

CRIPPS, THE CARRIER

BY
R. D. BLACKMORE
Author of "LORNA DOONE," "ALICE LORRAINE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER IV.—(Continued.)

"This here bend be as good as any other," said Cripps, though himself afraid of it. "What ails you, girl? What hath ailed you, ever since out of Oxford town you come? Is it a jail thou be coming home to? Oxford turns the head of thee."

"Now, Zak, you know better than that. I would liefer be at Beckley any day. But I have been that frightened since I passed this road on Tuesday night, that scarce a morsel could I eat or drink, and never sleep for dreaming."

"Frightened, child! You make me creep by talking so. There, wait till we be in our own lane—can't spare the time now to speak of it."

"Oh, but Zak, if you please, you must. I have had it on my mind so long. And I kept it for you, till we got to the place, that you might go and see to it."

"They had stopped with the off wheel of the cart within a few yards of the gap in the hedge, where Esther began her search that night. She knew the place at a glance, although in the snow it looked so different, and she ran to the gap and peeped as if she expected to see it all again."

In all the beauty of fair earth, few things are more beautiful than snow on clustering ivy leaves. Wednesday's fall had been shaken off; for even in the coldest weather, jealous winds and evaporation soon clear foliage of snow. But a little powdery shed of flakes had come at noon that very day, like the fitting of a fairy; and every delicate star shone crisply in its cupped or pillowed rest. The girl was afraid to shake a leaf, because she had her best bonnet on; therefore she drew back and called the reluctant Zachary to gaze.

"Nort but a sight of snow," said he; "it hath almost filled old quarry up. Harse have rested, and so have we. Shan't be home by candle light. Wugg then, Dobbin. Wugg then, wilt 'a'?"

"Stop, brother, stop. Don't be in such a hurry. Something I must tell you now, that I have been feared to tell anybody else. It was so dreadfully terrible. Do you see anything in the snow down there?"

"As I am a sinner, there be something moving. Jump up into the cart, girl. I shall never get round with my things to-night."

"There is something there, Zak, that will never move again. There is the dead body of a woman there."

"No romantics! No romantics!" the carrier answered as he turned away; but his cheeks beneath a week's growth of beard turned as white as the snow in the buckthorn. No living man might scare him—but a woman, and a dead one—

"Come, Zak," cried Esther, having seen much worse than she was likely now to see; "you cannot be afraid of 'romantics,' Zak. Come here and I will show thee."

Driven by shame and curiosity, the valiant Cripps came back to her, and even allowed himself to be led a little way through the gap into the deep untrodden and drifted snow. She took him as far as a corner, whence the nook of the quarry was visible; and there with trembling fingers pointed to a vast billow of pure white, piled by the driving east wind over the grave, as she thought, of the murdered one.

"Enough," he said, having heard her tale, and becoming at once a man again in the face of something real; "my dear, what a sight thou must have had! How couldst thou have kept it all this time? I would not tell thee our news at home, for fear of terrifying thee in the cold. Hath no one to Oxford told thee?"

"Told me what? Oh, Zak, dear Zak, I am so frightened, I can hardly stand."

"Then run, girl, run. We must go home, fast as ever we can, for constableness."

He took her to the cart, and, reckless of Dobbin's indignation, lashed him up the hill, and made him trot the whole length of Beckley Lane, then threw a sack over his loins, and left his Christmas parcels in the frost and snow, while he hurried to Squire Oglander.

CHAPTER V.

Worth Oglander sat in his old oak chair, weary, and very low of heart, but not altogether broken down. He had not been in bed since last Monday night, and had slept, if at all, in the saddle, or on the roof of the Henley coach. For miles he had scoured the country road, until his three horses quite broke down, with the weather so much against them; and all the bran to be got in the village was made away with in washes.

His daughter, his only child, in whom all the rest of his old life lived and loved, was gone and lost; not even leaving knowledge of where she lay, or surety of a better meeting. His faith in God was true and firm; for on the whole he was a pious man, although no great professor; and if it had pleased the Lord to take his only joy from his old age, he could have tried to bear it.

But thus to lose her, without good-bye, without even knowing how the loss befell, and with the deep misery of doubting what she might herself have done—only a chilly Stoic, or a remarkably warm Christian, could have borne it with resignation. The Squire was neither of these; but only a simple, kind and loving hearted gentleman; with many faults and among them a habit of expecting the Lord to favor him perpetually. And of this he could not quit himself, in the deepest tribulation; but still expected all things to be tempered to his happiness, according to his own ideas of what happiness should be.

And now, in the dusk of this cold day, Squire Oglander sat gazing from the window of his dining room; with his head fallen back, and his waste chin up, and hard-worn hands clasped languidly. His heavy eyes dwelled on the dreary snow that buried his daughter's handiwork—the dwarf plants not to be traced, and the tall ones only as soft hillocks, like the tufts in a great white counterpane. And more and more, as the twilight deepened and the curves of white grew dim, he kept repeating below his voice, "Her winding sheet, her winding sheet; and her pretty eyes wide open, perhaps!"

"Now, sir, if you please, you must—you must," cried Mary Hookham, his best maid, trotting in with her thumbs turned back from a right hot dish, and her lips up as if she were longing to kiss him, to let our her feelings. "Here be a duster, by way of a cloth, not to scorch the table, against Miss Grace comes home again. Sir, if you please, you must ate a bit. Not a bit have you aten sin' Toosday, and it is enough to kill a carrier's horse."

The old man did his best to eat; for he knew that he must keep his strength up, to abide the end of it. And Mary, without asking leave, lit four good candles, and drew the curtains, and made the fire cheerful. "All of us have our troubles," said Mary; "but these here pickles is wonderful."

"You are a good girl," answered the Squire; "and you deserve a good husband. Now, if either the man from Oxford, or young Mr. Overshute should come, show them in directly; but I can see no other person. No more, thank you. Take all away, Mary."

Russel Overshute, the heir of the Overshutes at Shotover, was a young man who could speak for himself, and did it sometimes too strongly. He had long been taken prisoner by the sweet spell of Grace Oglander; and, being of a bold and fearless order, he had so avowed himself. But her father had always been against him; not from personal dislike, but simply because he could not bear his "wild political sentiments." Worth Oglander was as staunch an old Tory as ever stood in buckram, although in social and domestic matters, perhaps, almost too gentle. Radical and rascal were upon his tongue the self-same word; and he passed the salt with the back of his hand to even a mild Reformer. And now the door of the room was thrown open strongly, and in strode Russel Overshute.

"Will you kindly leave the room," he said to the sedulous Mary. "I wish to say a few words to the Squire of a private nature."

The young gentleman was a favorite with maid servants everywhere, because he always spoke to them "just the same as if they was ladies." Mary made a bob of the order still taught at the village school and simpered, and departed. "Shake hands with me, Squire," said Overshute, as Mr. Oglander arose, with cold dignity, and bowed to him. "You have sent for me; I rode over at once, the moment I heard of it. I returned from London this afternoon, having been there for a fortnight. When I heard the news I was thunderstruck. What can I do to help you?"

"I will not shake hands with you," answered the Squire, "until you have solemnly pledged your honor that you know nothing of this—of this—there, I have no word for it!" Mr. Oglander trembled, though his eyes were stern. His last hope of his daughter's life lay in the young man before him; and bitterly as he would have felt the treachery of his only child, and deeply as he despised himself for harboring such a suspicion—yet even that blow would be better than the alternative—the only alternative—her death.

"I should have thought it quite needless," young Overshute answered, with some disdain, until he observed the father's face, so broken down with misery; "from any one but you, sir, it would have been an insult. If you do not know the Overshutes, you ought to know your own daughter."

"But against her will—against her will. Say that you took her against her will. You have been from home. For what else was it? Tell me the truth. Russel Overshute—only the truth, and I will forgive you."

"You haven't anything to forgive, sir. Upon the word of an Englishman, I hadn't even heard of it."

The old man watched his clear, keen eye, with deep tears gathering in his own. Then Russel took his hand and led him tenderly to his hard oak chair.

For a minute or two not a word was said; the young man doubting what to say, and the old one really not caring whether he ever spoke again. At last he looked up and spread both hands, as if he groped forth from a heavy dream; and the rheumatism from so much night-work caught him in both shoulder blades.

"What is it?—what is it?" he cried. "I have lived a long time in this wicked world, and I have not found it painful."

"My dear sir," his visitor answered, pitying him sincerely, and hiding his own deep heartburn of anxiety, "may I say, without your being in the least degree offended, what I fancy—or at least, I mean, a thing that has occurred to me? You will take it for its worth. Most likely you will laugh at it; but taking my chance of that, may I say it? Will you promise not to be angry?"

"I wish I could be angry, Russel. What have I to be angry for?"

"A terrible wrong, if I am right, but not a purely hopeless one. I have not had time to think it out, because I have

been hurried so. But, right or wrong, what I think is this—the whole is a foul scheme of Luke Sharp's."

"Luke Sharp! My own solicitor! The most respectable man in Oxford! Overseer, you have made me hope, and then you dash me with balderdash!"

"Well, sir, I have no evidence at all; but I go by something I heard in London, which supplies the strongest motive; and I know, from my own family affairs, what Luke Sharp will do when he has strong motive. I beg you to keep my guess quite secret. Not that I fear a score of such fellows, but that he would be times craftier if he thought we suspected him; and he is crafty enough without that."

"I will not speak of it," the Squire answered; "such a crochet is not worth speaking of, and it might get you into great trouble. With one thing and another now, I am so knocked about that I cannot put two and two together."

The old man, in spite of fierce anxiety, long suspense and keen excitement, began to be so overpowered with downright bodily weariness that now he could scarcely keep his head from nodding, and his eyes from closing. The hope which had roused him, when Overshute entered, was gone, and despair took place of it; tired body and sad mind had but a very low heart to work them. Russel, with a strong man's pity, and the love which must arise between one man and another, when small vanity vanishes, watched the creeping shades of slumber soften the lines of the harrowed face. As evening steals along a hillside where the sun has tyrannized, and spreads the withering and the wearying of the day with gentleness, and brings relief to rugged points, and breadth of calm to everything, so the Squire's fine old face relaxed in slumber's halo, and tranquil ease began to settle on each yielding lineament; when open flew the door of the room, and Mary, at the top of her voice, exclaimed:

"Plaise, sir, Maister Cripps be here."

CHAPTER VI.

"Confound that Cripps!" young Overshute cried, with irritation getting the better of his larger elements; while the Squire slowly awoke and stared, and rubbed his gray eyelashes, and said that he really was almost falling off, and he ought to be quite ashamed of himself. Then he begged his visitor's pardon and asked what the matter was. "Sir, it is only that fool Cripps," said the young man. "Some trumpery parcel, of course. They might have let you rest for a minute or two."

"No, sir, no! if you please, sir, no!" cried Mary, advancing with her hands up. "Maister Cripps have seen something terrible, and he hath come straight to his Worship. He be that out of breath that he was aforced to lay hold of me, before he could stand a'most! He must have met them sheep stealers!"

"Sheep stealing again!" said Mr. Oglander, who was an active magistrate. "Well, let him come in. I have troubles of my own; but I must attend to my duty."

"Let me attend to it," interposed the other, being also one of the "Great Unpaid." "You must not be pestered with such things now."

"I am much obliged to you," answered the Squire, rising, and looking wide awake; "but I will hear what he has to say myself. Of course, I shall be too glad of your aid, if you are not in a hurry."

Mr. Overshute knew that this fine old Justice, although so good in the main, was not entirely free from foibles, of which there was none more conspicuous than a keen and resolute jealousy; if any brother magistrate dared to meddle with Beckley matters.

At last the signal was passed that Cripps might now come on, and tell his tale; and he felt as if he should have served them right by refusing to say anything. But when he saw the Squire's jovial face drawn thin with misery, and his sturdy form unlike itself, and the soft, puzzled manner in lieu of the old distinct demand to know everything, Zachary Cripps came forward gently, and thought of what he had to tell, with fear.

"What is it, my good fellow?" asked the Squire. "Nothing amiss with your household, I sincerely hope? You are a fortunate man in one thing—you have had no children yet."

"Ay, ay; your Worship is right enough there. The Lord lends they, and He takes them away. And the taking be worse than the giving was good."

"Now, Master Cripps, we must not talk so. All is meant for the best, I doubt."

"Her may be. Her may be," Cripps replied. "The Lord is the one to pronounce upon that, knowing His own maning best. But He do give very hard measure some time to them as have never deserved it. Now there be your poor Miss Grace, for instance. As nice a young lady as ever lived; that humble, too, and gracious always; that 'Cripps,' she would say—my 'Master Cripps,' she always give me my proper title—'Master Cripps,' her always said, 'let me mark it off, in your hat, for you'—no matter whether it was my best hat, or the one with the greasy come through."

"Very well, Cripps. I know all that. It is nothing to what my Grace was. And I hope, with God's blessing, she will do it again. But what is it you are so full of, Cripps?"

The carrier felt in the crown of his hat, and then inside the lining; as if he had something entered there, to help him in his predicament; and after that he could not help himself, but out with everything.

(To be continued.)

Very Good. "Are you on good terms with all your guests?" asked the new arrival at the winter resort.

"Very good terms," chuckled the landlord of the hotel. "About \$10 per day."

A girl should strive to keep her fiancé at a distance—from young widows.

Congressman Cooper of Texas tells about a distinguished army officer who, on one occasion, offered prayer before a regiment. He summed up the causes and objects of the war—the war with Mexico—and asserted that it was no war of conquest, but annexation only, concluding his supplication to the throne of grace with: "I refer you, good Lord, to Polk's message on this subject."

The following notice was posted up recently in an art exhibition in Tokio, Japan: "No visitor who is mad or intoxicated is allowed to enter in, if any person found in shall be claimed to retire. No visitor is allowed to carry in with himself any parcel, umbrella, stick, and the like kind, except his purse, and is strictly forbidden to take within himself dog, or the same kind of beasts. Visitor is requested to take care of himself from thievery."

The English language is supposed to be very simple in the matter of genders. But foreigners who triumphantly handle questions of gender of inanimate things in their own languages often have their difficulties with the English. A Frenchman recently came to grief over his English. "I fear I cockroach too much upon your time, madam," he remarked politely to his hostess. "En-croach, monsieur," she smilingly corrected him. He threw up his hands in despair. "Ah, your English genders!" he sighed.

The originality of some of your expressions is very, very refreshing," said John Morley, the visiting English statesman, in speaking of his observations. "As I was standing at one of the entrances to your new subway in New York, a man passed me who apparently had gone through the demoralizing experience of being part of a jostling, energetic crowd. His companion asked him, 'Well, how do you feel now, after going through the tunnel?' 'I feel as the porker must feel,' answered the man, pushing a few dents out of his hat, 'who has just been forced through a sausage skin.'"

Paul du Chailly, the one-time African explorer, performed a Good Samaritan act one night in assisting along the street a very intoxicated stranger. The man told him where his home was, and after considerable difficulty Du Chailly got him to his door. The bibulous one was very grateful, and wanted to know his helper's name. As the explorer did not particularly care to give his name in full, he merely replied that it was Paul. "So it's—hie—Paul, ish it?" hiccoughed the man, and then, after some moments of apparent thought, inquired, solicitously: "Shay, ol' man, did y'ever get any—hie—any anther to those lo-og letters y' wrote to th' Ephesians?"

Emperor William occasionally hears remarks not intended for his ears. Years ago he used to sound alarms at odd hours, and turn up all available army corps to march past or maneuver when they least expected it—at night, or in the gray of a winter morning. On one such occasion the garrison included a detachment of submarine crews, and the Emperor came along just before dawn accoutered as an admiral. He was standing among a group of shivering officers, when one veteran, approaching him from the rear, took him for some other worthy sailor. He slapped him vehemently on the back. "I see that Gondola Willy has fished up the aquarium this morning," he observed, pleasantly. "They attribute the cessation of sudden alarms to that incident in the army, and have all but canonized that dazed veteran."

Why the Hermit Kingdom.

Oppressed by her neighbors for centuries and overrun with war; her people decimated; her cities, her temples, and her libraries sacked and destroyed; her nobles and maidens driven off to China, and her artisans to Japan; the most ambitious and unscrupulous of her subjects constantly stirred to intrigue and conspiracy by foreign powers, it is small wonder that Korea has endeavored to shut herself off from the world, and, by becoming the "Hermit Kingdom," has effectually barred the way to all progress.—Century.

Self-Confessed.

Eavesdropping at the telephone is much more prevalent than it ever was at the keyhole, for detection is so much less probable. It is said that one sign of eavesdropping is the receding tone of a speaker's voice. Some one has "cut in." Acting on this hint, a woman who had her suspicions aroused, said to her friend suddenly—"Some one is listening." Instantly, from nowhere in particular, in a strange voice came an indignant exclamation—"I'm not doing any such thing!"

Three Women and One Secret.

Ella—Bella told me that you told her that secret I told you not to tell her.

Stella—She's a mean thing! I told her not to tell you! I told her.

Ella—Well, I told her I wouldn't tell you she told me; so don't tell her I did.—Jester.

Revenge.

Witherby—I say, did you recommend that cook of ours to my wife? Plankington—Yes, I believe so. Witherby—Well, I wish you would come and take dinner with

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Asked about the details of his remarkable recovery, Mr. Marston gave the following account: "I was attacked by numbness or dull feeling just back of my right hip. I didn't know what the matter was, but thought it was simply a stiffness that would wear away in a short time. It didn't, however, and soon the pain became so very bad that every step was torture for me. When I finally succeeded in getting home, it was just as much as I could do to reach my room and get to bed."

"The doctor was sent for, and when he had examined me he said I had sciatica. He prescribed for me, and advised me not to try to leave my bed. The advice was unnecessary for I couldn't get out of bed if I wanted to. It was impossible for me to turn from one side to the other. The moment I attempted to move any part of my body, the pain became so excruciating that I would have to lie perfectly motionless."

"I suffered this torture for six months without getting any relief. Then I discharged the doctor, and on the advice of a friend I bought a box of Dr. Williams' Pink Pills and began to take them, three at a dose, three times a day. I was determined to give them a thorough trial."

"Two months after I began to use them I was able to leave my bed and walk about the house, and a month later I was entirely cured and able to go about my work as usual. I think Dr. Williams' Pink Pills are the best medicine I ever used, and I heartily recommend them to anyone who suffers from sciatica."

Mr. Marston is a prosperous farmer and may be reached by mail addressed to Charles P. Marston, Hampton P. O., New Hampshire. Dr. Williams' Pink Pills have cured other painful nervous disorders, such as neuralgia, partial paralysis and locomotor ataxia. They are sold by all druggists.

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