

CHAPTER XX.

THE widow was looking at David with shining eyes and devouring his words. All the years of trouble and sorrow and privation were wiped out, and she was back in the days of her girlhood. Ah, yes! how well she remembered him as he looked that very day—so handsome, so splendidly dressed, so debonair; and how proud she had been to sit by his side that night, observed and envied of all the village girls.

"I ain't goin' to go over the hull show," proceeded David, "well 's I remember it. The' didn't nothin' git away from me that afternoon, an' once I come near to stickin' a piece o' gingerbread into my ear 'stid o' my mouth. I had my ten-cent piece that Billy P. give me, but he wouldn't let me buy nothin'; an' when the gingerbread man come along he says, 'Air ye hungry, Dave? (I'd told him my name), air ye hungry?' Wa'al, I was a growin' boy, an' I was hungry putty much all the time. He bought two big squares an' gin me one, an' when I'd swallowed it, he says, 'Guess you better tackle this one too,' he says, 'I've dined.' I didn't exac'ly know what 'dined' meant, but—he, he, he, he!—I tackled it," and David smacked his lips in memory.

"Wa'al," he went on, "we done the hull pro-

grammy—gingerbread, lemonade—*pink* lemonade, an' he took some o' that—pop corn, peanuts, pep'mint candy, cin'mun candy—scat my —! an' he payin' fer ev'rythin'—I thought he was jest made o' money! An' I remember how we talked about all the doin's; the ridin', an' jumpin', an' summersettin', an' all—fer he'd got all the shyniss out of me for the time—an' once I looked up at him, an' he looked down at me with that curious look in his eyes an' put his hand on my shoulder. Wa'al, now, I tell ye, I had a queer, crinkly feelin' go up an' down my back, an' I like to up an' cried."

"Dave," said the widow, "I kin see you two as if you was settin' there front of me. He was alwus like that. Oh, my! Oh, my! David," she added solemnly, while two tears rolled slowly down her wrinkled face, "we lived together, husband an' wife, fer seven year, an' he never give me a cross word."

"I don't doubt it a mossel," said David simply, leaning over and poking the fire, which operation kept his face out of her sight and was prolonged rather unduly. Finally he straightened up and, blowing his nose as it were a trumpet, said:

"Wa'al, the cirkis fin'ly come to an end, an' the crowd hustled to git out 's if they was afraid the tent 'd come down on 'em. I got kind o' mixed up in 'em, an' somebody tried to git my tin pail, or I thought he did, an' the upshot was that I lost sight o' Billy P., an' couldn't make out to ketch a glimpse of him nowhere. An' *then* I kind o' come down to earth, kerchug! It was five o'clock, an' I had better 'n four mile to walk—mostly up hill—an' if I knowed anything 'bout

the old man, an' I thought I *did*, I had the all-fired lickin' ahead of me 't I'd ever got, an' that was sayin' a good deal. But, boy 's I was, I had grit enough to allow 't was wuth it, an' off I put."

"Did he lick ye much?" inquired Mrs. Cul-
lom anxiously.

"Wa'al," replied David, "he done his best. He was layin' fer me when I struck the front gate—I knowed it wa'n't no use to try the back door, an' he took me by the ear—most pulled it off—an' marched me off to the barn shed without a word. I never see him so mad. Seemed like he couldn't speak fer a while, but fin'ly he says, 'Where you ben all day?'

"Down t' the village," I says.

"What you ben up to down there?" he says.

"Went to the cirkis," I says, thinkin' I might
's well make a clean breast on't.

"Where 'd you git the money?" he says.

"Mr. Cul-
lom took me," I says.

"You lie," he says. "You stole the money
somewheres, an' I'll trounce it out of ye, if I
kill ye," he says.

"Wa'al," said David, twisting his shoulders in
recollection, "I won't harrer up your feelin's. 'S
I told you, he done his best. I was willin' to
quit long 'fore he was. Fact was, he overdone
it a little, an' he had to throw water in my face
'fore he got through; an' he done that as thor-
ough as the other thing. I was somethin' like
a chicken jest out o' the cistern. I crawled off
to bed the best I could, but I didn't lay on my
back fer a good spell, I c'n tell ye."

"You poor little critter," exclaimed Mrs. Cul-
lom sympathetically. "You poor little critter!"

"'T was more'n wuth it, Mis' Cul-
lom," said David emphatically. "I'd had the most enjoy-
'ble day, I might say the only enjoy'ble day,
't I'd ever had in my hull life, an' I hain't
never fergot it. I got over the lickin' in
course of time, but I've ben enjoyin' that cirkis
fer forty year. The' wa'n't but one thing to hen-
der, an' that's this, that I hain't never ben able
to remember—an' to this day I lay awake nights
tryin' to—that I said 'Thank ye' to Billy P., an'
I never seen him after that day."

"How's that?" asked Mrs. Cul-
lom.

"Wa'al," was the reply, "that day was the
turnin' point with me. The next night I lit out
with what duds I c'd git together, an' as much
grub 's I could pack in that tin pail; an' the next
time I see the old house on Buxton Hill the'
hain't ben no Harums in it fer years."

Here David rose from his chair, yawned and
stretched himself, and stood with his back to
the fire. The widow looked up anxiously
into his face. "Is that all?" she asked after a
while.

"Wa'al, it is an' it ain't. I've got through
yarnin' about Dave Harum at any rate, an' meb-
be we'd better have a little confab on your mat-
ters, seein' 't I've got you 'way up here such a
mornin' 's this. I gen'ally do bus'nis fust an'
talkin' afterward," he added, "but I kind o' got
to goin' an' kept on this time."

He put his hand into the breast pocket of his
coat and took out three papers, which he shuffled
in review as if to verify their identity, and then
held them in one hand, tapping them softly upon
the palm of the other, as if at a loss how to begin.
The widow sat with her eyes fastened upon the

papers, trembling with nervous apprehension. Presently he broke the silence.

"About this here morgidge o' your'n," he said, "I sent ye word that I wanted to close the matter up, an' seein' 't you're here an' come fer that purpose, I guess we'd better make a job on't. The' ain't no time like the present, as the sayin' is."

"I s'pose it'll hev to be as you say," said the widow in a shaking voice.

"Mis' Cullom," said David solemnly, "you know, an' I know, that I've got the reputation of bein' a hard, graspin', schemin' man. Mebbe I be. Mebbe I've ben hard done by all my hull life, an' have had to be; an' mebbe, now 't I've got ahead some, it's got to be second nature, an' I can't seem to help it. 'Bus'nis is bus'nis' ain't part of the golden rule, I allow, but the way it gen'ally runs, fur 's I've found out, is, 'Do unto the other feller the way he'd like to do unto you, an' do it fust.' But, if you want to keep this thing a-runnin' as it's goin' on now fer a spell longer, say one year, or two, or even three, you may, only I've got somethin' to say to ye 'fore ye elect."

"Wa'al," said the poor woman, "I expect it 'd only be pilin' up wrath agin' the day o' wrath. I can't pay the int'rlist now without starvin', an' I hain't got no one to bid in the prop'ty fer me if it was to be sold."

"Mis' Cullom," said David, "I said I'd got somethin' more to tell ye, an' if, when I git through, you don't think I've treated you right, includin' this mornin's confab, I hope you'll forgive me. It's this, an' I'm the only person livin' that 's knowin' to it, an' in fact I may say that

I'm the only person that ever was really knowin' to it. It was before you was married, an' I'm sure he never told ye, fer I don't doubt he fergot all about it, but your husband, Billy P. Cullom, that was, made a small investment once on a time, yes, ma'am, he did, an' in his kind of careless way it jest slipped his mind. The amount of cap'tal he put in wa'n't large, but the rate of int'rlist was uncommon high. Now, he never drewed no dividends on't, an' they've ben 'cumulatin' fer forty year, more or less, at compound int'rlist."

The widow started forward, as if to rise from her seat. David put his hand out gently and said, "Jest a minute, Mis' Cullom, jest a minute, till I git through. Part o' that cap'tal," he resumed, "consistin' of a quarter an' some odd cents, was invested in the cirkis bus'nis, an' the rest on't—the cap'tal, an' all the cash cap'tal that I started in bus'nis with—was the ten cents your husband give me that day, an' here," said David, striking the papers in his left hand with the back of his right, "*here is the dividends!* This here second morgidge, not bein' on record, may jest as well go onto the fire—it's gettin' low—an' here's a satisfaction piece which I'm goin' to execute now, that'll clear the thousan' dollar one. Come in here, John," he called out.

The widow stared at David for a moment speechless, but as the significance of his words dawned upon her, the blood flushed darkly in her face. She sprang to her feet and, throwing up her arms, cried out: "My Lord! My Lord! Dave! Dave Harum! Is it true?—tell me it's true! You ain't foolin' me, air ye, Dave? You wouldn't fool a poor old woman that never done

ye no harm, nor said a mean word agin ye, would ye? Is it true? an' is my place clear? an' I don't owe nobody anythin'—I mean, no money? Tell it agin. Oh, tell it agin! Oh, Dave! it's too good to be true! Oh! Oh! Oh, *my!* an' here I be cryin' like a great baby, an', an'—fumbling in her pocket—"I do believe I hain't got no hank'-chif—Oh, thank ye," to John; "I'll do it up an' send it back to-morrer. Oh, what made ye do it, Dave?"

"Set right down an' take it easy, Mis' Cullom," said David soothingly, putting his hands on her shoulders and gently pushing her back into her chair. "Set right down an' take it easy.—Yes," to John, "I acknowledge that I signed that."

He turned to the widow, who sat wiping her eyes with John's handkerchief.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, "it's as true as anythin' kin be. I wouldn't no more fool ye, ye know I wouldn't, don't ye? than I'd—jerk a hoss," he asseverated. "Your place is clear now, an' by this time to-morro' the' won't be the scratch of a pen agin it. I'll send the satisfaction over fer record fust thing in the mornin'."

"But, Dave," protested the widow, "I s'pose ye know what you're doin'—?"

"Yes," he interposed, "I cal'late I do, putty near. You ast me why I done it, an' I'll tell ye if ye want to know. I'm payin' off an old score, an' gettin' off cheap, too. That's what I'm doin'! I thought I'd hinted up to it putty plain, seein' 't I've talked till my jaws ache; but I'll sum it up to ye if you like."

He stood with his feet aggressively wide

apart, one hand in his trousers pocket, and holding in the other the "morgidge," which he waved from time to time in emphasis.

"You c'n estimate, I reckon," he began, "what kind of a bringin'-up I had, an' what a poor, mis'able, God-fersaken, scairt-to-death little forlorn critter I was; put upon, an' snubbed, an' jawed at till I'd come to believe myself—what was rubbed into me the hull time—that I was the most all-round no-account animul that was ever made out o' dust, an' wa'n't ever likely to be no diff'rent. Lookin' back, it seems to me that—exceptin' of Polly—I never had a kind word said to me, nor a day's fun. Your husband, Billy P. Cullom, was the fust man that ever treated me human up to that time. He give me the only enjoy'ble time 't I'd ever had, an' I don't know 't anythin' 's ever equaled it since. He spent money on me, an' he give me money to spend—that had never had a cent to call my own—*an'*, Mis' Cullom, he took me by the hand, an' he talked to me, an' he gin me the fust notion 't I'd ever had that mebbe I wa'n't only the scum o' the earth, as I'd ben teached to believe. I told ye that that day was the turnin' point of my life. Wa'al, it wa'n't the lickin' I got, though that had somethin' to do with it, but I'd never have had the spunk to run away 's I did if it hadn't ben for the heartenin' Billy P. gin me, an' never knowed it, an' never knowed it," he repeated mournfully. "I alwus allowed to pay some o' that debt back to him, but seein' 's I can't do that, Mis' Cullom, I'm glad an' thankful to pay it to his widdo'."

"Mebbe he knows, Dave," said Mrs. Cullom softly.

"Mebbe he does," assented David in a low voice.

Neither spoke for a time, and then the widow said: "David, I can't thank ye 's I ought ter—I don't know how—but I'll pray for ye night an' mornin' 's long 's I got breath. An', Dave," she added humbly, "I want to take back what I said about the Lord's providin'."

She sat a moment, lost in her thoughts, and then exclaimed, "Oh, it don't seem 's if I c'd wait to write to Charley!"

"I've wrote to Charley," said David, "an' told him to sell out there an' come home, an' to draw on me fer any balance he needed to move him. I've got somethin' in my eye that'll be easier an' better payin' than fightin' grasshoppers an' drought in Kansas."

"Dave Harum!" cried the widow, rising to her feet, "you ought to 'a' ben a king!"

"Wa'al," said David with a grin, "I don't know much about the kingin' bus'nis, but I guess a cloth cap 'n' a hoss whip 's more 'n my line than a crown an' scepter. An' now," he added, "'s we've got through 'th our bus'nis, s'pose you step over to the house an' see Polly. She's expectin' on ye to dinner. Oh, yes," replying to the look of deprecation in her face as she viewed her shabby frock, "you an' Polly c'n prink up some if you want to, but we can't take 'No' fer an answer Chris'mus day, clo'es or no clo'es."

"I'd really like ter," said Mrs. Cullom.

"All right then," said David cheerfully. "The path is swep' by this time, I guess, an' I'll see ye later. Oh, by the way," he exclaimed, "the's somethin' I fergot. I want to make you

a proposition, ruther an onusual one, but seein' ev'rythin' is as 't is, perhaps you'll consider it."

"Dave," declared the widow, "if I could, an' you ast for it, I'd give ye anythin' on the face o' this mortal globe!"

"Wa'al," said David, nodding and smiling, "I thought that mebbe, long 's you got the int'rist of that investment we ben talkin' about, you'd let me keep what's left of the princ'pal. Would ye like to see it?"

Mrs. Cullom looked at him with a puzzled expression without replying.

David took from his pocket a large wallet, secured by a strap, and, opening it, extracted something enveloped in much faded brown paper. Unfolding this, he displayed upon his broad fat palm an old silver dime black with age.

"There's the cap'tal," he said.