

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

DAVID and John had been driving for some time in silence. The elder man was apparently musing upon something which had been suggested to his mind. The horses slackened their gait to a walk as they began the ascent of a long hill. Presently the silence was broken by a sound which caused John to turn his head with a look of surprised amusement—Mr. Harum was singing. The tune, if it could be so called, was scaleless, and these were the words:

*"Monday mornin' I married me a wife,
Thinkin' to lead a more contented life;
Fiddlin' an' dancin' the' was played,
To see how unhappy poor I was made."*

*"Tuesday mornin', 'bout break o' day,
While my head on the piller did lay,
She tuned up her clack, an' scolded more
Than I ever heard before."*

"Never heard me sing before, did ye?" he said, looking with a grin at his companion, who laughed and said that he had never had that pleasure. "Wa'al, that's all 't I remember on't," said David, "an' I dunno 's I've thought about it in thirty year. The' was a number o' verses which carried 'em through the rest o' the week, an' ended up in a case of 'sault an' battery, I rec'lect,

but I don't remember jest how. Somethin' we ben sayin' put the thing into my head, I guess."

"I should like to hear the rest of it," said John, smiling.

David made no reply to this, and seemed to be turning something over in his mind. At last he said:

"Mebbe Polly's told ye that I'm a wid'wer."

John admitted that Mrs. Bixbee had said as much as that.

"Yes, sir," said David, "I'm a wid'wer of long standin'."

No appropriate comment suggesting itself to his listener, none was made.

"I hain't never cared to say much about it to Polly," he remarked, "though fer that matter Jim Bixbee, f'm all accounts, was about as poor a shack as ever was turned out, I guess, an'——"

John took advantage of the slight hesitation to interpose against what he apprehended might be a lengthy digression on the subject of the deceased Bixbee by saying:

"You were quite a young fellow when you were married, I infer."

"Two or three years younger 'n you be, I guess," said David, looking at him, "an' a putty green colt too in some ways," he added, handing over the reins and whip while he got out his silver tobacco box and helped himself to a liberal portion of its contents. It was plain that he was in the mood for personal reminiscences.

"As I look back on't now," he began, "it kind o' seems as if it must 'a' ben some other feller, an' yet I remember it all putty dum'd well too—all but one thing, an' that the biggist part on't, an' that is how I ever come to git married

at all. She was a widdo' at the time, an' kep' the boardin' house where I was livin'. It was up to Syrchester. I was better lookin' them days 'n I be now—had more hair at any rate—though," he remarked with a grin, "I was alwus a better goer than I was a looker. I was doin' fairly well," he continued, "but mebbe not so well as was thought by some.

"Wa'al, she was a good-lookin' woman, some older 'n I was. She seemed to take some shine to me. I'd roughed it putty much alwus, an' she was putty clever to me. She was a good talker, liked a joke an' a laugh, an' had some education, an' it come about that I got to beauin' her 'round quite a consid'able, and used to go an' set in her room or the parlor with her sometimes evenin's an' all that, an' I wouldn't deny that I liked it putty well."

It was some minutes before Mr. Harum resumed his narrative. The reins were sagging over the dashboard, held loosely between the first two fingers and thumb of his left hand, while with his right he had been making abstracted cuts at the thistles and other eligible marks along the roadside.

"Wa'al," he said at last, "we was married, an' our wheels tracked putty well fer quite a consid'able spell. I got to thinkin' more of her all the time, an' she me, seemin'ly. We took a few days off together two three times that summer, to Nig'ry, an' Saratogy, an' 'round, an' had real good times. I got to thinkin' that the state of matrimony was a putty good institution. When it come along fall, I was doin' well enough so 't she could give up bus'nis, an' I hired a house an' we set up housekeepin'. It was really more on

my account than her'n, fer I got to kind o' feelin' that when the meat was tough or the pie wa'n't done on the bottom that I was 'sociated with it, an' gen'ally I wanted a place of my own. But," he added, "I guess it was a mistake, fur 's she was concerned."

"Why?" said John, feeling that some show of interest was incumbent.

"I reckon," said David, "'t she kind o' missed the comp'ny an' the talk at table, an' the goin's on gen'ally, an' mebbe the work of runnin' the place—she was a great worker—an' it got to be some diff'rent, I s'pose, after a spell, settin' down to three meals a day with jest only me 'stid of a tableful, to say nothin' of the evenin's. I was glad enough to have a place of my own, but at the same time I hadn't ben used to settin' 'round with nothin' pertic'ler to do or say, with somebody else that hadn't neither, an' I wa'n't then nor ain't now, fer that matter, any great hand fer readin'. Then, too, we'd moved into a diff'rent part o' the town where my wife wa'n't acquainted. Wa'al, anyway, fust things begun to drag some—she begun to have spells of not speakin', an' then she begun to git notions about me. Once in a while I'd have to go down town on some bus'nis in the evenin'. She didn't seem to mind it at fust, but bom-by she got it into her head that the' wa'n't so much bus'nis goin' on as I made out, an' though along that time she'd set sometimes mebbe the hull evenin' without sayin' anythin' more 'n yes or no, an' putty often not that, yet if I went out there'd be a flare-up; an' as things went on the'd be spells fer a fortni't together when I couldn't any time of day git a word out of her hardly, unless it was to go fer

me 'bout somethin' that mebbe I'd done an' mebbe I hadn't—it didn't make no difference. An' when them spells was on, what she didn't take out o' me she did out o' the house—diggin' an' scrubbin', takin' up carpits, layin' down carpits, shiftin' the furniture, eatin' one day in the kitchen an' another in the settin' room, an' sleepin' most anywhere. She wa'n't real well after a while, an' the wuss she seemed to feel, the fiercer she was fer scrubbin' an' diggin' an' upsettin' things in gen'ral, an' bom-by she got so she couldn't keep a hired girl in the house more 'n a day or two at a time. She either wouldn't have 'em, or they wouldn't stay, an' more 'n half the time we was without one. This can't int'rist you much, can it?" said Mr. Harum, turning to his companion.

"On the contrary," replied John, "it interests me very much. I was thinking," he added, "that probably the state of your wife's health had a good deal to do with her actions and views of things, but it must have been pretty hard on you all the same."

"Wa'al, yes," said David, "I guess that's so. Her health wa'n't jest right, an' she showed it in her looks. I noticed that she'd pined an' pindled some, but I thought the' was some natural criss-crossedness mixed up into it too. But I tried to make allow'nces an' the best o' things, an' git along 's well 's I could; but things kind o' got wuss an' wuss. I told ye that she begun to have notions about me, an' 't ain't hardly necessary to say what shape they took, an' after a while, mebbe a year 'n a half, she got so 't she wa'n't satisfied to know where I was *nights*—she wanted to know where I was *daytimes*. Kind o'

makes me laugh now," he observed, "it seems so redic'lous; but it wa'n't no laughin' matter then. If I looked out o' winder she'd hint it up to me that I was watchin' some woman. She grudged me even to look at a picture paper; an' one day when we happened to be walkin' together she showed feelin' about one o' them wooden Injun women outside a cigar store."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Harum," said John, laughing.

"Wa'al," said David with a short laugh, "mebbe I did stretch that a little; but 's I told ye, she wanted to know where I was daytimes well 's nights, an' ev'ry once 'n a while she'd turn up at my bus'nis place, an' if I wa'n't there she'd set an' wait fer me, an' I'd either have to go home with her or have it out in the office. I don't mean to say that all the sort of thing I'm tellin' ye of kep' up all the time. It kind o' run in streaks; but the streaks kep' comin' oftener an' oftener, an' you couldn't never tell when the' was goin' to appear. Matters 'd go along putty well fer a while, an' then, all of a sudden, an' fer nothin' 't I could see, the' 'd come on a thunder shower 'fore you c'd git in out o' the wet."

"Singular," said John thoughtfully.

"Yes, sir," said David. "Wa'al, it come along to the second spring, 'bout the first of May. She'd ben more like folks fer about a week mebbe 'n she had fer a long spell, an' I begun to chirk up some. I don't remember jest how I got the idee, but f'm somethin' she let drop I gathered that she was thinkin' of havin' a new bunnit. I will say this for her," remarked David, "that she was an economical woman, an' never spent no

money jest fer the sake o' spendin' it. Wa'al, we'd got along so nice fer a while that I felt more 'n usual like pleasin' her, an' I allowed to myself that if she wanted a new bunnit, money shouldn't stand in the way, an' I set out to give her a supprise."

They had reached the level at the top of the long hill and the horses had broken into a trot, when Mr. Harum's narrative was interrupted and his equanimity upset by the onslaught of an excessively shrill, active, and conscientious dog of the "yellow" variety, which barked and sprang about in front of the mares with such frantic assiduity as at last to communicate enough of its excitement to them to cause them to bolt forward on a run, passing the yellow nuisance, which, with the facility of long practice, dodged the cut which David made at it in passing. It was with some little trouble that the horses were brought back to a sober pace.

"Dum that dum'd dog!" exclaimed David with fervor, looking back to where the object of his execrations was still discharging convulsive yelps at the retreating vehicle, "I'd give a five-dollar note to git one good lick at him. I'd make him holler 'pen-an'-ink' *once!* Why anybody's willin' to have such a dum'd, wuthless, pestiferous varmint as that 'round 's more 'n I c'n understand. I'll bet that the days they churn, that critter, unless they ketch him an' tie him up the night before, 'll be under the barn all day, an' he's jest blowed off steam enough to run a dog churn a hull forenoon."

Whether or not the episode of the dog had diverted Mr. Harum's mind from his previous topic, he did not resume it until John ventured

to remind him of it, with "You were saying something about the surprise for your wife."

"That's so," said David. "Yes, wa'al, when I went home that night I stopped into a mil'nery store, an' after I'd stood 'round a minute, a girl come up an' ast me if she c'd show me anythin'."

"I want to buy a bunnit," I says, an' she kind o' laughed. 'No,' I says, 'it ain't fer me, it's fer a lady,' I says; an' then we both laughed.

"What sort of a bunnit do you want?" she says.

"Wa'al, I dunno," I says, 'this is the fust time I ever done anythin' in the bunnit line.' So she went over to a glass case an' took one out an' held it up, turnin' it 'round on her hand.

"Wa'al," I says, 'I guess it's putty enough fur 's it goes, but the' don't seem to be much of anythin' to it. Hain't you got somethin' a little bit bigger an'—'

"Showier?" she says. 'How is this?' she says, doin' the same trick with another.

"Wa'al," I says, 'that looks more like it, but I had an idee that the A 1, tribble-extry fine article had more traps on't, an' most any one might have on either one o' them you've showed me an' not attrac' no attention at all. You needn't mind expense,' I says.

"Oh, very well," she says, 'I guess I know what you want,' an' goes over to another case an' fetches out another bunnit twice as big as either the others, an' with more notions on't than you c'd shake a stick at—flowers, an' gard'n stuff, an' fruit, an' glass beads, an' feathers, an' all that, till you couldn't see what they was fixed on to. She took holt on't with both hands, the girl did, an'

put it onto her head, an' kind o' smiled an' turned round slow so 't I c'd git a gen'ral view on't.

"Style all right?" I says.

"The very best of its kind," she says.

"How 'bout the *kind*?" I says.

"The very best of its style," she says.

John laughed outright. David looked at him for a moment with a doubtful grin.

"She *was* a slick one, wa'n't she?" he said.

"What a hoss trader she would 'a' made. I didn't ketch on at the time, but I rec'lected afterward. Wa'al," he resumed, after this brief digression, "'how much is it?' I says.

"Fifteen dollars," she says.

"What?" I says. "Scat my —! I c'd buy head rigging enough to last me ten years fer that."

"We couldn't sell it for less," she says.

"S'posin' the lady 't I'm buyin' it fer don't jest like it," I says, "can you alter it or swap somethin' else for it?"

"Cert'nly, within a reasonable time," she says.

"Wa'al, all right," I says, "do her up." An' so she wrapped the thing 'round with soft paper an' put it in a box, an' I paid for't an' moseyed along up home, feelin' that ev'ry man, woman, an' child had their eyes on my parcel, but thinkin' how tickled my wife would be."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE road they were on was a favorite drive with the two men, and at the point where they had now arrived David always halted for a look back and down upon the scene below them—to the south, beyond the intervening fields, bright with maturing crops, lay the village; to the west the blue lake, winding its length like a broad river, and the river itself a silver ribbon, till it was lost beneath the southern hills.

Neither spoke. For a few minutes John took in the scene with the pleasure it always afforded him, and then glanced at his companion, who usually had some comment to make upon anything which stirred his admiration or interest. He was gazing, not at the landscape, but apparently at the top of the dashboard. "Ho, hum," he said, straightening the reins, with a "clk" to the horses, and they drove along for a while in silence—so long, in fact, that our friend, while aware that the elder man did not usually abandon a topic until he had "had his say out," was moved to suggest a continuance of the narrative which had been rather abruptly broken off, and in which he had become considerably interested.

"Was your wife pleased?" he asked at last.

"Where was I?" asked the other in return.