

THE RED CLOUD CHIEF.

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RED CLOUD. NEBRASKA.

AN OLD MAN'S LOVE.

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CHAPTER XIII.—CONTINUED.

"Don't chaff, because I'm in earnest. Katie Forrester will be in by the very train that was to take you on to London, and I'm to wait and put her into Mr. Hall's carriage. One of the daughters, I don't doubt, will be there, and you can wait and see her if you like to. If you'll get your bag ready, the coachman will take it with Katie's luggage. There's the Park carriage coming down the street now. I'll go out and stop old Steedypace, the coachman; only don't you keep him long, because I shouldn't like Katie to find that there was no one to look after her at the station."

There seemed to be an opening in all this for John Gordon to remain at any rate a day longer in the neighborhood of Mary Lawrie, and he determined that he would avail himself of the opportunity. He, therefore, together with his friend Blake, saw the coachman, and gave instructions as to finding the bag at the station, and prepared himself to walk out to the Park. "You can go down to the station," he said to Blake, "and ride back with the carriage."

"Of course I shall see you up, at the house," said Blake. "Indeed, I've been asked to do this while Katie is with them. Nothing could be more hospitable than Mr. Hall and his four daughters. I'd give you some advice, only I really don't know which you'd like the best. There is a sort of simony about them; but that's far off when you come to know them. I have heard people say that the two eldest are very much alike. If that be so, perhaps you'll like the third the best. The third is the neatest, as her hair may be a shade darker than the others. I really must be of now, as I wouldn't for worlds that the train should come in before I'm on the platform." With that he went into the yard, and at once trotted off on his coat.

Gordon paid his bill, and started to Little Arlesford Park. Looking back he could just remember to have heard his father speak of Mr. Hall. But that was all. His father was now dead, and, certainly, he thought, had not mentioned the name for many years. But the invitation was civil, and, as he was to remain in the neighborhood, it might be that he should again have an opportunity of seeing Mary Lawrie or Mr. Whittlestaff. He found that Little Arlesford Park lay between the town and Mr. Blake's church, so that he was at the gate sooner than he expected. He went in, and, having time on his hands, deviated from the road and went up a hill, which was, indeed, one of the downs, though between the park palings. Here he saw deer feeding, and he came after a while to a beech grove. He had now gone down the hill on the other side, and found himself close to a pretty laborer's cottage as he remembered ever to have seen. It was still June, and it was hot, and he had been on his legs nearly the whole morning. Then he began to talk, or rather think, to himself. "What a happy fellow is that man Mr. Blake! He has everything that he wants. The work of his life is merely play. He is going to marry a wife—not who is, but whom he thinks to be, perfect. He looks as though he were never ill a day in his life. How would he do if he were grubbing for diamonds amid the mud and dust of Kimberley? Instead of that, he can throw himself down on such a spot as this, and meditate his sermon among the beech-trees." Then he began to think whether the sermon could be made to have some flavor of the beech-trees, and how much better in that case it would be, and as he so thought fell asleep.

He had not been asleep long, perhaps five minutes, when he became aware in his slumber that an old man was standing over him. One does thus become conscious of things before the moment of waking has arrived, so positively as to give to the sleeper a false sense of the reality of existence. "I wonder whether you can be Mr. Gordon?" said the old man.

"But I am," said Gordon. "I wonder how you know me."

"Because I expect you." There was something very mysterious in this—which, however, lost all mystery as soon as he was sufficiently awake to think of things. "You are Mr. Blake's friend."

"Yes; I am Mr. Blake's friend."

"And I am Mr. Hall. I didn't expect to find you sleeping here, in Gar Wood. But when I find a strange gentleman asleep in Gar Wood, I put two and two together, and conclude that you must be Mr. Gordon."

"It's the prettiest spot in all the world, I think."

"Yes; we are rather proud of Gar Wood—especially when the deer are browsing on the hill-side to the left, as they are now. If you want to go to sleep again, we'll walk up to the house. There's the carriage. I can hear the wheels. The girls have gone down to fetch your friend's bride. Mr. Blake is very fond of his bride—as I dare say you have found out."

Then, as the two walked together to the house, Mr. Hall explained that there had been some little difference years gone by between old Mr. Gordon and himself, as to money. "I was very sorry, but I had to look after myself. You know nothing about it—I dare say."

"I have heard your name—that's all."

"I need not say anything more about it," said Mr. Hall; "only, when I heard that you were in the country, I was very glad to have the opportunity of seeing you. Blake tells me that you know my friend Whittlestaff?"

"I did not know him till yesterday morning."

"Then you know the young lady there: a charming young lady she is. My girls are extremely fond of Mary Lawrie. I hope we may get them to come over while you are staying here."

"I can only remain one night, or at most two, Mr. Hall."

"Pooch! We have other places in the neighborhood to show you quite as pretty as Gar Wood. Though that's a bounce: I don't think there is any morsel quite so choice as Gar Wood when the deer are there. What an eye you must have, Mr. Gordon, to have made it out yourself at once; but then, after all, it only put you to sleep. I wonder whether the Rookery will put you to sleep. We go in this way, so as to escape the formality of the front door,

and I'll introduce you to my daughters and Miss Forrester."

CHAPTER XIII.

AT LITTLE ARLESFORD.

Mr. Hall was a pleasant English gentleman, now verging upon seventy years of age, who had "never had a headache in his life"; as he was wont to boast, but when well, especially, as one who did not intend to have many headaches. He certainly did not intend to make his headache by the cares of the work of the world. He was very well off—that is to say, that with many thousands a year, he managed to live upon half. This he had done for very many years, because the estate was entailed on a distant relative, and because he had not chosen to leave his children paupers. When the girls came he immediately resolved that he would never go up to London—and kept his resolve. Not above once in three or four years was it supposed to be necessary that he showed his head to a London hair-dresser. He was quite content to have a gentleman cut out from Arlesford and to pay £100, including it, to the coachman. His tenants were all very kind to him, and setting after dinner, Mr. Hall suggested that Mr. Whittlestaff and Miss Lawrie should be asked over to dine on the next day. John Gordon had already promised to stay until the third, and had known his intention of going back to South Africa as soon as he could arrange matters. "I've got nothing to keep me here," he said, "and as there is a good deal of money at stake, I should be glad to be there as soon as possible."

"Oh, come! I don't know about you having nothing to keep you here," said Blake. "But to Mr. Hall's proposition regarding the inhabitation of Croker's Lodge, Gordon did nothing. He could not object to the guests who a gentleman might call his own house; it was thought improbable that either Mr. Whittlestaff or Mary should come. If he chose to appear, and to bring her with him, it must be his own lookout. At any rate, he, Gordon, could say and could do nothing on such an occasion. He had been betrayed into telling his secret to this gallant young person. There was no help for split milk; but it was not probable that Mr. Blake would go any further, and he at any rate must be content to bear the man's society for one other evening. 'I don't see why you shouldn't manage to make things pleasant even yet,' said the person. But to this John Gordon made no reply.

In the evening some of the sisters played a few pieces at the piano, and Miss Forrester sang a few songs. Mr. Hall in the meantime went fast asleep. The four daughters had two saddle-horses between them, and the father had another for his own use. He did not hunt—and living in that part of Hampshire, he did not go hunting. He did shoot a terrier or a pheasant, or a partridge, with Mr. Blake, and perhaps Mr. Whittlestaff, and would bring home three pheasants, for participants a hare, and a quantity of rabbits that the cook might have ordered.

He kept a carriage for his four daughters, and did not tell all the world that the horses spent a fair proportion of their time at the plow. The four daughters had two saddle-horses between them, and the father had another for his own use. He did not hunt—and living in that part of Hampshire, he did not go hunting. He did shoot a terrier or a pheasant, or a partridge, with Mr. Blake, and perhaps Mr. Whittlestaff, and would bring home three pheasants, for participants a hare, and a quantity of rabbits that the cook might have ordered.

"Don't you think she's a beautiful girl?" said Blake, coming to Gordon's room after they had all retired to bed. "Such goodness, and such a bright, and sprightly young woman, is quite perfect—absolutely not what it ought to be, I do know something about singing myself, because I've had all the parish voices under my own charge for the last three years. A practice like that goes a long way, you know." To this Mr. Gordon could only give that assent which silence is intended to imply. "She'll have £10,000 at once, you know, which does make her in a manner equal to either of the Miss Halls. I don't quite know that they'll have, but not more than that, I should think. The property is entailed, and he's a saving man. But if he can have put by £20,000 he has done very well; don't you think so?"

"Very well, indeed." "I suppose I might have had one of them, I don't mind telling you in strictest confidence. But goodness gracious, after I had seen Katie Forrester, there was no longer a doubt. I wish you'd tell me what you think about her."

"About Miss Forrester?" "You needn't mind speaking quite openly to me. I'm that sort of a fellow that I shouldn't mind what any fellow said. I've formed my own ideas, and am not likely to change them. But I should like to hear, you know, how she sings as a fellow who has been at the diamond fields. I can't imagine but that you must have a different idea about women to what we have." Then Mr. Blake sat himself down in an armchair at the foot of the bed and prepared to discuss the opinion which he did not doubt that his friend was about to desire.

"A very nice young woman, indeed," said John Gordon, who was anxious to go to bed. "As he said this he laid his hand on his heart. "Ah, you know, that's a kind of thing that anybody can say. There's no real friendship in that. I want to know the true, candid opinion of a man who has travelled about the world, and been at the diamond-fields. It isn't everybody who has been at the diamond-fields," continued he, thinking that he might thereby flatter his friend.

There Gordon met the young ladies with the clergyman, and had to undergo the necessary introductions. He thought that he could perceive at once that his story, as it regarded Mary Lawrie, had been told to all of them. Gordon was quick, and could learn from the manners of his companions what had been said about him, and could perceive that they were aware of something of his story. Blake had no such quickness, and could attribute none of it to anyone.

"I am very proud to have pleasure in making you acquainted with these five young ladies. As he said this he laid his hand on his heart. "Ah, you know, that's a kind of thing that anybody can say. There's no real friendship in that. I want to know the true, candid opinion of a man who has travelled about the world, and been at the diamond-fields. It isn't everybody who has been at the diamond-fields," continued he, thinking that he might thereby flatter his friend.

"Just so. It's only a variation in terms, you know." "But then her manner, her music, her language, her wit, and the color of her hair? When I remember it all, I think I'm the luckiest fellow in the world. I shall be a deal happier with her than with Augusta Hall. Don't you think so?" Augusta was the one intended for me; but, bless you, it's all right, without telling," continued the father.

"I can't see it, for the life of me," said Mr. Blake. He evidently thought that civility demanded such an assertion. Mr. Gordon, looking at the two young ladies, felt that he would never know them apart, though he might live in the house for a year.

"And this is Mary. Mary considers herself to be quite the hope of the family," said Blake. "Ha, ha!"

"What does *grecie* mean? I'm sure I don't know," said Mary. The four young ladies were about thirty, varying up from thirty to thirty-five.

They were fair-haired, healthy young women, with good common sense, not beautiful, though very like their father."

"And I must introduce you to Miss Forrester," Katie Forrester, "said Mr. Blake, who was beginning to think that his own young lady was being left out in the cold."

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Hall. "As I had begun with my own, I was obliged to go to the other, Miss Forrester."

"Papa, what nonsense you do talk!" said Mr. Blake. He evidently thought that civility demanded such an assertion.

Mr. Gordon, looking at the two young ladies, felt that he would never know them apart, though he might live in the house for a year.

"Indeed I have," said John Gordon.

"Well, I should be more free-spoken than that, if you were to ask me about Mary Lawrie. But then, of course, Mary Lawrie is not your engaged one. It does make a difference. If it does turn out that she marries Mr. Whittlestaff, I shan't think much of her. I can tell you that. As it is, as far as looks are concerned, you can't compare her to Katie."

"Comparisons are odious," said Gordon.

"Well, yes; when you are sure to get the worst of them. You wouldn't think comparisons odious if you were going to marry Katie, and it was my lot to have Mary Lawrie. Well, yes; I don't mean to go to her, as you have done with such as that."

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Hall. "As I had begun with my own, I was obliged to go to the other, Miss Forrester."

"Mr. Gordon, Miss Forrester is a young lady whose promotion has been fixed in the world."

"Then she is the third," continued Mr. Blake, who was beginning to think that his own young lady was being left out in the cold."

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Hall. "As I had begun with my own, I was obliged to go to the other, Miss Forrester."

"Papa, what nonsense you do talk!" said Mr. Blake.

"Off and on in the summer-time," said Augusta. "Of course he could not much injure us as to say that. You take away from it the chance of changing my mind."

"Yes," said the oldest Miss Hall; "and Mr. Gordon the possibility of changing his. Mr. Gordon, what a sad thing it is that Mr. Harbottle should never have had an opportunity of seeing his old parish once again."

"I never knew him," said Gordon.

"But he had been here nearly fifty years. And then to leave the parish without seeing it any more. It's very sad when you look at it in that light."

"He has never resided here permanently for a quarter of a century," said Mr. Blake.

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