

Nervous

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CAMERON BLOCK.

JOHN HUXFORD'S HIATUS.

BY A. CONAN DOYLE.

Strange it is and wonderful to mark how upon this planet of ours the smallest and most insignificant of events set a train of consequences in motion which acts and reacts until their final results are portentous and incalculable. Set a force rolling, however small, and who can say where it shall end, or what it may lead to? Trifles develop into tragedies, and the bagatelle of one day ripens into the catastrophe of the next. An oyster throws out a secretion to surround a grain of sand, and so a pearl comes into being; a pearl diver fishes it up, a merchant buys it and sells it to a jeweler, who disposes of it to a customer. The customer is robbed of it by two scoundrels who quarrel over the booty. One slays the other, and perishes himself upon the scaffold. Here is a direct chain of events with a sick mollusk for its first link, and a gallows for its last one. Had that grain of sand not chanced to wash in between the shells of the bivalve, two living, breathing beings with all their potentialities for good and for evil would not have been blotted out from among their fellows. Who shall undertake to judge what is really small and what is great?

Thus when in the year 1821 Don Diego Salvador bethought him that if it paid the heretics in England to import the bark of his cork oaks, it would pay him also to found a factory by which the corks might be cut and sent out ready made, surely at first sight no very vital human interests would appear to be affected. Yet there were poor folk who would suffer, and suffer acutely—women who would weep, and men who would become sallow and hungry-looking and dangerous in places of which he had never heard, and all on account of that one idea which had flashed across him as he strolled, cigarette in hand, beneath the grateful shades of his limes. So crowded is this old globe of ours, and so interwoven our interests, that one can not think a new thought without some poor devil being the better or the worse for it. Don Diego Salvador was a capitalist, and the abstract thought soon took the concrete form of a square, plastered building wherein a couple of hundred of his swarthy countrymen worked with deft, nimble fingers at a rate of pay which no English artisan could have accepted. Within a few months the result of this new competition was an abrupt fall of prices in the trade, which was serious for the largest firms and disastrous for the smaller ones. A few old-established houses held on as they were, others reduced their establishments and cut down their expenses, while one or two put up their shutters and confessed themselves beaten. In this last unfortunate category was the ancient and respected firm of Fairbairn Brothers of Brisport.

Several causes had led up to this disaster, though Don Diego's debut as a cork-cutter had brought matters to a head. When a couple of generations back the original Fairbairn had founded the business, Brisport was a little fishing town with no outlet or occupation for her superfluous population. Men were glad to have safe and continuous work upon any terms. All this was altered now, for the town was expanding into the center of a large district in the west, and the demand for labor and its remuneration had proportionately increased. Again, in the old days, when carriage was ruinous and communication slow, the vintners of Exeter and of Barnstaple were glad to buy their corks from their neighbor of Brisport; but now the large London houses sent down their travelers, who competed with each other to gain the local custom, until profits were cut down to the vanishing point. For a long time the firm had been in a precarious position, but this further drop in prices settled the matter, and compelled Mr. Charles Fairbairn, the acting manager, to close his establishment.

It was a murky, foggy Saturday afternoon in November when the hands were paid for the last time, and the old building was to be finally abandoned. Mr. Fairbairn, an anxious-faced, sorrow-worn man, stood on a raised dais by the cashier while he handed the little pile of hardly earned shillings and coppers to each successive workman as the long procession filed past his table. It was usual with the employees to chatter away the instant that they had been paid, like so many children let out of school; but to-day they waited, forming little groups over the great dreary room, and discussing in subdued voices the misfortune which had come upon their employers, and the future which awaited themselves. When the last pile of coins had been handed across the table, and the last name checked by the cashier, the whole throng faced silently round to the man who had been their master and waited expectantly for any words which he might have to say to them.

Mr. Charles Fairbairn had not expected this, and it embarrassed him. He had waited as a matter of routine duty until the wages were paid, but he was a taciturn, slow-witted man, and he had not foreseen this sudden call upon his oratorical powers. He stroked his thin cheek nervously with his long white fingers, and looked down with weak, watery eyes at the mosaic of upturned, serious faces.

"I am sorry that we have to part, my men," he said at last in a crackling voice. "It's a bad day for all of us, and for Brisport too. For three years we have been losing money over the works. We held on in the hope of a change coming, but matters are going from bad to worse. There's nothing for it but give it up before the balance of our fortune is swallowed up. I hope you may all be able to get work of some sort before very long. Good-bye, and God bless you!"

"God bless you, sir! God bless you!" cried a chorus of rough voices. "Three cheers for Mr. Charles Fairbairn!" shouted a bright-eyed, smart young fellow, springing upon a bench and waving his peaked cap in the air. The crowd responded to the call, but their huzzas wanted the true ring which only a joy-

ous moment can give. Then they began to flock out into the sunlight, looking back as they went at the long deal tables and the cork-strown floor—above all at the sad-faced, solitary man, whose cheeks were flecked with color at the rough cordiality of their farewell.

"Huxford," said the cashier, touching on the shoulder the young fellow who had led the cheering; "the governor wants to speak to you."

The workman turned back and stood swinging his cap awkwardly in front of his ex-employer, while the crowd pushed on until the doorway was clear, and the heavy fog wreaths rolled unchecked into the deserted factory.

"Ah, John!" said Mr. Fairbairn, coming suddenly out of his reverie and taking up a letter from the table. "You have been in my service since you were a boy, and you have shown that you merited the trust which I have placed in you. From what I have learned I think I am right in saying that this sudden want of work will affect your plans more than it will many of my other hands."

"I was to be married at Shrovetide," the man answered, tracing a pattern upon the table with his horny forefinger. "I'll have to find work first."

"And work my poor fellow is by no means easy to find. You see you have been in this groove all your life, and are unfit for anything else. It's true you've been my foreman, but even that won't hold you, for the factories all over England are discharging hands, and there's not a vacancy to be had. It's a bad outlook for you and such as you."

"What would you advise, then, sir?" asked John Huxford.

"That's what I was coming to. I have a letter here from Sheridan & Moore, of Montreal, asking for a good hand to take charge of a workroom. If you think it will suit you, you can go out by the next boat. The wages are far in excess of anything which I have been able to give you."

"Why, sir, this is real kind of you," the young workman said earnestly. "She—my girl—Mary, will be as grateful to you as I am. I know what you say is right, and that if I had to look for work I should be likely to spend the little that I have laid by toward housekeeping before I found it. But, sir, with your leave I'd like to speak to her about it before I made up my mind. Could you leave it open for a few hours?"

"The mail goes out to-morrow," Mr. Fairbairn answered. "If you decide to accept you can write to-night. Here is their letter, which will give you their address."

John Huxford took the precious paper with a grateful heart. An hour ago his future had been all black, but now this rift of light had broken in the west, giving promise of better things. He would have liked to have said something expressive of his feelings to his employer, but the English nature is not effusive, and he could not get beyond a few choking, awkward words which were as awkwardly received by his benefactor. With a scrape and a bow, he turned on his heel, and plunged out into the foggy street.

So thick was the vapor that the houses over the way were only a vague loom, but the foreman hurried on with springy steps through side streets and winding lanes, past walls where the fishermen's nests were drying, and over cobblestoned alleys redolent of herring, until he reached a modest line of whitewashed cottages fronting the sea. At the door of one of these the young man tapped, and then without waiting for a response, pressed down the latch and walked in.

An old silvery-haired woman and a young girl hardly out of her teens were sitting on either side of the fire, and the latter sprang to her feet as he entered.

"You've got some good news, John," she cried, putting her hands upon his shoulders, and looking into his eyes. "I can tell it from your step. Mr. Fairbairn is going to carry on after all."

"No, dear, not so good as that," John Huxford answered, smoothing back her rich brown hair; "but I have an offer of a place in Canada, with good money, and if you think as I do, I shall go out to it, and you can follow with the granny whenever I have made all straight for you at the other side. What say you to that, my lass?"

"Why, surely, John, what you think is right must be for the best," said the girl quietly, with trust and confidence in her pale, plain face and loving hazel eyes. "But poor granny, how is she to cross the seas?"

"Oh, never mind about me," the old woman broke in cheerfully. "I'll be no drag on you. If you want granny, granny's not too old to travel; and if you don't want her, why she can look after the cottage, and have an English home ready for you whenever you turn back to the old country."

"Of course we shall need you, granny," John Huxford said, with a cheery laugh. "Fancy leaving granny behind! That would never do, Mary! But if both come out, and if we are married all snug and proper at Montreal, we'll look through the whole city until we find a house something like this one, and we'll have creepers on the outside just the same, and when the doors are shut and we sit around the fire on the winter's nights, I'm hanged if we'll be able to tell that we're not at home. Besides, Mary, it's the same speech out there, the same king, and the same flag; it's not like a foreign country."

"No, of course not," Mary answered with conviction. She was an orphan with no living relation save her old grandmother, and no thought in life but to make a helpful and worthy wife to the man she loved. Where these two were she could not fail to find happiness. If John went to Canada, then Canada became home to her, for what had Brisport to offer when he was gone?

"I'm to write to-night then and accept?" the young man asked. "I knew you would both be of the same mind as myself, but of course I couldn't close with the offer until we had talked it over. I can get started in a week or two, and then in a couple of months I'll have all ready for you on the other side."

"It will be a weary, weary time until we hear from you, dear John," said Mary, clasping his hand; "but it's God's will, and we must be patient. Here's pe-

write the letter which is to take the three of us across the Atlantic." Strange how Don Diego's thoughts were molding human lives in the little Devon village.

The acceptance was duly dispatched, and John Huxford began immediately to prepare for his departure, for the Montreal firm had intimated that the vacancy was a certainty, and that the chosen man might come out without delay to take over his duties. In a very few days his scanty outfit was completed, and he started off in a coasting vessel for Liverpool, where he was to catch the passenger ship for Quebec.

"Remember, John," whispered Mary, as he pressed her to his heart upon the Brisport quay, "the cottage is our own, and come what may, we have always that to fall back upon. If things should chance to turn out badly over there, we have always a roof to cover us. There you will find me until you send word to us to come."

"And that will be very soon, my lass," he answered cheerfully, with a last embrace. "Good-bye, granny, good-bye." The ship was a mile and more from the land before he lost sight of the figures of the straight, slim girl and her old com-

panion, who stood watching and waving to him from the end of the gray stone quay. It was with a sinking heart and a vague feeling of impending disaster that he saw them at last as minute specks in the distance, walking toward and disappearing amid the crowd who lined the beach.

From Liverpool the old woman and her granddaughter received a letter from John announcing that he was just starting in the bark "St. Lawrence," and six weeks afterward a second longer epistle informed them of his safe arrival at Quebec, and gave them his first impressions of the country. After that a long unbroken silence set in. Week after week and month after month passed by, and never a word came from across the seas. A year went over their heads, and yet another, but no news of the absentee. Sheridan & Moore were written to, and replied that though John Huxford's letter had reached them, he had never presented himself, and they had been forced to fill up the vacancy as best they could. Still Mary and her grandmother hoped against hope, and looked out for the letter-carrier every morning with such eagerness that the kind-hearted man would often make a detour rather than pass the two pale, anxious faces which peered at him from the cottage window. At last, three years after the young foreman's disappearance, old granny died, and Mary was left alone, a broken, sorrowful woman, living as best she might on a small annuity which had descended to her, and eating her heart out as she brooded over the mystery which hung over the fate of her lover.

(To be Continued)

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