

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



maiden name. "Your brother Dave comes putty nigh to bein' an angel!"

"Wa'al," replied Mrs. Bixbee with a twinkle, "I reckon Dave might hev to be fixed up some afore he come out in that pertic'ler shape, but," she added impressively, "es fur as bein' a *man* goes, he's 'bout 's good 's they make 'em. I know folks thinks he's a hard bargainer, an' close-fisted, an' some on 'em that ain't fit to lick up his tracks says more'n that. He's got his own ways, I'll allow, but down at bottom, an' all through, I know the' ain't no better man livin'. No, ma'am, the' ain't, an' what he's ben to me, Cynthy Cullom, nobody knows but me—an'an'—mebbe the Lord—though I hev seen the time," she said tentatively, "when it seemed to me 't I knowed more about my affairs 'n He did," and she looked doubtfully at her companion, who had been following her with affirmative and sympathetic nods, and now drew her chair a little closer, and said softly: "Yes, yes, I know. I ben putty doubtful an' rebellious myself a good many times, but seems now as if He had had me in His mercy all the time." Here Aunt Polly's sense of humor asserted itself. "What's Dave ben up to now?" she asked.

And then the widow told her story, with tears and smiles, and the keen enjoyment which we all have in talking about ourselves to a sympathetic listener like Aunt Polly, whose interjections pointed and illuminated the narrative. When it was finished she leaned forward and kissed Mrs. Cullom on the cheek.

"I can't tell ye how glad I be for ye," she said; "but if I'd known that David held that morgidge, I could hev told ye ye needn't hev

worried yourself a mite. He wouldn't never have taken your prop'ty, more'n he'd rob a hen-roost. But he done the thing his own way—kind o' fetched it round fer a Merry Chris'mus, didn't he? Curious," she said reflectively, after a momentary pause, "how he lays up things about his childhood," and then, with a searching look at the Widow Cullom, "you didn't let on, an' I didn't ask ye, but of course you've heard the things that some folks says of him, an' natch'ally they got some holt on your mind. There's that story about 'Lish, over to Whitcom—you heard somethin' about that, didn't ye?"

"Yes," admitted the widow, "I heard somethin' of it, I s'pose."

"Wa'al," said Mrs. Bixbee, "you never heard the hull story, ner anybody else really, but I'm goin' to tell it to ye—"

"Yes," said Mrs. Cullom assentingly.

Mrs. Bixbee sat up straight in her chair with her hands on her knees and an air of one who would see justice done.

"'Lish Harum," she began, "wa'n't only half-brother to Dave. He was hull-brother to me, though, but notwithstanding that, I will say that a meaner boy, a meaner growin' man, an' a meaner man never walked the earth. He wa'n't satisfied to git the best piece an' the biggist piece—he hated to hev any one else git anythin' at all. I don't believe he ever laughed in his life, except over some kind o' suff'rin'—man or beast—an' what 'd tickle him the most was to be the means on't. He took pertic'ler delight in abusin' an' tormentin' Dave, an' the poor little critter was jest as 'fraid as death of him, an' good reason. Father was awful hard, but he didn't go out of



his way; but 'Lish never let no chance slip. Wa'al, I ain't goin' to give you the hull fam'ly hist'ry, an' I've got to go into the kitchen fer a while 'fore dinner, but what I started out fer 's this: 'Lish fin'ly settled over to Whitcom."

"Did he ever git married?" interrupted Mrs. Cullom.

"Oh, yes," replied Mrs. Bixbee, "he got married when he was past forty. It's curious," she remarked, in passing, "but it don't seem as if the' was ever yit a man so mean but he c'd find some woman was fool enough to marry him, an' she was a putty decent sort of a woman too, f'm all accounts, an' good lookin'. Wa'al, she stood him six or seven year, an' then she run off."

"With another man?" queried the widow in an awed voice. Aunt Polly nodded assent with compressed lips.

"Yes'm," she went on, "she left him an' went out West somewhere, an' that was the last of her; an' when her two boys got old enough to look after themselves a little, they quit him too, an' they wa'n't no way growed up neither. Wa'al, the long an' the short on't was that 'Lish got goin' down hill ev'ry way, health an' all, till he hadn't nothin' left but his disposition, an' fairly got onter the town. The' wa'n't nothin' for it but to send him to the county house, onless somebody 'd s'port him. Wa'al, the committee knew Dave was his brother, an' one on 'em come to see him to see if he'd come forwud an' help out, an' he seen Dave right here in this room, an' Dave made me stay an' hear the hull thing. Man's name was Smith, I remember, a peaked little man with long chin whiskers that he kep' clawin' at

with his fingers. Dave let him tell his story, an' he didn't say nothin' fer a minute or two, an' then he says, 'What made ye come to me?' he says. 'Did he send ye?'

"'Wa'al,' says Smith, 'when it was clear that he couldn't do nuthin', we ast him if the' wa'n't nobody could put up fer him, an' he said you was his brother, an' well off, an' hadn't ought to let him go t' the poorhouse.'

"He said that, did he?' says Dave.

"'Amountin' to that,' says Smith.

"'Wa'al,' says Dave, 'it's a good many years sence I see 'Lish, an' mebbe you know him better 'n I do. You known him some time, eh?'

"'Quite a number o' years,' says Smith.

"'What sort of a feller was he,' says Dave, 'when he was somebody? Putty good feller? good citizen? good neighbor? lib'ral? kind to his fam'ly? ev'rybody like him? gen'ally pop'lar, an' all that?'

"'Wa'al,' says Smith, wigglin' in his chair an' pullin' out his whiskers three four hairs to a time, 'I guess he come some short of all that.'

"'E'umph!' says Dave, 'I guess he did! Now, honest,' he says, 'is the' man, woman, or child in Whitcom that knows 'Lish Harum that's got a good word fer him? or ever knowed of his doin' or sayin' anythin' that hadn't got a mean side to it some way? Didn't he drive his wife off, out an' out? an' didn't his two boys hev to quit him soon 's they could travel? An', says Dave, 'if any one was to ask you to figure out a pattern of the meanist human skunk you was capable of thinkin' of, wouldn't it—honest, now!' Dave says, 'honest, now—wouldn't it be 's near



like 'Lish Harum as one buckshot 's like another?'"

"My!" exclaimed Mrs. Cullom. "What did Mr. Smith say to that?"

"Wa'al," replied Mrs. Bixbee, "he didn't say nuthin' at fust, not in so many words. He sot fer a minute clawin' away at his whiskers—an' he'd got both hands into 'em by that time—an' then he made a move as if he gin the hull thing up an' was goin'. Dave set lookin' at him, an' then he says, 'You ain't goin', air ye?'"

"'Wa'al,' says Smith, 'feelin' 's you do, I guess my arrant here ain't goin' t' amount to nothin', an' I may 's well.'"

"'No, you set still a minute,' says Dave. 'If you'll answer my question honest an' square, I've got sunthin' more to say to ye. Come, now,' he says."

"'Wa'al,' says Smith, with a kind of give-it-up sort of a grin, 'I guess you sized him up about right. I didn't come to see you on 'Lish Harum's account. I come fer the town of Whitcom.' An' then he spunked up some an' says, 'I don't give a darn,' he says, 'what comes of 'Lish, an' I don't know nobody as does, fur's he's person'ly concerned; but he's got to be a town charge less 'n you take 'm off our hands.'"

"Dave turned to me an' says, jest as if he meant it, 'How 'd you like to have him here, Polly?'"

"'Dave Harum!' I says, 'what be you thinkin' of, seein' what he is, an' alwus was, an' how he alwus treated you? Lord sakes!' I says, 'you ain't thinkin' of it!'"

"'Not much,' he says, with an ugly kind of a smile, such as I never see in his face before,

'not much! Not under this roof, or any roof of mine, if it wa'n't more'n my cow stable—an', he says, turnin' to Smith, 'this is what I want to say to you: You've done all right. I hain't no fault to find with you. But I want you to go back an' say to 'Lish Harum that you've seen me, an' that I told you that not one cent of my money nor one mossel o' my food would ever go to keep him alive one minute of time; that if I had an empty hogpen I wouldn't let him sleep in't overnight, much less to bunk in with a decent hog. You tell him that I said the poorhouse was his proper dwellin', barrin' the jail, an' that it 'd have to be a dum'd sight poorer house 'n I ever heard of not to be a thousan' times too good fer him.'"

"My!" exclaimed Mrs. Cullom again. "I can't really 'magine it of Dave."

"Wa'al," replied Mrs. Bixbee, "I told ye how set he is on his young days, an' nobody knows how cruel mean 'Lish used to be to him; but I never see it come out of him so ugly before, though I didn't blame him a mite. But I hain't told ye the upshot: 'Now,' he says to Smith, who set with his mouth gappin' open, 'you understand how I feel about the feller, an' I've got good reason for it. I want you to promise me that you'll say to him, word fer word, jest what I've said to you about him, an' I'll do this: You folks send him to the poorhouse, an' let him git jest what the rest on 'em gits—no more an' no less—as long 's he lives. When he dies you git him the tightest coffin you kin buy, to keep him f'm spilin' the earth as long as may be, an' then you send me the hull bill. But this has got to be between you an' me only. You c'n tell the



rest of the committee what you like, *but* if you ever tell a livin' soul about this here understandin', an' I find it out, I'll never pay one cent, an' you'll be to blame. I'm willin', on them terms, to stan' between the town of Whitcom an' harm; but fer 'Lish Harum, not one sumarkee! Is it a barg'in?' Dave says.

"Yes, sir," says Smith, puttin' out his hand. 'An' I guess,' he says, 'I'm all 't I c'n gather, thet you're doin' all 't we could expect, an' more too,' an' off he put."

"How 'd it come out?" asked Mrs. Cullom.

"'Lish lived about two year," replied Aunt Polly, "an' Dave done as he agreed, but even then when he come to settle up, he told Smith he didn't want no more said about it 'n could be helped."

"Wa'al," said Mrs. Cullom, "it seems to me as if David did take care on him after all, fur 's spendin' money was concerned."

"That's the way it looks to me," said Mrs. Bixbee, "but David likes to think t'other. He meant to be awful mean, an' he was—as mean as he could—but the fact is, he didn't reelly know how. My sakes! Cynthia (looking at the clock), I'll hev to excuse myself fer a spell. Ef you want to do any fixin' up 'fore dinner, jest step into my bedroom. I've laid some things out on the bed, if you should happen to want any of 'em," and she hurried out of the room.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

DAVID'S house stood about a hundred feet back from the street, facing the east. The main body of the house was of two stories (through which ran a deep bay in front), with mansard roof. On the south of the main body of the house were two stories of the "wing," in which were the "settin' room," Aunt Polly's room, and, above, David's quarters. Ten minutes or so before one o'clock John rang the bell at the front door.

"Sairy's busy," said Mrs. Bixbee apologetically as she let him in, "an' so I come to the door myself."

"Thank you very much," said John. "Mr. Harum told me to come over a little before one, but perhaps I ought to have waited a few minutes longer."

"No, it's all right," she replied, "for mebbe you'd like to wash an' fix up 'fore dinner, so I'll jest show ye where to," and she led the way upstairs and into the "front parlor bedroom."

"There," she said, "make yourself comf'table, an' dinner 'll be ready in about ten minutes."

For a moment John mentally rubbed his eyes. Then he turned and caught both of Mrs. Bixbee's hands and looked at her, speechless. When he