

CHAPTER XL.

JOHN leaned out of the buggy and looked back along the road, as if deeply interested in observing something which had attracted his attention, and David's face worked oddly for a moment.

Turning south in the direction of the village, they began the descent of a steep hill, and Mr. Harum, careful of loose stones, gave all his attention to his driving. Our friend, respecting his vigilance, forebore to say anything which might distract his attention until they reached level ground, and then, "You never married again?" he queried.

"No," was the reply. "My matrymonial experience was 'brief an' to the p'int,' as the say-in' is."

"And yet," urged John, "you were a young man, and I should have supposed——"

"Wa'al," said David, breaking in and emitting his chuckling laugh, "I allow 't mebbe I sometimes thought on't, an' once, about ten year after what I ben tellin' ye, I putty much made up my mind to try another hitch-up. The' was a woman that I seen quite a good deal of, an' liked putty well, an' I had some grounds fer thinkin' 't she wouldn't show me the door if I was to ask her. In fact, I made up my mind I would take

the chances, an' one night I put on my best bib an' tucker an' started fer her house. I had to go 'cross the town to where she lived, an' the farther I walked the fiercer I got—havin' made up my mind—so 't putty soon I was travelin' 's if I was 'fraid some other feller'd git there 'head o' me. Wa'al, it was Sat'day night, an' the stores was all open, an' the streets was full o' people, an' I had to pull up in the crowd a little, an' I don't know how it happened in pertic'ler, but fust thing I knew I run slap into a woman with a ban'box, an' when I looked 'round, there was a mil'nery store in full blast an' winders full o' bunnits. Wa'al, sir, do you know what I done? Ye don't. Wa'al, the' was a hoss car passin' that run three mile out in the country in a diff'rent direction f'm where I started fer, an' I up an' got onto that car, an' rode the length o' that road, an' got off an' *walked back*—an' I never went near her house f'm that day to this, an' that," said David, "was the nearest I ever come to havin' another pardner to my joys an' sorro's."

"That was pretty near, though," said John, laughing.

"Wa'al," said David, "mebbe Providence might 'a' had some other plan fer stoppin' me 'fore I smashed the hull rig, if I hadn't run into the mil'nery shop, but as it was, that fetched me to a stan'still, an' I never started to run agin."

They drove on for a few minutes in silence, which John broke at last by saying, "I have been wondering how you got on after your wife died and left you with a little child."

"That was where Mis' Jones come in," said David. "Of course I got the best nurse I could, an' Mis' Jones 'd run in two three times ev'ry day

an' see 't things was goin' on as right 's they could; but it come on that I had to be away f'm home a good deal, an' fin'ly, come fall, I got the Joneses to move into a bigger house, where I could have a room, an' fixed it up with Mis' Jones to take charge o' the little feller right along. She hadn't but one child, a girl of about thirteen, an' had lost two little ones, an' so between havin' took to my little mite of a thing f'm the fust, an' my makin' it wuth her while, she was willin', an' we went on that way till—the' wa'n't no further occasion fur 's he was concerned, though I lived with them a spell longer when I was at home, which wa'n't very often, an' after he died I was gone fer a good while. But before that time, when I was at home, I had him with me all the time I could manage. With good care he'd growed up nice an' bright, an' as big as the average, an' smarter 'n a steel trap. He liked bein' with me better 'n anybody else, and when I c'd manage to have him I couldn't bear to have him out o' my sight. Wa'al, as I told you, he got to be most seven year old. I'd had to go out to Chicago, an' one day I got a telegraph sayin' he was putty sick—an' I took the fust train East. It was 'long in March, an' we had a breakdown, an' run into an awful snowstorm, an' one thing another, an' I lost twelve or fifteen hours. It seemed to me that them two days was longer 'n my hull life, but I fin'ly did git home about nine o'clock in the mornin'. When I got to the house Mis' Jones was on the lookout fer me, an' the door opened as I run up the stoop, an' I see by her face that I was too late. 'Oh, David, David!' she says (she'd never called me David before), puttin' her hands on my shoulders.

"'When?' I says.

"'Bout midnight,' she says.

"'Did he suffer much?' I says.

"'No,' she says, 'I don't think so; but he was out of his head most of the time after the fust day, an' I guess all the time the last twenty-four hours.'

"'Do you think he'd 'a' knowed me?' I says. 'Did he say anythin'?' an' at that," said David, "she looked at me. She wa'n't cryin' when I come in, though she had ben; but at that her face all broke up. 'I don't know,' she says. 'He kept sayin' things, an' 'bout all we could understand was "Daddy, daddy,"' an' then she throwed her aporn over her face, an'——"

David tipped his hat a little farther over his eyes, though, like many if not most "horsey" men, he usually wore it rather far down, and leaning over, twirled the whip in the socket between his two fingers and thumb. John studied the stitched ornamentation of the dashboard until the reins were pushed into his hands. But it was not for long. David straightened himself, and, without turning his head, resumed them as if that were a matter of course.

"Day after the fun'ral," he went on, "I says to Mis' Jones, 'I'm goin' back out West,' I says, 'an' I can't say how long I shall be gone—long enough, anyway,' I says, 'to git it into my head that when I come back the' won't be no little feller to jump up an' 'round my neck when I come into the house; but, long or short, I'll come back some time, an' meanwhile, as fur 's things between you an' me air, they're to go on jest the same, an' more 'n that, do you think you'll remember him some?' I says.

" 'As long as I live,' she says, 'jest like my own.'

" 'Wa'al,' I says, 'long 's you remember him, he'll be, in a way, livin' to ye, an' as long 's that I allow to pay fer his keep an' tendin' jest the same as I have, *an*,' I says, 'if you don't let me you ain't no friend o' mine, an' you *ben* a good one.' Wa'al, she squimmidged some, but I wouldn't let her say 'No.' 'I've 'ranged it all with my pardner an' other ways,' I says, 'an' more 'n that, if you git into any kind of a scrape an' I don't happen to be got at, you go to him an' git what you want.'"

"I hope she lived and prospered," said John fervently.

"She lived twenty year," said David, "an' I wish she was livin' now. I never drewed a check on her account without feelin' 't I was doin' somethin' for my little boy.

"The's a good many diff'rent sorts an' kinds o' sorro'," he said, after a moment, "that's in some ways kind o' kin to each other, but I guess losin' a child 's a specie by itself. Of course I passed the achin', smartin' point years ago, but it's somethin' you can't fergit—that is, you can't help feelin' about it, because it ain't only what the child *was* to you, but what you keep thinkin' he'd 'a' ben growin' more an' more to *be* to you. When I lost my little boy I didn't only lose him as he was, but I ben losin' him over an' agin all these years. What he'd 'a' ben when he was *so* old; an' what when he'd got to be a big boy; an' what he'd 'a' ben when he went mebbe to collidge; an' what he'd 'a' ben afterward, an' up to *now*. Of course the times when a man stuffs his face down into the pillers nights, passes,

after a while; but while the's some sorro's that the happenin' o' things helps ye to fergit, I guess the's some that the happenin' o' things keeps ye rememberin', an' losin' a child 's one on 'em."