

CHAPTER XXI.

JOHN walked to the front door with Mrs. Cullom, but she declined with such evident sincerity his offer to carry her bundle to the house that he let her out of the office and returned to the back room. David was sitting before the fire, leaning back in his chair with his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets. He looked up as John entered and said, "Draw up a chair."

John brought a chair and stood by the side of it while he said, "I want to thank you for the Christmas remembrance, which pleased and touched me very deeply; and," he added diffidently, "I want to say how mortified I am—in fact, I want to apologize for——"

"Regrettin'?" interrupted David with a motion of his hand toward the chair and a smile of great amusement. "Sho, sho! Se' down, se' down. I'm glad you found somethin' in your stockin' if it pleased ye, an' as fur 's that regret o' your'n was concerned—wa'al—wa'al, I liked ye all the better for 't, I did fer a fact. He, he, he! Appearances was ruther agin me, wasn't they, the way I told it."

"Nevertheless," said John, seating himself, "I ought not to have—that is to say, I ought to have known——"

"How could ye," David broke in, "when I

as good as told ye I was cal'latin' to rob the old lady? He, he, he, he! Scat my ——! Your face was a picture when I told ye to write that note, though I reckon you didn't know I noticed it."

John laughed and said, "You have been very generous all through, Mr. Harum."

"Nothin' to brag on," he replied, "nothin' to brag on. Fur 's Mis' Cullom's matter was concerned, 't was as I said, jest payin' off an old score; an' as fur 's your stockin', it's really putty much the same. I'll allow you've earned it, if it'll set any easier on your stomach."

"I can't say that I have been overworked," said John with a slight laugh.

"Mebbe not," rejoined David, "but you hain't ben overpaid neither, an' I want ye to be satisfied. Fact is," he continued, "my gettin' you up here was putty consid'able of an experiment, but I ben watchin' ye putty close, an' I'm more'n satisfied. Mebbe Timson c'd beat ye at figurin' an' countin' money when you fust come, an' knowed more about the pertic'ler points of the office, but outside of that he was the biggest dumb-head I ever see, an' you know how he left things. He hadn't no tack, fer one thing. Outside of summin' up figures an' countin' money he had a faculty fer gettin' things t'other-end to that beat all. I'd tell him a thing, an' explain it to him two three times over, an' he'd say 'Yes, yes,' an', scat my ——! when it came to carryin' on't out, he hadn't sensed it a mite—jest got it which-end-t'other. An' talk! Wa'al, I think it must 'a' ben a kind of disease with him. He really didn't mean no harm, mebbe, but he couldn't no more help lettin' out anythin' he

knowned, or thought he knowed, than a settin' hen c'n help settin'. He kep' me on tenter-hooks the hull endurin' time."

"I should say he was honest enough, was he not?" said John.

"Oh, yes," replied David with a touch of scorn, "he was honest enough fur 's money matters was concerned; but he hadn't no tack, nor no sense, an' many a time he done more mischief with his gibble-gabble than if he'd took fifty dollars out an' out. Fact is," said David, "the kind of honesty that won't actually steal 's a kind of fool honesty that's common enough; but the kind that keeps a feller's mouth shut when he hadn't ought to talk 's about the scurcest thing goin'." I'll jest tell ye, fer example, the last mess he made. You know Purse, that keeps the gen'ral store? Wa'al, he come to me some months ago, on the quiet, an' said that he wanted to borro' five hunderd. He didn't want to git no indorser, but he'd show me his books an' give me a statement an' a chattel morgidge fer six months. He didn't want nobody to know 't he was anyway pushed fer money because he wanted to git some extensions, an' so on. I made up my mind it was all right, an' I done it. Wa'al, about a month or so after he come to me with tears in his eyes, as ye might say, an' says, 'I got somethin' I want to show ye,' an' handed out a letter from the house in New York he had some of his biggist dealin's with, tellin' him that they regretted"—here David gave John a nudge—"that they couldn't give him the extensions he ast for, an' that his paper must be paid as it fell due—some twelve hunderd dollars. 'Somebody 's leaked,' he says, 'an' they've heard of

that morgidge, an' I'm in a putty scrape,' he says.

"'H'm'm,' I says, 'what makes ye think so?'

"'Can't be nothin' else,' he says; 'I've dealt with them people fer years an' never ast fer nothin' but what I got it, an' now to have 'em round up on me like this, it can't be nothin' but what they've got wind o' that chattel morgidge,' he says.

"'H'm'm,' I says. 'Any o' their people ben up here lately?' I says.

"'That's jest it,' he says. 'One o' their travellin' men was up here last week, an' he come in in the afternoon as chipper as you please, wantin' to sell me a bill o' goods, an' I put him off, sayin' that I had a putty big stock, an' so on, an' he said he'd see me agin in the mornin'—you know that sort of talk,' he says.

"'Wa'al,' I says, 'did he come in?'

"'No,' says Purse, 'he didn't. I never set eyes on him agin, an' more'n that,' he says, 'he took the first train in the mornin', an' now,' he says, 'I expect I'll have ev'ry last man I owe anythin' to buzzin' 'round my ears.'

"'Wa'al,' I says, 'I guess I see about how the land lays, an' I reckon you ain't fur out about the morgidge bein' at the bottom on't, an' the ain't no way it c'd 'a' leaked out 'ceptin' through that dum'd chuckle-head of a Timson. But this is the way it looks to me—you hain't heard nothin' in the village, have ye?' I says.

"'No,' he says. 'Not yit,' he says.

"'Wa'al, ye won't, I don't believe,' I says, 'an' as fur as that drummer is concerned, you c'n bet,' I says, 'that he didn't nor won't let on to nobody but his own folks—not till his bus'nis is

squared up, an' more 'n that,' I says, 'seein' that your trouble 's ben made ye by one o' my help, I don't see but what I'll have to see ye through,' I says. 'You jest give me the address of the New York parties, an' tell me what you want done, an' I reckon I c'n fix the thing so 't they won't bother ye. I don't believe,' I says, 'that anybody else knows anythin' yet, an' I'll shut up Timson's yawp so 's it'll stay shut.'

"How did the matter come out?" asked John, "and what did Purse say?"

"Oh," replied David, "Purse went off head up an' tail up. He said he was everlastin'ly obliged to me, an'—he, he, he!—he said 't was more 'n he expected. You see I charged him what I thought was right on the 'rig'nal deal, an' he squimmidged some, an' I reckon he allowed to be putty well bled if I took holt agin; but I done as I agreed on the extension bus'nis, an' I'm on his paper for twelve hunderd fer nothin', jest because that nikum-noddy of a Timson let that drummer bamboozle him into talkin'. I found out the hull thing, an' the very day I wrote to the New York fellers fer Purse, I wrote to Gen'ral Wolsey to find me somebody to take Timson's place. I allowed I'd ruther have somebody that didn't know nobody, than such a clack-in' ole he-hen as Chet."

"I should have said that it was rather a hazardous thing to do," said John, "to put a total stranger like me into what is rather a confidential position, as well as a responsible one."

"Wa'al," said David, "in the fust place I knew that the Gen'ral wouldn't recommend no dead-beat nor no skin, an' I allowed that if the raw material was O. K., I could break it in; an'

if it wa'n't I should find it out putty quick. Like a young hoss," he remarked, "if he's sound an' kind, an' got gumption, I'd sooner break him in myself 'n not—fur's my use goes—an' if I can't, nobody can, an' I get rid on him. You understand?"

"Yes," said John with a smile.

"Wa'al," continued David, "I liked your letter, an' when you come I liked your looks. Of course I couldn't tell jest how you'd take holt, nor if you an' me 'd hitch. An' then agin, I didn't know whether you could stan' it here after livin' in a city all your life. I watched ye putty close—closter 'n you knowed of, I guess. I seen right off that you was goin' to fill your collar, fur's the work was concerned, an' though you didn't know nobody much, an' couldn't have no amusement to speak on, you didn't mope nor sulk, an' what's more—though I know I advised ye to stay there fer a spell longer when you spoke about boardin' somewhere else—I know what the Eagle tavern is in winter; summer, too, fer that matter, though it's a little better then, an' I allowed that air test 'd be final. He, he, he! Putty rough, ain't it?"

"It is, rather," said John, laughing. "I'm afraid my endurance is pretty well at an end. Elright's wife is ill, and the fact is, that since day before yesterday I have been living on what I could buy at the grocery—crackers, cheese, salt fish, canned goods, *et cetera*."

"Scat my —!" cried David. "Wa'al! Wa'al! That's too dum'd bad! Why on earth—why, you must be *hungry*! Wa'al, you won't have to eat no salt herrin' to-day, because Polly 'n I are expectin' ye to dinner."

Two or three times during the conversation David had gone to the window overlooking his lawn and looked out with a general air of observing the weather, and at this point he did so again, coming back to his seat with a look of satisfaction, for which there was, to John, no obvious reason. He sat for a moment without speaking, and then, looking at his watch, said: "Wa'al, dinner 's at one o'clock, an' Polly's a great one fer bein' on time. Guess I'll go out an' have another look at that pesky colt. You better go over to the house 'bout quarter to one, an' you c'n make your t'ilet over there. I'm 'fraid if you go over to the Eagle it'll spoil your appetite. She'd think it might, anyway."

So David departed to see the colt, and John got out some of the books and busied himself with them until the time to present himself at David's house.

CHAPTER XXII.

"WHY, Mis' Cullom, I'm real glad to see ye. Come right in," said Mrs. Bixbee as she drew the widow into the "wing settin' room," and proceeded to relieve her of her wraps and her bundle. "Set right here by the fire while I take these things of your'n into the kitchen to dry 'em out. I'll be right back"; and she bustled out of the room. When she came back Mrs. Cullom was sitting with her hands in her lap, and there was in her eyes an expression of smiling peace that was good to see.

Mrs. Bixbee drew up a chair, and seating herself, said: "Wa'al, I don't know when I've seen ye to git a chance to speak to ye, an' I was real pleased when David said you was goin' to be here to dinner. An' my! how well you're lookin'—more like Cynthia Sweetland than I've seen ye fer I don't know when; an' yet," she added, looking curiously at her guest, "you 'pear somehow as if you'd ben cryin'."

"You're real kind, I'm sure," responded Mrs. Cullom, replying to the other's welcome and remarks *seriatim*; "I guess, though, I don't look much like Cynthia Sweetland, if I do feel twenty years younger 'n I did a while ago; an' I have ben cryin', I allow, but not fer sorro', Polly Harum," she exclaimed, giving the other her