

CHAPTER XXIV. - NOT THE ARCADIA.

Those who do not know the Arcadia may have a mixture that their uneducated palate loves, but they are always ready to try other mixtures. The Arcadian, however, will never help himself from an outsider's pouch. Nevertheless, there was one black week when we all smoked the ordinary tobaccos. Owing to a terrible oversight on the part of our purveyor, there was no Arcadia to smoke.

We ought to have put our pipes aside and existed on cigars; but the pipes were old friends, and desert them we could not. Each of us bought a different mixture, but they tasted alike and were equally abominable. I fell ill. Doctor Southwick, knowing no better, called my malady by a learned name, but I knew to what I owed it. Never shall I forget my delight when Jimmy broke into my room one day with a pound-tin of the Arcadia. Weak though I was, I opened my window and, seizing the half-empty packet of tobacco that had made me ill, hurled it into the street. The tobacco scattered before it fell, but I sat at the window gloating over the packet, which lay a dirty scrap of paper, where every cab might pass over it. What I call the street is more strictly a square, for my windows were at the back of the inn, and their view was somewhat plebeian. The square is the meeting-place of five streets, and at the corner of each the paper was caught up in a draught that bore it along to the next.

Here, it may be thought, I gladly forgot the cause of my troubles, but I really watched the paper for days. My doctor came in while I was still staring at it, and instead of prescribing more medicine, he made a bet with me. It was that the scrap of paper would disappear before the dissolution of the government. I said it would be fluttering around after the government was dissolved, and if I lost, the doctor was to get a new stethoscope. If I won, my bill was to be accounted discharged. Thus, strange as it seemed, I had now cause to take a friendly interest in paper that I had previously loathed. Formerly the sight of it made me miserable; now I dreaded losing it. But I looked for it when I rose in the morning, and I could tell at once by its appearance what kind of night it had passed. Nay, more: I believed I was able to decide how the wind had been since sundown, whether there had been much traffic, and if the fire-engine had been out. There is a fire-station within view of the windows, and the paper had a specially crushed appearance, as if the

heavy engine ran over it. However, though I felt certain that I could pick my scrap of paper out of a thousand scraps, the doctor insisted on making sure. The bet was consigned to writing on the very piece of paper that suggested it. The doctor went out and captured it himself. On the back of it the conditions of the wager were formally drawn up and signed by both of us. Then we opened the window and the paper was cast forth again. The doctor solemnly promised not to interfere with it, and I gave him a convalescent's word of honor to report progress honestly.

Several days elapsed, and I no longer found time heavy on my hands. My attention was divided between two papers, the scrap in the square and my daily copy of the Times . Any morning the one might tell me that I had lost my bet, or the other that I had won it; and I hurried to the window fearing that the paper had migrated to another square, and hoping my Times might contain the information that the government was out. I felt that neither could last very much longer. It was remarkable how much my interest in politics had increased since I made this wager.

The doctor, I believe, relied chiefly on the scavengers. He thought they were sure to pounce upon the scrap soon. I did not, however, see why I should fear them. They came into the square so seldom, and stayed so short a time when they did come, that I disregarded them. If the doctor knew how much they kept away he might say I bribed them. But perhaps he knew their ways. I got a fright one day from a dog. It was one of those low-looking animals that infest the square occasionally in half-dozens, but seldom alone. It ran up one of the side streets, and before I realized what had happened it had the paper in its mouth. Then it stood still and looked around. For me that was indeed a trying moment. I stood at the window.

The impulse seized me to fling open the sash and shake my fist at the brute; but luckily I remembered in time my promise to the doctor. I question if man was ever so interested in mongrel before. At one of the street corners there was a house to let, being meantime, as I had reason to believe, in the care of the wife of a police constable. A cat was often to be seen coming up from the area to lounge in the doorway. To that cat I firmly believe I owe it that I did not then lose my wager. Faithful animal! it came up to the door, it stretched itself; in the act of doing so it caught sight of the dog, and put up its back. The dog, resenting this

demonstration of feeling, dropped the scrap of paper and made for the cat. I sank back into my chair.

There was a greater disaster to be recorded next day. A workingman in the square, looking about him for a pipe-light, espied the paper frisking near the curb-stone. He picked it up with the obvious intention of lighting it at the stove of a wandering vender of hot chestnuts who had just crossed the square. The workingman followed, twisting the paper as he went, when--good luck again--a young butcher almost ran into him, and the loafer, with true presence of mind, at once asked him for a match. At any rate a match passed between them; and, to my infinite relief, the paper was flung away.

I concealed the cause of my excitement from William John. He nevertheless wondered to see me run to the window every time the wind seemed to be rising, and getting anxious when it rained. Seeing that my health prevented my leaving the house, he could not make out why I should be so interested in the weather. Once I thought he was fairly on the scent. A sudden blast of wind had caught up the paper and whirled it high in the air. I may have uttered an ejaculation, for he came hurrying to the window. He found me pointing unwittingly to what was already a white speck sailing to the roof of the fire-station. "Is it a pigeon?" he asked. I caught at the idea. "Yes, a carrier-pigeon," I murmured in reply; "they sometimes, I believe, send messages to the fire-stations in that way." Coolly as I said this, I was conscious of grasping the window-sill in pure nervousness till the scrap began to flutter back into the square.

Next it was squeezed between two of the bars of a drain. That was the last I saw of it, and the following morning the doctor had won his stethoscope--only by a few hours, however, for the government's end was announced in the evening papers. My defeat discomfited me for a little, but soon I was pleased that I had lost. I would not care to win a bet over any mixture but the Arcadia.