CHAPTER XLIII.

THE summer was drawing to a close. The season, so far as the social part of it was concerned, had been what John had grown accustomed to in previous years, and there were few changes in or among the people whom he had come to know very well, save those which a few years make in young people: some increase of importance in demeanor on the part of the young men whose razors were coming into requisition; and the changes from short to long skirts, from braids, pig-tails, and flowing manes to more elaborate coiffures on the part of the young women. The most notable event had been the reopening of the Verjoos house, which had been closed for two summers, and the return of the family, followed by the appearance of a young man whom Miss Clara had met abroad, and who represented himself as the acknowledged *fiancé* of that young woman. It need hardly be said that discussions of the event, and upon the appearance, manners, prospects, etc., of that fortunate gentleman had formed a very considerable part of the talk of the season among the summer people; and, indeed, interest in the affair had permeated all grades and classes of society.

It was some six weeks after the settlement of the transaction in "pork" that David and John

were driving together in the afternoon as they had so often done in the last five years. They had got to that point of understanding where neither felt constrained to talk for the purpose of keeping up conversation, and often in their long drives there was little said by either of them. The young man was never what is called "a great talker," and Mr. Harum did not always "git goin'." On this occasion they had gone along for some time, smoking in silence, each man absorbed in his thoughts. Finally David turned to his companion.

"Do you know that Dutchman Claricy Verjoos is goin' to marry?" he asked.

"Yes," replied John, laughing; "I have met him a number of times. But he isn't a Dutchman. What gave you that idea?"

"I heard it was over in Germany she run across him," said David.

"I believe that is so, but he isn't a German. He is from Philadelphia, and is a friend of the Bradways."

"What kind of a feller is he? Good enough for her?"

"Well," said John, smiling, "in the sense in which that question is usually taken, I should say yes. He has good looks, good manners, a good deal of money, I am told, and it is said that Miss Clara—which is the main point, after all—is very much in love with him."

"H'm," said David after a moment. "How do you git along with the Verjoos girls? Was Claricy's ears pointed all right when you seen her fust after she come home?"

"Oh, yes!" replied John, smiling, "she and her sister were perfectly pleasant and cordial,

and Miss Verjoos and I are on very friendly terms."

"I was thinkin'," said David, "that you an' Claricy might be got to likin' each other, an' mebbe——"

"I don't think there could ever have been the smallest chance of it," declared John hastily.

"Take the lines a minute," said David, handing them to his companion after stopping the horses. "The nigh one's picked up a stone, I guess," and he got out to investigate. "The river road," he remarked as he climbed back into the buggy after removing the stone from the horse's foot, "is about the puttiest road 'round here, but I don't drive it oftener jest on account of them dum'd loose stuns." He sucked the air through his pursed-up lips, producing a little squeaking sound, and the horses started forward. Presently he turned to John:

"Did you ever think of gettin' married?" he asked.

"Well," said our friend with a little hesitation, "I don't remember that I ever did, very definitely."

"Somebody 't you knew 'fore you come up here?" said David, jumping at a conclusion.

"Yes," said John, smiling a little at the question.

"Wouldn't she have ye?" queried David, who stuck at no trifles when in pursuit of information.

John laughed. "I never asked her," he replied, in truth a little surprised at his own willingness to be questioned.

"Did ye cal'late to when the time come right?" pursued Mr. Harum.

Of this part of his history John had, of course,

never spoken to David. There had been a time when, if not resenting the attempt upon his confidence, he would have made it plain that he did not wish to discuss the matter, and the old wound still gave him twinges. But he had not only come to know his questioner very well, but to be much attached to him. He knew, too, that the elder man would ask him nothing save in the way of kindness, for he had had a hundred proofs of that; and now, so far from feeling reluctant to take his companion into his confidence, he rather welcomed the idea. He was, withal, a bit curious to ascertain the drift of the inquiry, knowing that David, though sometimes working in devious ways, rarely started without an intention. And so he answered the question and what followed as he might have told his story to a woman.

"An' didn't you never git no note, nor message, nor word of any kind?" asked David.

"No."

"Nor hain't ever heard a word about her f'm that day to this?"

"No."

"Nor hain't ever tried to?"

"No," said John. "What would have been the use?"

"Prov'dence seemed to 've made a putty clean sweep in your matters that spring, didn't it?"

"It seemed so to me," said John.

Nothing more was said for a minute or two. Mr. Harum appeared to have abandoned the pursuit of the subject of his questions. At last he said:

"You ben here most five years."

"Very nearly," John replied.

"Ben putty contented, on the hull?"

"I have grown to be," said John. "Indeed, it's hard to realize at times that I haven't always lived in Homeville. I remember my former life as if it were something I have read in a book. There was a John Lenox in it, but he seems to me sometimes more like a character in a story than myself."

"An' yet," said David, turning toward him, "if you was to go back to it, this last five years 'd git to be that way to ye a good deal quicker. Don't ye think so?"

"Perhaps so," replied John. "Yes," he added thoughtfully, "it is possible."

"I guess on the hull, though," remarked Mr. Harum, "you done better up here in the country 'n you might some 'ers else——"

"Oh, yes," said John sincerely, "thanks to you, I have indeed, and——"

"—an'—ne' mind about me—you got quite a little bunch o' money together now. I was thinkin' 't mebbe you might feel 't you needn't to stay here no longer if you didn't want to."

The young man turned to the speaker inquiringly, but Mr. Harum's face was straight to the front, and betrayed nothing.

"It wouldn't be no more 'n natural," he went on, "an' mebbe it would be best for ye. You're too good a man to spend all your days workin' fer Dave Harum, an' I've had it in my mind fer some time—somethin' like that pork deal—to make you a little independent in case anythin' should happen, an'—gen'ally. I couldn't give ye no money 'cause you wouldn't 'a' took it even if I'd wanted to, but now you got it, why——"

"I feel very much as if you had given it to me," protested the young man.

David put up his hand. "No, no," he said, "all 't I did was to propose the thing to ye, an' to put up a little money fer two three days. I didn't take no chances, an' it's all right, an' it's your'n, an' it makes ye to a certain extent independent of Homeville."

"I don't quite see it so," said John.

"Wa'al," said David, turning to him, "if you'd had as much five years ago you wouldn't 'a' come here, would ye?"

John was silent.

"What I was leadin' up to," resumed Mr. Harum after a moment, "is this: I ben thinkin' about it fer some time, but I haven't wanted to speak to ye about it before. In fact, I might 'a' put it off some longer if things wa'n't as they are, but the fact o' the matter is that I'm goin' to take down my sign."

John looked at him in undisguised amazement, not unmixed with consternation.

"Yes," said David, obviously avoiding the other's eye, "'David Harum, Banker,' is goin' to come down. I'm gettin' to be an' old man," he went on, "an' what with some investments I've got, an' a hoss-trade once in a while, I guess I c'n manage to keep the fire goin' in the kitchin stove fer Polly an' me, an' the' ain't no reason why I sh'd keep my sign up much of any longer. Of course," he said, "if I was to go on as I be now I'd want ye to stay jest as you are; but, as I was sayin', you're to a consid'able extent independent. You hain't no speciul ties to keep ye, an' you ought anyway, as I said before, to be doin' better for yourself than jest drawin' pay in a country bank."

One of the most impressive morals drawn from the fairy tales of our childhood, and indeed from the literature and experience of our later periods of life, is that the fulfilment of wishes is often attended by the most unwelcome results. There had been a great many times when to our friend the possibility of being able to bid farewell to Homeville had seemed the most desirable of things, but confronted with the idea as a reality—for what other construction could he put upon David's words except that they amounted practically to a dismissal, though a most kind one?—he found himself simply in dismay.

"I suppose," he said after a few moments, "that by 'taking down your sign' you mean going out of business——"

"Figger o' speech," explained David.

"—and your determination is not only a great surprise to me, but grieves me very much. I am very sorry to hear it—more sorry than I can tell you. As you remind me, if I leave Homeville I shall not go almost penniless as I came, but I shall leave with great regret, and, indeed—— Ah, well——" he broke off with a wave of his hands.

"What was you goin' to say?" asked David, after a moment, his eyes on the horizon.

"I can't say very much more," replied the young man, "than that I am very sorry. There have been times," he added, "as you may understand, when I have been restless and discouraged for a while, particularly at first; but I can see now that, on the whole, I have been far from unhappy here. Your house has grown to be more a real home than any I have ever known, and you and your sister are like my own people. What you

say, that I ought not to look forward to spending my life behind the counter of a village bank on a salary, may be true; but I am not, at present at least, a very ambitious person, nor, I am afraid, a very clever one in the way of getting on in the world; and the idea of breaking out for myself, even if that were all to be considered, is not a cheerful one. I am afraid all this sounds rather selfish to you, when, as I can see, you have deferred your plans for my sake, and after all else that you have done for me."

"I guess I sha'n't lay it up agin ye," said David quietly.

They drove along in silence for a while.

"May I ask," said John, at length, "when you intend to 'take down your sign,' as you put it?"

"Whenever you say the word," declared David, with a chuckle and a side glance at his companion. John turned in bewilderment.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Wa'al," said David with another short laugh, "fur 's the sign 's concerned, I s'pose we *could* stick a new one over it, but I guess it might 's well come down; but we'll settle that matter later on."

John still looked at the speaker in utter perplexity, until the latter broke out into a laugh.

"Got any idee what's goin' onto the new sign?" he asked.

"You don't mean——"

"Yes, I do," declared Mr. Harum, "an' my notion 's this, an' don't you say aye, yes, nor no till I git through," and he laid his left hand restrainingly on John's knee.

"The new sign 'll read 'Harum & Comp'ny,'

or 'Harum & Lenox,' jest as you elect. You c'n put in what money you got an' I'll put in as much more, which 'll make cap'tal enough in gen'ral, an' any extry money that's needed—wa'al, up to a certain point, I guess I c'n manage. Now putty much all the new bus'nis has come in through you, an' practically you got the hull thing in your hands. You'll do the work about 's you're doin' now, an' you'll draw the same sal-'ry; an' after that's paid we'll go snucks on anythin' that's left—that *is*," added David with a chuckle, "if you feel that you c'n *stan'* it in Homeville."

"I wish you was married to one of our Homeville girls, though," declared Mr. Harum later on as they drove homeward.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SINCE the whooping-cough and measles of childhood the junior partner of Harum & Company had never to his recollection had a day's illness in his life, and he fought the attack which came upon him about the first week in December with a sort of incredulous disgust, until one morning when he did not appear at breakfast. He spent the next week in bed, and at the end of that time, while he was able to be about, it was in a languid and spiritless fashion, and he was shaken and exasperated by a persistent cough. The season was and had been unusually inclement even for that region, where the thermometer sometimes changes fifty degrees in thirty-six hours; and at the time of his release from his room there was a period of successive changes of temperature from thawing to zero and below, a characteristic of the winter climate of Homeville and its vicinity. Dr. Hayes exhibited the inevitable quinine, iron, and all the tonics in his pharmacopœia, with cough mixtures and sundry, but in vain. Aunt Polly pressed bottles of sovereign decoctions and infusions upon him—which were received with thanks and neglected with the blackest ingratitude—and exhausted not only the markets of Homeville, but her own and Sairy's culinary resources (no mean ones, by the way)