CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH THE LORD OF BRAMPTON RETURNS

GREAT events, like young Mr. Worthington's visit to Brampton, are all very well for a while, but they do not always develop with sufficient rapidity to satisfy the audiences of the drama. Seven days were an interlude quite long enough in which to discuss every phase and bearing of this opening scene, and after that the play in all justice ought to move on. But there it halted — for a while — and the curtain obstinately refused to come up. If the inhabitants of Brampton had only known that the drama, when it came, would be well worth waiting for, they might have been less restless.

It is unnecessary to enrich the pages of this folio with all the footnotes and remarks of the sages of Brampton. These can be condensed into a paragraph or two — and we can ring up the curtain when we like on the next scene, for which Brampton had to wait considerably over a month. There is to be no villain in this drama with the face of an Abbé Maury like the seven cardinal sins. Comfortable-looking Mr. Dodd of the prudential committee, with his chin-tuft of yellow beard, is cast for the part of the villain, but will play it badly; he would have been better suited to a comedy part.

Young Mr. Worthington left Brampton on the five o'clock train, and at six Mr. Dodd met his fellow-member of the committee, Judge Graves.

"Called a meetin'?" asked Mr. Dodd, pulling the yellow tuft.

"What for?" said the judge, sharply.

"What be you a-goin' to do about it?" said Mr. Dodd.

"Do about what?" demanded the judge, looking at the hardware dealer from under his eyebrows.

Mr. Dodd knew well enough that this was not ignorance on the part of Mr. Graves, whose position in the matter had been very well defined in the two sentences he had spoken. Mr. Dodd perceived that the judge was trying to get him to commit himself, and would then proceed to annihilate him. He, Levi Dodd, had no intention of walking into such a trap.

"Well," said he, with a final tug at the tuft, "if that's the way you feel about it."

"Feel about what?" said the judge, fiercely.

"Callate you know best," said Mr. Dodd, and passed on up the street. But he felt the judge's gimlet eyes boring holes in his back. The judge's position was very fine, no doubt — for the judge. All of which tends to show that Levi Dodd had swept his mind, and that it was ready now for the reception of — an opinion.

Six weeks or more, as has been said, passed before the curtain rose again, but the snarling trumpets of the orchestra played a fitting prelude. Cynthia's feelings and Cynthia's life need not be gone into during this interval: knowing her character, they may well be imagined. They were trying enough, but Brampton had no means of guessing them. During the weeks she came and went between the little house and the little school, putting all the strength that was in her into her duties. The Prudential Committee, which sometimes sat on the platform, could find no fault with the performance of these duties, or with the capability of the teacher, and it is not going too far to state that the children grew to love her better than Miss Goddard had been loved. It may be declared that children are the fittest citizens of a republic, because they are apt to make up their own minds on any subject without regard to public opinion. It was so with the scholars of Brampton village lower school: they grew to love the new teacher, careless of what the attitude of their elders might be, and some of them could have been seen almost any day walking home with her down the street.

As for the attitude of the elders — there was none. Before assuming one they had thought it best, with characteristic caution, to await the next act in the drama. There were ladies in Brampton whose hearts prompted them, when they called on the new teacher, to speak a kindly word of warning and advice; but somehow, when they were seated before her in the little sitting room of the John Billings house, their courage failed them. There was something about this daughter of the Coniston storekeeper and ward of Jethro Bass that made them pause. So much for the ladies of Brampton. What they said among themselves would fill a chapter, and more.

There was, at this time, a singular falling-off in the attendance of the Brampton Club. Ephraim sat alone most of the day in his Windsor chair by the stove, pretending to read newspapers. But he did not mention this fact to Cynthia. He was more lonesome than ever on the Saturdays and Sundays which she spent with Jethro Bass.

Jethro Bass! It is he who might be made the theme of the music of the snarling trumpets. What was he about during those six weeks? That is what the state at large was beginning to wonder, and the state at large was looking on at a drama, too. A rumor reached the capital and radiated thence to every city and town and hamlet, and was followed by other rumors like confirmations. Jethro Bass, for the first time in a long life of activity, was inactive: inactive, too, at this most critical period of his career, the climax of it, with a war to be waged which for bitterness and ferocity would have no precedent; with the town meetings at hand, where the frontier fighting was to be done, and no quarter given. Lieutenants had gone to Coniston for further orders and instructions, and had come back without either. Achilles was sulking in the tannery house — some said a broken Achilles. Not a word could be got out of him, or the sign of an intention. Jake Wheeler moped through the days in Rias Richardson's store, too sore at heart to speak to any man, and could have wept if tears had been a relief to him. No

more blithe errands over the mountain to Clovelly and elsewhere, though Jake knew the issue now and itched for the battle, and the vassals of the hill-Rajah under a jubilant Bijah Bixby were arming cap-a-pie. Lieutenant-General-and-Senator Peleg Hartington of Brampton, in his office over the livery stable, shook his head like a mournful stork when questioned by brother officers from afar. Operations were at a standstill, and the sinews of war relaxed. Rural givers of mortgages, who had not had the opportunity of selling them or had feared to do so, began (*mirabile dictu*) to express opinions. Most ominous sign of all — the proprietor of the Pelican Hotel had confessed that the Throne Room had not been engaged for the coming session.

Was it possible that Jethro Bass lay crushed under the weight of the accusations which had been printed, and were still being printed, in the *Newcastle Guardian?* He did not answer them, or retaliate in other newspapers, but Jethro Bass had never made use of newspapers in this way. Still, nothing ever printed about him could be compared with those articles. Had remorse suddenly overtaken him in his old age? Such were the questions people were asking all over the state — people, at least, who were interested in politics, or in those operations which went by the name of politics: yes, and many private citizens — who had participated in politics only to the extent of voting for such candidates as Jethro in his wisdom had seen fit to give them, read the articles and began to say that boss domination was at an end. A new era was at hand, which they fondly (and very properly) believed was to be a golden era. It was, indeed, to be a golden era — until things got working; and then the gold would cease. The *Newcastle Guardian*, with unconscious irony, proclaimed the golden era; and declared that its columns, even in other days and under other ownership, had upheld the wisdom of Jethro Bass. And he was still a wise man, said the *Guardian*, for he had had sense enough to give up the fight.

Had he given up the fight? Cynthia fervently hoped

and prayed that he had, but she hoped and prayed in silence. Well she knew, if the event in the tannery shed had not made him abandon his affairs, no appeal could do so. Her happiest days in this period were the Saturdays and Sundays spent with him in Coniston, and as the weeks went by she began to believe that the change, miraculous as it seemed, had indeed taken place. He had given up his power. It was a pleasure that made the weeks bearable for her. What did it matter whether he had made the sacrifice for the sake of his love for her? He had made it.

On these Saturdays and Sundays they went on long drives together over the hills, while she talked to him of her life in Brampton or the books she was reading, and of those she had chosen for him to read. Sometimes they did not turn homeward until the delicate tracery of the branches on the snow warned them of the rising moon. Jethro was often silent for hours at a time, but it seemed to Cynthia that it was the silence of peace — of a peace he had never known before. There came no newspapers to the tannery house now: during the mid-week he read the books of which she had spoken — William Wetherell's books; or sat in thought, counting, perhaps, the days until she should come again. And the joy of those days for him was more pathetic than much that is known to the world as sorrow.

And what did Coniston think? Coniston, indeed, knew not what to think, when, little by little, the great men ceased to drive up to the door of the tannery house, and presently came no more. Coniston sank then from its proud position as the real capital of the state to a lonely hamlet among the hills. Coniston, too, was watching the drama, and had had a better view of the stage than Brampton, and saw some reason presently for the change in Jethro Bass. Not that Mr. Satterlee told, but such evidence was bound, in the end, to speak for itself. The *Newcastle Guardian* had been read and debated at the store — debated with some heat by Chester Perkins and other mortgagors; discussed, nevertheless, in a political rather than

a moral light. Then Cynthia had returned home, her face had awed them by its sorrow, and she had begun to earn her own living. Then the politicians had ceased to come. The credit belongs to Rias Richardson for having been the first to piece these three facts together, causing him to burn his hand so severely on the stove that he had to carry it bandaged in soda for a week. Cynthia Wetherell had reformed Jethro.

Though the village loved and revered Cynthia, Coniston as a whole did not rejoice in that reform. The town had fallen from its mighty estate, and there were certain envious ones who whispered that it had remained for a young girl who had learned city ways to twist Jethro around her finger; that she had made him abandon his fight with Isaac D. Worthington because Mr. Worthington had a son — but there is no use writing such scandal. Stripped of his power — even though he stripped himself — Jethro began to lose their respect, a trait tending to prove that the human race may have had wolves for ancestors as well as apes. People had small opportunity, however, of showing a lack of respect to his person, for in these days he noticed no one and spoke to none.

When the lion is crippled, the jackals begin to range. A jackal reconnoitred the lair to see how badly the lion was crippled, and conceived with astounding insolence the plan of capturing the lion's quarry. This jackal, who was an old one, well knew how to round up a quarry, and fled back over the hills to consult with a bigger jackal, his master. As a result, two days before March town-meeting day, Mr. Bijah Bixby paid a visit to the Harwich bank and went among certain Coniston farmers looking over the sheep, his clothes bulging out in places when he began, and seemingly normal enough when he had finished. History repeats itself, even among lions and jackals. Thirty-six years before there had been a town-meeting in Coniston and a surprise. Established Church, decent and orderly selectmen and proceedings had been toppled over that day, every outlying farm sending its representative through the sleet to do it. And now retribution was

at hand. This March-meeting day was mild, the grass showing a green color on the south slopes where the snow had melted, and the outlying farmers drove through mud-holes up to the axles. Drove, albeit, in procession along the roads, grimly enough, and the sheds Jock Hallowell had built around the meeting-house could not hold the horses; they lined the fences and usurped the hitching posts of the village street, and still they came. Their owners trooped with muddy boots into the meeting-house, and when the moderator rapped for order the Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, Jethro Bass, was not in his place; never, indeed, would be there again. Six and thirty years he had been supreme in that town — long enough for any man. The beams and king posts would know him no more. Mr. Amos Cuthbert was elected Chairman, not without a gallant and desperate but unsupported fight of a minority led by Mr. Jake Wheeler, whose loyalty must be taken as a tribute to his species. Farmer Cuthbert was elected, and his mortgage was not foreclosed! Had it been, there was more money in the Harwich bank.

There was no telegraph to Coniston in these days, and so Mr. Sam Price, with his horse in a lather, might have been seen driving with unseemly haste toward Brampton, where in due time he arrived. Half an hour later there was excitement at Newcastle, sixty-five miles away, in the office of the *Guardian*, and the next morning the excitement had spread over the whole state.

Jethro Bass was dethroned in Coniston — discredited in his own town!

And where was Jethro? Did his heart ache, did he bow his head as he thought of that supremacy, so hardly won, so superbly held, gone forever? Many were the curious eyes on the tannery house that day, and for days after, but its owner gave no signs of concern. He read and thought and chopped wood in the tannery shed as usual. Never, I believe, did man, shorn of power, accept his lot more quietly. His struggle was over, his battle was fought, a greater peace than he had ever thought to

"Trooped with muddy boots into the meeting-house."

hope for was won. For the opinion and regard of the world he had never cared. A greater reward awaited him, greater than any knew — the opinion and regard and the praise of one whom he loved beyond all the world. On Friday she came to him, on Friday at sunset, for the days were growing longer, and that was the happiest sunset of his life. She said nothing as she raised her face to his and kissed him and clung to him in the little parlor, but he knew, and he had his reward. So much for earthly power!

Cynthia brought the little rawhide trunk this time, and came to Coniston for the March vacation — a happy two weeks that was soon gone. Happy by comparison, that is, with what they both had suffered, and a haven of rest after the struggle and despair of the wilderness. The bond between them had, in truth, never been stronger, for both the young girl and the old man had denied themselves the thing they held most dear. Jethro had taken refuge and found comfort in his love. But Cynthia! Her greatest love had now been bestowed elsewhere.

If there were letters for the tannery house, Milly Skinner, who made it a point to meet the stage, brought them. And there were letters during Cynthia's sojourn, — many of them, bearing the Cambridge postmark. One evening it was Jethro who laid the letter on the table beside her as she sat under the lamp. He did not look at her or speak, but she felt that he knew her secret — felt that he deserved to have from her own lips what he had been too proud — yes — and too humble to ask. Whose sympathy could she be sure of, if not of his? Still she had longed to keep this treasure to herself. She took the letter in her hand.

"I do not answer them, Uncle Jethro, but — I cannot prevent his writing them," she faltered. She did not confess that she kept them, every one, and read them over and over again; that she had grown, indeed, to look forward to them as to a sustenance. "I — I do love him, but I will not marry him."

Yes, she could be sure of Jethro's sympathy, though he

could not express it in words. Yet she had not told him for this. She had told him, much as the telling had hurt her, because she feared to cut him more deeply by her silence.

It was a terrible moment for Jethro, and never had he desired the gift of speech as now. Had it not been for him, Cynthia might have been Robert Worthington's wife. He sat down beside her and put his hand over hers that lay on the letter in her lap. It was the only answer he could make, but perhaps it was the best, after all. Of what use were words at such a time!

Four days afterward, on a Monday morning, she went back to Brampton to begin the new term.

That same Monday a circumstance of no small importance took place in Brampton — nothing less than the return, after a prolonged absence in the West and elsewhere, of its first citizen. Isaac D. Worthington was again in residence. No bells were rung, indeed, and no delegation of citizens as such, headed by the selectmen, met him at the station; and other feudal expressions of fealty were lacking. No staff flew Mr. Worthington's arms; nevertheless the lord of Brampton was in his castle again, and Brampton felt that he was there. He arrived alone, wearing the silk hat which had become habitual with him now, and stepping into his barouche at the station had been driven up Brampton Street behind his grays, looking neither to the right nor left. His reddish chop whiskers seemed to cling a little more closely to his face than formerly, and long years of compression made his mouth look sterner than ever. A hawk-like man, Isaac Worthington, to be reckoned with and feared, whether in a frock coat or in breastplate and mail.

His seneschal, Mr. Flint, was awaiting him in the library. Mr. Flint was large and very ugly, big-boned, smooth-shaven, with coarse features all askew, and a large nose with many excrescences, and thick lips. He was forty-two. From a foreman of the mills he had risen, step by step, to his present position, which no one seemed able to define. He was, indeed, a seneschal. He managed

the mills in his lord's absence, and — if the truth be told — in his presence ; knotty questions of the Truro Railroad were brought to Mr. Flint and submitted to Mr. Worthington, who decided them, — with Mr. Flint's advice ; and, within the last three months, Mr. Flint had invaded the realm of politics, quietly, as such a man would, under the cover of his patron's name and glory. Mr. Flint it was who had bought the *Newcastle Guardian*, who went occasionally to Newcastle and spoke a few effective words now and then to the editor; and, if the truth will out, Mr. Flint had largely conceived that scheme about the railroads which was to set Mr. Worthington on the throne of the state, although the scheme was not now being carried out according to Mr. Flint's wishes. Mr. Flint was, in a sense, a Bismarck, but he was not as yet all-powerful. Sometimes his august master or one of his fellow petty sovereigns would sweep Mr. Flint's plans into the waste basket, and then Mr. Flint would be content to wait. To complete the character sketch, Mr. Flint was not above hanging up his master's hat and coat, which he did upon the present occasion, and went up to Mr. Worthington's bedroom to fetch a pocket handkerchief out of the second drawer. He even knew where the handkerchiefs were kept. Lucky petty sovereigns sometimes possess Mr. Flints to make them emperors.

The august personage seated himself briskly at his desk.

"So that scoundrel Bass is actually discredited at last," he said, blowing his nose in the pocket handkerchief Mr. Flint had brought him. "I lose patience when I think how long we've stood the rascal in this state. I knew the people would rise in their indignation when they learned the truth about him."

Mr. Flint did not answer this. He might have had other views.

"I wonder we did not think of it before," Mr. Worthington continued. "A very simple remedy, and only requiring a little courage and—and —" (Mr. Worthington was going to say money, but thought better of it) "and the chimera disappears. I congratulate you, Flint."

"Congratulate yourself," said Mr. Flint; "that would not have been my way."

"Very well, I congratulate myself," said the august personage, who was in too good a humor to be put out by the rejection of a compliment. "You remember what I said : the time was ripe, just publish a few biographical articles telling people what he was, and Jethro Bass would snuff out like a candle. Mr. Duncan tells me the town-meeting results are very good all over the state. Even if we hadn't knocked out Jethro Bass, we'd have a fair majority for our bill in the next legislature."

"You know Bass's saying," answered Mr. Flint, "You can hitch that kind of a hoss, but they won't always 'stay hitched.'"

"I know, I know," said Mr. Worthington; "don't croak, Flint. We can buy more hitch ropes, if necessary. Well, what's the outlay up to the present? Large, I suppose. Well, whatever it is, it's small compared to what we'll get for it." He laughed a little and rubbed his hands, and then he remembered that capacity in which he stood before the world. Yes, and he stood before himself in the same capacity. Isaac Worthington may have deceived himself, but he may or may not have been a hero to his seneschal. "We have to fight fire with fire," he added, in a pained voice. "Let me see the account."

"I have tabulated the expense in the different cities and towns," answered Mr. Flint; "I will show you the account in a little while. The expenses in Coniston were somewhat greater than the size of the town justified, perhaps. But Sutton thought —"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Mr. Worthington, "if it had cost as much to carry Coniston as Newcastle, it would have been worth it — for the moral effect alone."

Moral effect! Mr. Flint thought of Mr. Bixby with his bulging pockets going about the hills, and smiled at the manner in which moral effects are sometimes obtained.

"Any news, Flint?"

No news yet, Mr. Flint might have answered. In a few minutes there might be news, and plenty of it, for it