

THE RED CLOUD CHIEF

A. C. HOSMER, Publisher.

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA.

AN OLD MAN'S LOVE

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"The Popish Prayer," "Phineas Finn,"
"The Irish Member," "The Warden,"
"Barchester Towers," Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER XXII.—CONTINUED.

He went to his club, but the first person who came to him was Mr. Whittlestaff. Mr. Whittlestaff, when he had left the park, had determined never to see John Gordon again, or to see him only during that ceremony of the marriage, which it might be that he would even escape. All that was still in the distant future. Dim ideas as to some means of avoiding it, fitted through his brain. But even though he had seen Gordon on that terrible occasion, he need not speak to him. And it would have to be done then, and then only. But now another idea, certainly very vague, had found its way into his mind, and with the object of carrying it out, Mr. Whittlestaff had come to the club. "Oh, Mr. Whittlestaff, how do you do again?"

"I'm much the same as I was before, thank you. There hasn't happened anything to improve my health," "I hope nothing may happen to injure it."

"It doesn't much matter. You said something about some property you've got in diamonds, and you said once that you must go out to look after it?" "But I'm not going now. I shall sell my share in the mines. I am going to see a Mr. Fooker about it immediately."

"Can't you sell them to me?"

"The diamond shares—to you?"

"Why not to me? If the thing has to be done at once, of course you and I must trust each other. I suppose you can trust me."

"Certainly I can." "As I don't care much about it, whether I get what I buy or not, it does not much matter for me. But, in truth, such an affair as this, I would trust you. Why should not I go in your place?"

"I don't think you are the man who ought to go there."

"I am too old? I'm not a crippler, if you mean that. I don't see why I shouldn't go to the diamond-fields as well as a younger man."

"It is not about your age, Mr. Whittlestaff; but I do not think you would be happy there."

"Happy! I do not know that my state of bliss here is very great. If I had bought your shares, as you call them, and paid money for them, I don't see why my happiness need stand in the way."

"You are a gentleman, Mr. Whittlestaff."

"Well, I hope so."

"And of that kind that you would have your eyes picked out of your head before you had been there a week. Don't go. Take my word for it, that life will be pleasanter to you here than there, and that for you the venture would be altogether dangerous. Here is Mr. Tooley." At this point of the conversation Mr. Tooley entered the hall, in some fashion of introduction took place between the two strangers. John Gordon led the way into a private room, and the two others followed him. "Here's a gentleman anxious to buy my shares, Tooley, said Gordon.

"What's the whole lot of the old Stick-in-the-Mud? He'll have to shell down some money in order to do that? If I were to ask my opinion, I should say that the transaction was hardly out in the gentleman's way of business."

"I suppose an honest man may work at it," said Mr. Whittlestaff.

"It's the honestest business I know out," said Fitzwakker Tooley, "but it does require a gentleman to have his eyes about him."

"Haven't I got my eyes?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly," said Tooley. "I never knew a gentleman have them brighter. And there are eyes and eyes. Here's Mr. Gordon did have a stroke of luck out there—quite wonderful! But because he tumbled over a stone, it's no reason others should. And he's sold his claim already, if he doesn't go himself—either to me or else to Poker & Hodge."

"I'm afraid it is so," said John Gordon.

"There's my darling wife, who is going out with me, and who means to stand all the hardship of the hard work amidst those scenes of constant labor—a lady who is dying to see her babies there. I am sure, sir, that Mr. Gordon won't forget his promises to me and my wife."

"If you have the money ready."

"There is Mr. Poker in a hansom-cab outside, and ready to go with you to the bank at once, as the matter is rather pressing. If you will come with him, he will explain everything. I will follow in another cab, and then everything can be completed." John Gordon did make an appointment to meet Mr. Poker in the city later on in the day, and then was left together with Mr. Whittlestaff at the club.

It was soon decided that Mr. Whittlestaff should give up all idea of the diamond-fields, and in so doing he allowed himself to be brought back to a state of semi-courteous conversation with his happy rival. "Well, yes; you may write to her, I suppose. Indeed, I don't know what right I have to say that you may or may not. She's more yours than mine, I suppose." "Turn her out! I don't know what makes you take such an idea as that in your head." John Gordon had not suggested that Mr. Whittlestaff would turn Mary Lawrie out—though he had spoken of the steps he would have taken were he to find Mary left without a home. "She shall have my house as her own till she can find another. As she will not be my wife, she shall be my daughter—till she is somebody else's wife. I told you before that you may come and marry her. Indeed I can't help myself. Of course you may or may not wish to be with some other girl. You may go and stay with Montague Blake, or you may please to be with me. Everybody knows it now." Then he did say good-bye, though he could not be persuaded to shake hands with John Gordon.

Mr. Whittlestaff did not go home that day, but on the next morning in town till he was driven out of it by twenty-four hours of absolute misery. He had said to himself that he would remain till he could think of some future plan of life that should have in it some better promise of success for him than his sudden scheme of going to the diamond-fields. But there was no other plan which became practicable in his eyes. On the afternoon of the very next day

London was no longer bearable to him; and as there was no other place but Croker's Hall to which he could take himself with any prospect of meeting friends who would know anything of his way of life, he did go down on the following day. One consequence of this was that Mary had received from her lover the letter which he had written almost as soon as he had received Mr. Whittlestaff's permission to write. The letter was as follows:

"DEAR MARY—I do not know whether you are surprised by what Mr. Whittlestaff has told you. I am not. I have always known how to write to you in my very simple language. You are a dear child, and who is a perfect stranger to me—it does seem to me that I am assuming a great deal. For I am not in a position to do for you what I have done for myself. I should say to him that you refuse to come to me at his bidding."

"You may say what you like." He answered her crossly, and she heard the tone. But he was aware of it also, and felt that he was disgracing himself. There was none of his half-hour of joy that he had promised himself. He had struggled so hard to give her everything, and he might, at any rate, have perfected his gift with good humor. "You know you have my full permission," he said, with a smile. But he was aware that this smile was not pleasant—not was it such a smile as would make her happy. But it did not signify. When he was gone away, utterly absorbed, then she would be happy.

"I do not know that I want your permission."

"No; no; I dare say not."

"You asked me to be your wife."

"Yes; I did."

"And I accepted you. The matter was settled then."

"But you told me of him—even at first. And you told me that you would always think of him."

"Yes. I told you what I knew to be true. But I accepted you; and I determined to love you with all my heart—with all my heart."

"And you knew that you would love him without any determination."

"I think that I have myself under more control, I think that in time—in a little time—I would have done my duty by you perfectly."

"As how?"

"Loving you with all my heart."

"And now?" It was a hard question to put to her, and so unnecessary!

"To put you to her, and so unnecessary!

"I beg you to distract me somewhat."

"What's the name of Mr. Whittlestaff?"

"He but contrives to do so in such a way that I can take it only as the expression of regret that you do not like him. But he is a good man, and I don't have a right to assume that it is so. I told him that it was so down at Croker's Hall, and he did not contradict me. He is the most indolent of men, and has allowed all your secrets to escape from his breast. He has told me that you love me, and that you are good to me in speaking to you of my love."

"But, Mary, why should there be any mistake? You are a good woman, and when I speak of you I mean to receive your expression of self-accusation that I have ever met."

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