

CRIPPS, THE CARRIER

R. D. BLACKMORE

Author of "LORNA DOONE," "ALICE LORRAINE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

"Poor old Fernage (what with the fungus already in his tubes, and what he was taking down might be talking sheer nonsense for all that I knew. And indeed, for a long time I treated it so, and I had no stomach for a voyage to Oporto, upon mere speculation, and for the benefit only of some pretty girl. Then I found out, by the purest chance, that old 'Port-wine' meant nothing more than the London stores, and agency, of the Oporto Company. And even after that I made one expedition to the Minorities, all for nothing. Two or three very polite young dons stared at me, and thought I was come to chaff them, or perhaps had turned up from their vaults too heavy, when I asked for 'Senior Jolly Fellows.' And so I came away, and lost some months, and might never have thought it worth while to go again, except for another mere accident."

"My dear, what a chapter of accidents!" cried Mrs. Sharp. "I thought you were a great deal too clever to allow any room for accidents."

"Women think so. Men know better," the lawyer replied sententiously. "And, Miranda, you forget that I had as yet no personal interest in the question. But when I happened to have a Portuguese gentleman as a client—a man who had spent many years in England—and happened to be talking of our language to him, I told him one part of the story, and asked if he could throw any light on it. He told me at once that the name which had so puzzled me must be Gelo-blow—a Portuguese surname, by no means common. And the next time I was in town, I had occasion to call in St. John street and found myself, almost by accident again, not far from the company's offices."

"Mr. Sharp, you left such a thing to chance, when you knew that it might pull down that dreadful woman's insolence?"

"My dear, it is not the duty of my life to mitigate feminine arrogance. And to undertake such a crusade, gratis! I am equal to a bold stroke, as you will see, if your patience lasts—but never to such a vast undertaking. When it comes before me, in the way of business, naturally I take it up. But this was no business of my own; and the will was proved, and assets called in; for the old rogue did not owe one penny. Well, I went again, and this time I got hold of the right man— Miranda, I hear the bell."

The new office bell rang as hard as ring it could. A special messenger was come from London, and in half an hour Mr. Luke Sharp was sitting on the box of the night up-mail.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Kit Sharp made his way through back lanes, leading towards the conscientious obscurity of Worcester College, and skirting the coasts of Jericho, dangerously hospitable, he emerged at last in broad St. Giles, without a stone to prate of his whereabouts. Here he went into livery stables, where he was well known, and found the cob Sam at his service. Kit knew his value, and his lasting powers, and sagacious gratitude; and whenever he wanted a horse trustworthy in patience, obedience and wit, he always took brown Sam. To Sam it was a treat to carry Kit, because of the victuals ordered at almost every lenient stage; and the grand largesse of oats and beans was more than he could get for a week in stable. And so he set forth, with a spirited neigh, on the Giddington road, to cross the Cherwell, and make his way towards Weston. The heart of Christopher burned within him whenever he thought of his mother; but a man is a man for all that, and cannot be tied to apron strings. So Kit shook his whip, and the Cairngorm flashed in the sun, and the spirit of youth did the same. He was certain to see the sweet maid to-day, knowing her manners and customs, and when she was ordered forth for her mossy walk upon the margin of the wood.

The soft sun hung in the light of the wood, as if he were guided by the breeze and air; and gentle warmth flowed through the alleys, where the nesting pheasant ran. Little fluttering, timid things, that meant to be leaves, please God, some day, but had been baffled and beaten about so, that their faith was shrunk to hope; little rifts of cover also keeping beauty coiled inside, and ready to open, like a bivalve shell, to the pulse of the summer tide, and then to be sweet blossom; and the ground below them pressing upward with ambition of young green; and the sky above them spread with liquid blue behind white pillows.

But these things are not well to be seen without just entering into the wood; and in doing so there can be no harm, with the light so inviting, and the way so clear. Grace had a little idea that perhaps she had better stop outside the wood, but still that walk was within her bounds, and her orders were to take exercise; and she saw some very pretty flowers there; and if they would not come to her, she had nothing to do but to go to them. Still she ought to have known that now things had changed from what they were a little as a week ago; that a dotted veil of innumerable buds would hang between her and the good Miss Patch, while many forward trees were casting quite a shade of mystery. Nevertheless, she had no fear. If anybody did come near her, it would only be somebody thoroughly afraid of her. For now she knew, and was proud to know,

that Kit was the prey of her bow and spear.

Whether she cared for him or not was a wholly different question. But in her dismal dullness and long, wearisome seclusion, the finest possible chance was offered for any young gentleman to meet her, and make acquaintance of nature's doing. At first she kept this to herself, in dread of conceit and vanity; but when it outgrew accident, she told "Aunt Patch" the whole affair, and asked what she was to do about it. Thereupon she was told to avoid the snares of childish vanity, to look at the back of her looking glass, and never dare to dream again that any one could be drawn by her.

Her young mind had been eased by this, although with a good deal of pain about it; and it made her more venturesome to discover whether the whole of that superior estimate of herself was true. Whether she was so entirely vain or stupid, whenever she looked at herself; and whether it was so utterly and bitterly impossible that anybody should come miles and miles for the simple pleasure of looking, for one or two minutes, at herself.

Suddenly at a corner, where the whole of the ground fell downward, and grass was overhanging grass so early in the season, and sapling shoots from the self-same stool stood a yard above each other, and down in the hollow a little brook sang of its stony troubles to the whispering reeds—here Grace Oglender happened to meet a very fine young man indeed. The astonishment of these two might be seen, at a moment's glance, to be mutual. The maiden, by gift of nature, was the first to express it, with dress, and hand, and eye. She showed a warm eagerness to retire; yet waited half a moment for the sake of proper dignity.

Kit looked at her with a clear intuition that now was his chance of chances to make certain sure of her. If he could only now be strong, and take her consent for granted, and so induce her to set seal to it, she never would withdraw; and the two might settle the rest at their leisure.

He loved the young lady with all his heart; and beyond that he knew nothing of her, except that she was worthy. But she had not given her heart as yet; and with natural female common sense, she would like to know a great deal more about him before she said too much to him. Also in her mind—if not in her heart—there was a clearer likeness of a very different man—a man who was a man in earnest, and walked with a stronger and firmer step, and lurked behind no corners.

"This path is so extremely narrow," Miss Oglender said, with a very pretty blush, "and the ground so steep, that I fear I must put you to some little inconvenience. But if I hold carefully by this branch, perhaps there will be room for you to pass."

"You are most kind and considerate," he answered, as if he were in peril of a precipice; "but I would not for the world give you such trouble. And I don't want to go any further now. I cannot matter in the least, I do assure you."

"But surely you must have been going somewhere. You are most polite. But I cannot think for one moment of turning you back like this."

"Then may I sit down? I feel a little tired; and the weather has suddenly become so warm. Don't you think it is very trying?"

"To people who are not very strong perhaps it is. But surely it ought not to be so to you."

"Well, I must not put all the blame upon the weather. There are so many other things much worse. If I could only tell you!"

"Oh, I am so very sorry. I had no idea you had such troubles. It must be so sad for you, while you are so young."

"Yes, I suppose many people call me young. And perhaps to the outward eye I am so. But no one except myself can dream of the anxieties that prey upon me."

Christopher, by this time, was growing very crafty, as the above speech of his will show. The paternal gift was awaking within him, but softened by maternal goodness; so that it was not likely to be used with much severity. And now at the end of his speech he sighed, and without any thought laid his hand right on the rich heart of his velvet waistcoat, where beautiful forget-me-nots were blooming out of willow leaves. Then Grace could not help thinking how that trouble-worn right hand had been uplifted in her cause, and had descended on the rabbit man. And although she was most anxious to discourage the present vein of thought, she could not suppress one little sigh—sweeter music to the ear of Kit than ever had been played or dreamed.

"Now would you really like to know?—you are so wonderfully good," he continued, with his eyes cast down, and every possible appearance of excessive misery; "would you, I mean, do your best, not only not to be offended, but to pity and forgive me, if, or rather supposing that I were to endeavor to explain what—that it is, who—who she is—no, no, I do not quite mean that. I scarcely know how to express myself. Things are too many for me. Surely you know who it is that I want?"

"How can I imagine that?"

"Why, you, only you, only you, sweet Grace. I should like to see the whole earth swallowed up, if only you and I were left together."

Grace Oglender blushed at the power

of his words, and the pressure of his hand on hers. Then, having plenty of her father's spirit, she fixed her bright, sensible eyes on his face, so that he saw that he had better stop. "I am afraid that it is no good," he said.

"I am very much obliged to you," answered Grace, with her fair cheeks full of color, and her hands drawn carefully back to her sides; "but will you be kind enough to stand up, and let me speak for a moment? I believe that you are very good, and I may say harmless, and you have helped me in the very kindest way, and I never shall forget your goodness. Ever since you came, I am sure, I have been glad to think of you; and your dogs, and your gun, and your fishing rod, reminded me of my father; and I am very, very sorry, that what you have just said will prevent me from thinking any more about you, or coming anywhere into any kind of places, where there are trees like this, again. I ought to have done it—at least, I mean, I never ought to have done it at all; but I did think that you were so nice; and now you have undeceived me. I know who your father is very well, although I have seldom seen him; and though I dislike the law, I declare that would not have mattered very much to me. But you do not even know my name, as several times you have proved to me; and now you can ride thirty miles from Oxford, in all sorts of weather, without being tired, and your dogs so fresh, has always been a puzzle to me."

"Thirty miles from Oxford?" Christopher Sharp cried in great amazement; for in the very lowest condition of the heart figures will maintain themselves.

"Yes, thirty miles, or thirty leagues. Sometimes I hear one thing, and sometimes the other."

"Where are you standing now is about seven miles and three-quarters from Summertown gate."

"Surely, Mr. Sharp, you are laughing at me! How far am I from Beckley, then, according to your calculation?"

"How did you ever hear of Beckley? It is quite a little village. A miserable little place."

"Indeed, then, it is not. It is the very finest place in all the world; or, at any rate, the nicest, and the dearest, and the prettiest."

"But how can you, just come from America, have such an opinion of such a little hole?"

"A little hole! Why, it stands on a hill. You never can have been near it, if you think of calling it a 'hole.' And as for my coming from America, you seem to have no geography. I never have been further away from darling Beckley, to my knowledge, than I am now."

Kit Sharp looked at her with greater amazement than that with which she looked at him. And then with one accord they spied a fat man coming along the hollow, and trying not to glance at them. With keen young instinct they knew that this villain was purely intent upon watching them.

"Come again, if you please, to-morrow," said Grace, while pretending to gaze at the clouds; "you have told me such things that I never shall sleep. Come earlier, and wait for me. Not that you must think anything; only that now you are bound, as a gentleman, to go on with what you were telling me."

CHAPTER XIX.

The old Squire sat in his bower chair with a warm cloak over his shoulders. His age was threescore and ten this day; and he looked back through the length of years, and marvelled at their fleeting. The stirring times of his youth, and the daily perils of his prime of life, and the slow promotion, the heavy disappointment, and the forced retirement from the army when the wars were over, with only the rank of major, which he preferred to sink in squire—because he ought to have been, according to his own view of the matter, a good lieutenant general—and then a very short golden age of five years and a quarter, from his wedding day to the death of his wife, a single and sweet-hearted wife—and after that the soft, and gentle, and undreamed-of step of comfort, coming almost faster than was welcome, while his little daughter grew.

After that the old man tried to think no more, but be content. To let the little scenes of dancing, and of asking, and of listening, and of looking puzzled, and of waiting to know truly whether all was earnest, and of raising from the level of papa's well-buttoned pocket clear bright eyes that did not know a guinea from a halfpenny; and then, with a very extraordinary spring, the jumping into opened arms, and the laying on of little lips, and the murmurs of delighted love—to let his recollections of all these die out, and to do without them, was this old man's business now.

To this belief and mild incline of gentle age, his head was bowing and his white hair settling down, according as the sun, or wind, or clouds, or time of day desired, when some one darkened half his light, and there stood Mary Hookham.

Mary had the newest of all new spring fashions on her head, and breast, and waist, and everywhere. A truly spirited girl was she, as well as a very handy one; and she never thought twice of a sixpence or shilling, if a soiled paper pattern could be had for it. And now she was busy with half a guinea, kindly beginning to form its impress on her moist hard-working palm.

(To be continued.)

His Reason.

"I never give a lady my seat in a street car."

"Then, sir, you are no gentleman."

"I always ride on the platform."—Cleveland Plain Dealer.

When you begin to tell your troubles to a man he nearly always interrupts you for the purpose of telling you his.

Talk about the misery of Russia; it looks mighty small to a woman who is losing all her hair.

When a fellow says that he is wedded to his art—alone, it is a sign that some woman is to be congratulated on her escape.

The shah of Persia has placed another order for six high-class automobiles in Paris. The value of the order is said to be \$28,000.

When a working man turns over his entire week's wages to his wife she wonders if his salary hasn't been recently raised.

One reason why women don't take a more active interest in the female suffrage question is that they suffer enough already.

Women will discuss the divorce question among themselves, but they are willing for the men to do the asking for publication.

Truthfulness is the cornerstone in character, and if it be not firmly laid in youth, there will ever after be a weak spot in the foundation.

A Subject for Chiropody.

General Nelson A. Miles relates the story of a cowboy guide who put up one night at a tavern that was, by reason of some festivity in the little town in which it was located, taxed to its capacity. The guide found himself placed in a room with a stranger, but the tavern keeper assured him that the arrangement would prove satisfactory for the reason that his bedfellow was a mild-mannered man from the East. Somewhat tired, the guide retired early. Determined to have at least his half of the bed, he strapped his spurs to his ankles. Apparently the Eastern man, when he eventually went to bed, was seriously inconvenienced, for during the night he awoke the guide and said:

"Pardon me, sir; but, if you're a gentleman, you will trim your toe nails."—Success Magazine.

Johnny on Twins.

When asked to write a short composition on some interesting experience, Johnny, after much labor, handed his teacher the following:

"Twins is a baby, only it's double. It usually arrives about 4:37 in the morning when a fellow is getting in his best licks sleepin'. Twins is accompanied by excitement and a doctor. When twins do ennything wrong, their mother can't tell which one to lick, so she gives it to both of 'em so as to make sure. We've got twins to our house, and I'd swap 'em enny day fer a billy goat or mos' ennything."—Success Magazine.

Why He Rejoiced.

Mrs. Peck—Jones, the grocer, is going to get married next week.

Peck—Good! For years I have been hoping against hope that some terrible calamity would befall that man.

Mrs. Peck—Why, Henry, how can you say that? He used to be an admirer of mine.

Peck—That's just it. He admired but didn't marry you.

It's up to young men with the engagement ring habit to boycott the diamond trust.

SADIE ROBINSON,
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Address Dr. S. B. Hartman, President of the Hartman Sanitarium, Columbus, O., for free medical advice. All correspondence strictly confidential.

vicroy. He is one of the wealthiest peers, and at one time was celebrated as an amateur rider on the turf.

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