago, the place was soundless.

John Timmons seemed satisfied with his inspection. He closed the wicket and retired into the deep gloom of the store. The only light now in this place entered through holes up high in two shutters. The holes were no more than a foot square, and were protected by perforated iron plates. They were intended for ventilating not lighting the store.

Even in the thick dark air John Timmons was quite independent of light. He could have found any article in his stock blindfold. He was no sun-worshipper, nor did he pay divine honours to the moon. A good thick blinding London fog was his notion of reasonable weather. One could then do one's business, whatever it might be, without fear of bright and curious eyes.

He had told his late visitor that he had the kettle on the fire. She had brought him half-a dozen red herrings and left them with him in a fish-basket. Now red herrings, differing in this respect from other kinds of fish, are seldom or never cooked in a kettle, and although the front of the door was closed and the only visible source of heat the two ventilators high up in the shutters, the air of the store was growing already warmer and drier, and although there was no smell of cooking there was an unmistakable smell of fire.

The owner did not seem in any great hurry to cook and taste his savoury victuals. He might have meant that the kettle was for tea merely, and had nothing to do directly with the red herrings. He fastened the wicket-door very carefully, and then slowly examined the rear of the shutters one by one, and, holding his eye close to them here and there, tried if he could spy out, in order to ascertain if any one could spy in. Then he rested his shoulder against the middle shutter, leant his

head against the panel and, having thrust his hands deeper than ever into his trousers' pockets, gave up his soul to listening.

In the meantime the fish basket, with the tails of the six red herrings sticking out, was lying on the top of the old fire-grate which had served his visitor as a seat. It had been placed here by Timmons when he took it from the woman.

A quarter of an hour the man remained thus without moving. Apparently he was satisfied at last. He stood upright upon his feet, shook himself, gazed confidently round the store and then walked to the old fire-grate. He was going to get his tea at last.

He took up the basket, drew out the wooden skewer by which it was closed, caught the herrings in a bundle and threw them behind him on the gritty earthen floor.

He opened the bag wide and peered into it. Holding it in his left hand upon his upraised thigh he thrust his right hand into it and fumbled about, bending his head down to look the better.

He was on the point of drawing something out when he suddenly paused and listened motionless.

There was the sound of approaching steps. Timmons stood as still as death.

Three soft knocks sounded upon the wicket and then, after an interval of a few seconds, two more knocks still softer.

"It's Stamer himself," cried Timmons, with an imprecation, in a muffled voice. Then he added: "What does he want? More money? Anyway, I suppose I must let him in."

He turned round, caught up the scattered red herrings, thrust them into the bag, fixed it with the skewer, and then threw it carelessly on the hob of the old grate. Then he went to the wicket, opened it without speaking, and admitted his second visitor of that evening.

When the new comer was inside the door and the bolt drawn once more, Timmons said, in a slow angry tone, "Well, Stamer, what do you want? Is a bargain a bargain? You were not to come here in daylight, and only in the dark when something of great consequence brought you. I gave your wife all I will give just now, if we are to go on working on the co-operative principle. What do you want?"

The low sized, round shouldered man, dressed in fustian and wearing two gold rings on the little finger of his left hand, said in a whisper: "The ole 'oman gev me the coin, gov'nor. I don't want no more till all's right. What I did come about is of consequence, is of the greatest consequence, gov'nor." He glanced round with furtive eyes, looking apprehensively in the dim light at everything large enough to conceal a man.

"What is it? Out with it!" said Timmons impatiently.

"You're going to see this cove to-night?"

"Yes."

"At what o'clock?"

"That's my affair," said Timmons savagely.

"I know it is, Mr. Timmons, but still I'm a bit interested too, if I understand right the co-operative principle."

"You! What are you interested in so long as you get the coin?"

"In you. I'm powerful interested in you."

"What do you mean?" asked Timmons, frowning.

"Tell me when you're going and I'll tell you."

"Midnight."

"Ah! It will be dark then!"

"What news you tell us. It generally is dark at midnight."

"Are you going to take much of the stuff with you-much of the red stuff-of the red herrings?"

Timmons drew back a pace with a start and looked at Stamer suspiciously. "Have you come to save me the trouble? Eh? Would you like to take it yourself? Eh? Did you come here to rob me? I mean to share fair. Do you want to throw up the great co-operative principle and bag all?"

Stamer's eyes winked quickly, and he answered in a tone of sorrow and reproach: "Don't talk like that, gov'nor. You know I'm a square un, I am. I'd die for you. Did I ever peach on you when I was in trouble, gov'nor? It hurts my feelings for you to talk like that! I say, don't do it, gov'nor. You know I'm square. Tell me how much stuff are you going to take with you to-night?"

The words and manner of the man indicated extreme sincerity, and seemed to reassure Timmons. "About two pounds," he answered.

"Oh!" groaned Stamer, shaking his close-cropped head dismally.

"What is the matter with the man? Are you mad? You're not drunk. Your wife tells me you're not on the drink."

"No. I'm reforming. Drink interferes dreadful with business. It spoils a man's nerve too. Two pounds is an awful lot."

"What are you driving at, Stamer? You say you're a square man. Well, as far as I have had to do with you I have found you a square man—"

"And honest?" said Stamer pathetically.

"With me. Yes."

"No man is honest in the way of business."

"Well, well! What is the matter?" said Timmons impatiently; "I've got the kettle on and must run down. I haven't put in those herrings your old woman brought yet."

"I know. I'm sorry, gov'nor, for bothering you. I'd give my life for you. Look here, gov'nor, suppose *he* is not an honest man, like me. He isn't in our co-operative plan, you know. Suppose *he* isn't particular about how he gets hold of a bit of stuff?"

"And tried to rob me?"

"That's not what I'd mind." He put his hand to the back of his waistband. "You know what I carry here. Suppose he carries one too?"

"You mean that he may murder me first and rob me after?"

Stamer nodded.

"Well, I'm very much obliged to you, Stamer, indeed I am; but I'm not a bit afraid, not a bit. Why, he's not much over four feet, and he's a hunchback as well."

"But hunchbacks can buy tools like this, and a man's inches don't matter then," moving his hand under his coat.

"I'm not a bit afraid. Not a bit. If that's what you came about it's all right, and now I *must* go down. The fire is low by this time, and I may as well run these out of likeness at once."

He opened the door for Stamer, who, with a doubtful shake of the head, stepped over the raised threshold and went out. As Stamer sauntered down Tunbridge Street he muttered to himself, "I'll keep my eye on this affair anyway."

When the wicket-door was closed Timmons took up the fish-basket, flung away the red herrings a second time, and descended to the cellar.

CHAPTER XVII

DINNER AT CURZON STREET

When Oscar Leigh left Mrs. Ashton's drawing-room abruptly that afternoon, Hanbury was too much annoyed and perplexed to trust himself to speak to Dora. It was getting late. He had promised to dine in Curzon Street that evening, and would have ample opportunity after dinner of saying to Dora anything he liked. Therefore he made an excuse and a hasty exit as if to overtake Leigh. He had had however enough of the clockmaker for that day, for all his life; so when he found himself on the landing and stairs and in the hall he walked slowly, allowing time for Leigh to get out of sight before emerging from the house.

He took his way south and crossed Piccadilly at Hyde Park Corner. He had to get to his mother's house in Chester Square, to dress for dinner, and there was not much time to lose. His mother did not expect him to dine at home that day. She knew he had promised to go to Curzon Street, and was not in the house when he arrived.

He went straight to his own room in no very amiable humour. He was not at all pleased with the day. He did not think Dora had acted with prudence in persisting on going slumming in Chelsea, he was quite certain she had not done prudently in giving Leigh their names. He considered Leigh had behaved-well, not much better than a man of his class might be expected to behave, and, worst of all and hardest of all to bear, he did not consider his own conduct had been anything like what it ought.

If he made up his mind to go in for a popular platform, he must overcome, beat down this squeamishness which caused him to give way at unpleasant sights. Whether he did or did not adopt the popular platform he ought to do this. It was grotesque that his effectiveness in an emergency should be at the mercy of a failing which most school-girls would laugh at! It was too bad that Dora should be able to help where he became a mere encumbrance. Poor girl-but there, he must not allow himself to run off on a sentimental lead just now. He must keep his mind firm, for he must be firm with Dora this evening.

What a wonderful likeness there was between that strange girl and Dora. Yes, Miss Grace was, if possible, lovelier in face than Dora. More quiet and still mannered. She absolutely looked more of an aristocrat than Dora. It would be curious to see if her mind was like Dora's too; if, for example, she had active, vivid, democratic sympathies.

Every one who knew him told him he had a brilliant future before him. Before he got married (about which there was no great hurry as they were both young) it would be necessary for him to take up a definite position in politics. He felt he had the stuff in him out of which to make an orator, and an orator meant a statesman, and a statesman meant power, what he pleased, a coronet later in life if he and Dora cared for one. But he must select his career before marriage.

It would be very interesting to see if those two girls, so marvellously alike in appearance, were similar in aspirations. How extraordinarily alike they were. The likeness was as that man had said, stranger than his own fabulous miracle gold.

Ashton and his wife got on very well together, although they did not take the same view of public affairs. But then in this case things were different from what they would be in his. Mrs. Ashton was an ardent politician, her husband none at all. For a politician to enter upon his public career with a young wife opposed to him would be most unwise, the beginning of disagreement at home. At first, when he met Dora, he was attracted towards her by the enthusiasm of her spirit. He had never before met so young a woman, a mere girl, with such settled faith. At that time he was not very sure how he himself thought on many of the questions which divided men. She knew no doubt or hesitancy, and she was very lovely and bright and fresh. He had thought-What a helpmate

for a busy man! And then, before he had time to think much more, he had made up his mind he could not get on without Dora.

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