

#### **CHAPTER IV. THE BEECHEN STICK.**

PERSONS of sensitive, nervous temperament, sleeping for the first time in a strange house, and in a bed that is new to them, must make up their minds to pass a wakeful night. My first night at Morwick Farm was no exception to this rule. The little sleep I had was broken and disturbed by dreams. Toward six o'clock in the morning, my bed became unendurable to me. The sun was shining in brightly at the window. I determined to try the reviving influence of a stroll in the fresh morning air.

Just as I got out of bed, I heard footsteps and voices under my window.

The footsteps stopped, and the voices became recognizable. I had passed the night with my window open; I was able, without exciting notice from below, to look out.

The persons beneath me were Silas Meadowcroft, John Jago, and three strangers, whose dress and appearance indicated plainly enough that they were laborers on the farm. Silas was swinging a stout beechen stick in his hand, and was speaking to Jago, coarsely and insolently enough, of his moonlight meeting with Naomi on the previous night.

"Next time you go courting a young lady in secret," said Silas, "make sure that the moon goes down first, or wait for a cloudy sky. You were seen in the garden, Master Jago; and you may as well tell us the truth for once in a way. Did you find her open to persuasion, sir? Did she say 'Yes?'"

John Jago kept his temper.

"If you must have your joke, Mr. Silas," he said, quietly and firmly, "be pleased to joke on some other subject. You are quite wrong, sir, in what you suppose to have passed between the young lady and me."

Silas turned about, and addressed himself ironically to the three laborers.

"You hear him, boys? He can't tell the truth, try him as you may. He wasn't making love to Naomi in the garden last night--oh dear, no! He has had one wife already; and he knows better than to take the yoke on his shoulders for the second time!"

Greatly to my surprise, John Jago met this clumsy jesting with a formal and

serious reply.

"You are quite right, sir," he said. "I have no intention of marrying for the second time. What I was saying to Miss Naomi doesn't matter to you. It was not at all what you choose to suppose; it was something of quite another kind, with which you have no concern. Be pleased to understand once for all, Mr. Silas, that not so much as the thought of making love to the young lady has ever entered my head. I respect her; I admire her good qualities; but if she was the only woman left in the world, and if I was a much younger man than I am, I should never think of asking her to be my wife." He burst out suddenly into a harsh, uneasy laugh. "No, no! not my style, Mr. Silas-- not my style!"

Something in those words, or in his manner of speaking them, appeared to exasperate Silas. He dropped his clumsy irony, and addressed himself directly to John Jago in a tone of savage contempt.

"Not your style?" he repeated. "Upon my soul, that's a cool way of putting it, for a man in your place! What do you mean by calling her 'not your style?' You impudent beggar! Naomi Colebrook is meat for your master!"

John Jago's temper began to give way at last. He approached defiantly a step or two nearer to Silas Meadowcroft.

"Who is my master?" he asked.

"Ambrose will show you, if you go to him," answered the other. "Naomi is his sweetheart, not mine. Keep out of his way, if you want to keep a whole skin on your bones."

John Jago cast one of his sardonic side-looks at the farmer's wounded left hand. "Don't forget your own skin, Mr. Silas, when you threaten mine! I have set my mark on you once, sir. Let me by on my business, or I may mark you for a second time."

Silas lifted his beechen stick. The laborers, roused to some rude sense of the serious turn which the quarrel was taking, got between the two men, and parted them. I had been hurriedly dressing myself while the altercation was proceeding; and I now ran downstairs to try what my influence could do toward keeping the peace at Morwick Farm.

The war of angry words was still going on when I joined the men outside.

"Be off with you on your business, you cowardly hound!" I heard Silas say. "Be off with you to the town! and take care you don't meet Ambrose on the way!"

"Take you care you don't feel my knife again before I go!" cried the other man.

Silas made a desperate effort to break away from the laborers who were holding him.

"Last time you only felt my fist!" he shouted "Next time you shall feel this!"

He lifted the stick as he spoke. I stepped up and snatched it out of his hand.

"Mr. Silas," I said, "I am an invalid, and I am going out for a walk. Your stick will be useful to me. I beg leave to borrow it."

The laborers burst out laughing. Silas fixed his eyes on me with a stare of angry surprise. John Jago, immediately recovering his self-possession, took off his hat, and made me a deferential bow.

"I had no idea, Mr. Lefrank, that we were disturbing you," he said. "I am very much ashamed of myself, sir. I beg to apologize."

"I accept your apology, Mr. Jago," I answered, "on the understanding that you, as the older man, will set the example of forbearance if your temper is tried on any future occasion as it has been tried today. And I have further to request," I added, addressing myself to Silas, "that you will do me a favor, as your father's guest. The next time your good spirits lead you into making jokes at Mr. Jago's expense, don't carry them quite so far. I am sure you meant no harm, Mr. Silas. Will you gratify me by saying so yourself? I want to see you and Mr. Jago shake hands."

John Jago instantly held out his hand, with an assumption of good feeling which was a little overacted, to my thinking. Silas Meadowcroft made no advance of the same friendly sort on his side.

"Let him go about his business," said Silas. "I won't waste any more words on him, Mr. Lefrank, to please you. But (saving your presence) I'm d--d if I take his hand!"

Further persuasion was plainly useless, addressed to such a man as this. Silas gave me no further opportunity of remonstrating with him, even if I

had been inclined to do so. He turned about in sulky silence, and, retracing his steps along the path, disappeared round the corner of the house. The laborers withdrew next, in different directions, to begin the day's work. John Jago and I were alone.

I left it to the man of the wild brown eyes to speak first.

"In half an hour's time, sir," he said, "I shall be going on business to Narrabee, our market-town here. Can I take any letters to the post for you? or is there anything else that I can do in the town?"

I thanked him, and declined both proposals. He made me another deferential bow, and withdrew into the house. I mechanically followed the path in the direction which Silas had taken before me.

Turning the corner of the house, and walking on for a little way, I found myself at the entrance to the stables, and face to face with Silas Meadowcroft once more. He had his elbows on the gate of the yard, swinging it slowly backward and forward, and turning and twisting a straw between his teeth. When he saw me approaching him, he advanced a step from the gate, and made an effort to excuse himself, with a very ill grace.

"No offense, mister. Ask me what you will besides, and I'll do it for you. But don't ask me to shake hands with John Jago; I hate him too badly for that. If I touched him with one hand, sir, I tell you this, I should throttle him with the other."

"That's your feeling toward the man, Mr. Silas, is it?"

"That's my feeling, Mr. Lefrank; and I'm not ashamed of it either."

"Is there any such place as a church in your neighborhood, Mr. Silas?"

"Of course there is."

"And do you ever go to it?"

"Of course I do."

"At long intervals, Mr. Silas?"

"Every Sunday, sir, without fail."

Some third person behind me burst out laughing; some third person had been listening to our talk. I turned round, and discovered Ambrose Meadowcroft.

"I understand the drift of your catechism, sir, though my brother doesn't," he said. "Don't be hard on Silas, sir. He isn't the only Christian who leaves his Christianity in the pew when he goes out of church. You will never make us friends with John Jago, try as you may. Why, what have you got there, Mr. Lefrank? May I die if it isn't my stick! I have been looking for it everywhere!"

The thick beechen stick had been feeling uncomfortably heavy in my invalid hand for some time past. There was no sort of need for my keeping it any longer. John Jago was going away to Narrabee, and Silas Meadowcroft's savage temper was subdued to a sulky repose. I handed the stick back to Ambrose. He laughed as he took it from me.

"You can't think how strange it feels, Mr. Lefrank, to be out without one's stick," he said. "A man gets used to his stick, sir; doesn't he? Are you ready for your breakfast?"

"Not just yet. I thought of taking a little walk first."

"All right, sir. I wish I could go with you; but I have got my work to do this morning, and Silas has his work too. If you go back by the way you came, you will find yourself in the garden. If you want to go further, the wicket-gate at the end will lead you into the lane."

Through sheer thoughtlessness, I did a very foolish thing. I turned back as I was told, and left the brothers together at the gate of the stable-yard.