

44. SANDBOURNE--A LONELY HEATH--THE 'RED LION'--THE HIGHWAY

It was half-past eleven before the Spruce, with Mountclere and Sol Chickerel on board, had steamed back again to Sandbourne. The direction and increase of the wind had made it necessary to keep the vessel still further to sea on their return than in going, that they might clear without risk the windy, sousing, thwacking, basting, scourging Jack Ketch of a corner called Old-Harry Point, which lay about halfway along their track, and stood, with its detached posts and stumps of white rock, like a skeleton's lower jaw, grinning at British navigation. Here strong currents and cross currents were beginning to interweave their scrolls and meshes, the water rising behind them in tumultuous heaps, and slamming against the fronts and angles of cliff, whence it flew into the air like clouds of flour. Who could now believe that this roaring abode of chaos smiled in the sun as gently as an infant during the summer days not long gone by, every pinnacle, crag, and cave returning a doubled image across the glassy sea?

They were now again at Sandbourne, a point in their journey reached more than four hours ago. It became necessary to consider anew how to accomplish the difficult remainder. The wind was not blowing much beyond what seamen call half a gale, but there had been enough unpleasantness afloat to make landsmen glad to get ashore, and this dissipated in a slight measure their vexation at having failed in their purpose. Still, Mountclere loudly cursed their confidence in that treacherously short

route, and Sol abused the unknown Sandbourne man who had brought the news

of the steamer's arrival to them at the junction. The only course left open to them now, short of giving up the undertaking, was to go by the road along the shore, which, curving round the various little creeks and inland seas between their present position and Knollsea, was of no less length than thirty miles. There was no train back to the junction till the next morning, and Sol's proposition that they should drive thither in hope of meeting the mail-train, was overruled by Mountclere.

'We will have nothing more to do with chance,' he said. 'We may miss the train, and then we shall have gone out of the way for nothing. More than that, the down mail does not stop till it gets several miles beyond the nearest station for Knollsea; so it is hopeless.'

'If there had only been a telegraph to the confounded place!'

'Telegraph--we might as well telegraph to the devil as to an old booby and a damned scheming young widow. I very much question if we shall do anything in the matter, even if we get there. But I suppose we had better go on now?'

'You can do as you like. I shall go on, if I have to walk every step o't.'

'That's not necessary. I think the best posting-house at this end of the

town is Tempett's--we must knock them up at once. Which will you do--attempt supper here, or break the back of our journey first, and get on to Anglebury? We may rest an hour or two there, unless you feel really in want of a meal.'

'No. I'll leave eating to merrier men, who have no sister in the hands of a cursed old Vandal.'

'Very well,' said Mountclere. 'We'll go on at once.'

An additional half-hour elapsed before they were fairly started, the lateness and abruptness of their arrival causing delay in getting a conveyance ready: the tempestuous night had apparently driven the whole town, gentle and simple, early to their beds. And when at length the travellers were on their way the aspect of the weather grew yet more forbidding. The rain came down unmercifully, the booming wind caught it, bore it across the plain, whizzed it against the carriage like a sower sowing his seed. It was precisely such weather, and almost at the same season, as when Picotee traversed the same moor, stricken with her great disappointment at not meeting Christopher Julian.

Further on for several miles the drive lay through an open heath, dotted occasionally with fir plantations, the trees of which told the tale of their species without help from outline or colour; they spoke in those melancholy moans and sobs which give to their sound a solemn sadness surpassing even that of the sea. From each carriage-lamp the long rays

stretched like feelers into the air, and somewhat cheered the way, until the insidious damp that pervaded all things above, around, and underneath, overpowered one of them, and rendered every attempt to rekindle it ineffectual. Even had the two men's dislike to each other's society been less, the general din of the night would have prevented much talking; as it was, they sat in a rigid reticence that was almost a third personality. The roads were laid hereabouts with a light sandy gravel, which, though not clogging, was soft and friable. It speedily became saturated, and the wheels ground heavily and deeply into its substance.

At length, after crossing from ten to twelve miles of these eternal heaths under the eternally drumming storm, they could discern eyelets of light winking to them in the distance from under a nebulous brow of pale haze. They were looking on the little town of Havenpool. Soon after this cross-roads were reached, one of which, at right angles to their present direction, led down on the left to that place. Here the man stopped, and informed them that the horses would be able to go but a mile or two further.

'Very well, we must have others that can,' said Mountclere. 'Does our way lie through the town?'

'No, sir--unless we go there to change horses, which I thought to do. The direct road is straight on. Havenpool lies about three miles down there on the left. But the water is over the road, and we had better go round. We shall come to no place for two or three miles, and then only to

Flychett.'

'What's Flychett like?'

'A trumpery small bit of a village.'

'Still, I think we had better push on,' said Sol. 'I am against running the risk of finding the way flooded about Havenpool.'

'So am I,' returned Mountclere.

'I know a wheelwright in Flychett,' continued Sol, 'and he keeps a beer-house, and owns two horses. We could hire them, and have a bit of sommat in the shape of victuals, and then get on to Anglebury. Perhaps the rain may hold up by that time. Anything's better than going out of our way.'

'Yes. And the horses can last out to that place,' said Mountclere. 'Up and on again, my man.'

On they went towards Flychett. Still the everlasting heath, the black hills bulging against the sky, the barrows upon their round summits like warts on a swarthy skin. The storm blew huskily over bushes of heather and furze that it was unable materially to disturb, and the travellers proceeded as before. But the horses were now far from fresh, and the time spent in reaching the next village was quite half as long as that taken up by the previous heavy portion of the drive. When they entered

Flychett it was about three.

'Now, where's the inn?' said Mountclere, yawning.

'Just on the knap,' Sol answered. "'Tis a little small place, and we must do as well as we can.'

They pulled up before a cottage, upon the whitewashed front of which could be seen a square board representing the sign. After an infinite labour of rapping and shouting, a casement opened overhead, and a woman's

voice inquired what was the matter. Sol explained, when she told them that the horses were away from home.

'Now we must wait till these are rested,' growled Mountclere. 'A pretty muddle!'

'It cannot be helped,' answered Sol; and he asked the woman to open the door. She replied that her husband was away with the horses and van, and that they could not come in.

Sol was known to her, and he mentioned his name; but the woman only began

to abuse him.

'Come, publican, you'd better let us in, or we'll have the law for't,' rejoined Sol, with more spirit. 'You don't dare to keep nobility waiting

like this.'

'Nobility!'

'My mate hev the title of Honourable, whether or no; so let's have none of your slack,' said Sol.

'Don't be a fool, young chopstick,' exclaimed Mountclere. 'Get the door opened.'

'I will--in my own way,' said Sol testily. 'You mustn't mind my trading upon your quality, as 'tis a case of necessity. This is a woman nothing will bring to reason but an appeal to the higher powers. If every man of title was as useful as you are to-night, sir, I'd never call them lumber again as long as I live.'

'How singular!'

'There's never a bit of rubbish that won't come in use if you keep it seven years.'

'If my utility depends upon keeping you company, may I go to h--- for lacking every atom of the virtue.'

'Hear, hear! But it hardly is becoming in me to answer up to a man so much older than I, or I could say more. Suppose we draw a line here for

the present, sir, and get indoors?'

'Do what you will, in Heaven's name.'

A few more words to the woman resulted in her agreeing to admit them if they would attend to themselves afterwards. This Sol promised, and the key of the door was let down to them from the bedroom window by a string. When they had entered, Sol, who knew the house well, busied himself in lighting a fire, the driver going off with a lantern to the stable, where he found standing-room for the two horses. Mountclere walked up and down the kitchen, mumbling words of disgust at the situation, the few of this kind that he let out being just enough to show what a fearfully large number he kept in.

'A-calling up people at this time of morning!' the woman occasionally exclaimed down the stairs. 'But folks show no mercy upon their flesh and blood--not one bit or mite.'

'Now never be stomachy, my good soul,' cried Sol from the fireplace, where he stood blowing the fire with his breath. 'Only tell me where the victuals bide, and I'll do all the cooking. We'll pay like princes--especially my mate.'

'There's but little in house,' said the sleepy woman from her bedroom.

'There's pig's fry, a side of bacon, a conger eel, and pickled onions.'

'Conger eel?' said Sol to Mountclere.

'No, thank you.'

'Pig's fry?'

'No, thank you.'

'Well, then, tell me where the bacon is,' shouted Sol to the woman.

'You must find it,' came again down the stairs. "'Tis somewhere up in chimley, but in which part I can't mind. Really I don't know whether I be upon my head or my heels, and my brain is all in a spin, wi' being rafted up in such a larry!'

'Bide where you be, there's a dear,' said Sol. 'We'll do it all. Just tell us where the tea-caddy is, and the gridiron, and then you can go to sleep again.'

The woman appeared to take his advice, for she gave the information, and silence soon reigned upstairs.

When one piece of bacon had been with difficulty cooked over the newly-lit fire, Sol said to Mountclere, with the rasher on his fork: 'Now look here, sir, I think while I am making the tea, you ought to go on

griddling some more of these, as you haven't done nothing at all?'

'I do the paying. . . . Well, give me the bacon.'

'And when you have done yours, I'll cook the man's, as the poor feller's hungry, I make no doubt.'

Mountclere, fork in hand, then began with his rasher, tossing it about the gridiron in masterly style, Sol attending to the tea. He was attracted from this occupation by a brilliant flame up the chimney, Mountclere exclaiming, 'Now the cursed thing is on fire!'

'Blow it out--hard--that's it! Well now, sir, do you come and begin upon mine, as you must be hungry. I'll finish the griddling. Ought we to mind the man sitting down in our company, as there's no other room for him? I hear him coming in.'

'O no--not at all. Put him over at that table.'

'And I'll join him. You can sit here by yourself, sir.'

The meal was despatched, and the coachman again retired, promising to have the horses ready in about an hour and a half. Sol and Mountclere made themselves comfortable upon either side of the fireplace, since there was no remedy for the delay: after sitting in silence awhile, they nodded and slept.

How long they would have remained thus, in consequence of their fatigues, there is no telling, had not the mistress of the cottage descended the stairs about two hours later, after peeping down upon them at intervals of five minutes during their sleep, lest they should leave without her knowledge. It was six o'clock, and Sol went out for the man, whom he found snoring in the hay-loft. There was now real necessity for haste, and in ten minutes they were again on their way.

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Day dawned upon the 'Red Lion' inn at Anglebury with a timid and watery eye. From the shadowy archway came a shining lantern, which was seen to be dangling from the hand of a little bow-legged old man--the hostler, John. Having reached the front, he looked around to measure the daylight, opened the lantern, and extinguished it by a pinch of his fingers. He paused for a moment to have the customary word or two with his neighbour the milkman, who usually appeared at this point at this time.

'It sounds like the whistle of the morning train,' the milkman said as he drew near, a scream from the further end of the town reaching their ears. 'Well, I hope, now the wind's in that quarter, we shall ha'e a little more fine weather--hey, hostler?'

'What be ye a talking o'?'

'Can hear the whistle plain, I say.'

'O ay. I suppose you do. But faith, 'tis a poor fist I can make at hearing anything. There, I could have told all the same that the wind was in the east, even if I had not seed poor Thomas Tribble's smoke blowing across the little orchard. Joints be a true weathercock enough when past three-score. These easterly rains, when they do come, which is not often, come wi' might enough to squail a man into his grave.'

'Well, we must look for it, hostler. . . . Why, what mighty ekkypage is this, come to town at such a purblinking time of day?'

"'Tis what time only can tell--though 'twill not be long first,' the hostler replied, as the driver of the pair of horses and carriage containing Sol and Mountclere slackened pace, and drew rein before the inn.

Fresh horses were immediately called for, and while they were being put in the two travellers walked up and down.

'It is now a quarter to seven o'clock,' said Mountclere; 'and the question arises, shall I go on to Knollsea, or branch off at Corvsgate Castle for Enckworth? I think the best plan will be to drive first to Enckworth, set me down, and then get him to take you on at once to Knollsea. What do you say?'

'When shall I reach Knollsea by that arrangement?'

'By half-past eight o'clock. We shall be at Enckworth before eight, which is excellent time.'

'Very well, sir, I agree to that,' said Sol, feeling that as soon as one of the two birds had been caught, the other could not mate without their knowledge.

The carriage and horses being again ready, away they drove at once, both having by this time grown too restless to spend in Anglebury a minute more than was necessary.

The hostler and his lad had taken the jaded Sandbourne horses to the stable, rubbed them down, and fed them, when another noise was heard outside the yard; the omnibus had returned from meeting the train. Relinquishing the horses to the small stable-lad, the old hostler again looked out from the arch.

A young man had stepped from the omnibus, and he came forward. 'I want a conveyance of some sort to take me to Knollsea, at once. Can you get a horse harnessed in five minutes?'

'I'll make shift to do what I can master, not promising about the

minutes. The truest man can say no more. Won't ye step into the bar, sir, and give your order? I'll let ye know as soon as 'tis ready.'

Christopher turned into a room smelling strongly of the night before, and stood by the newly-kindled fire to wait. He had just come in haste from Melchester. The upshot of his excitement about the wedding, which, as the possible hour of its solemnization drew near, had increased till it bore him on like a wind, was this unpremeditated journey. Lying awake the previous night, the hangings of his bed pulsing to every beat of his heart, he decided that there was one last and great service which it behoved him, as an honest man and friend, to say nothing of lover, to render to Ethelberta at this juncture. It was to ask her by some means whether or not she had engaged with open eyes to marry Lord Mountclere; and if not, to give her a word or two of enlightenment. That done, she might be left to take care of herself.

His plan was to obtain an interview with Picotee, and learn from her accurately the state of things. Should he, by any possibility, be mistaken in his belief as to the contracting parties, a knowledge of the mistake would be cheaply purchased by the journey. Should he not, he would send up to Ethelberta the strong note of expostulation which was already written, and waiting in his pocket. To intrude upon her at such a time was unseemly; and to despatch a letter by a messenger before evidence of its necessity had been received was most undesirable. The whole proceeding at best was clumsy; yet earnestness is mostly clumsy; and how could he let the event pass without a protest? Before daylight

on that autumn morning he had risen, told Faith of his intention, and started off.

As soon as the vehicle was ready, Christopher hastened to the door and stepped up. The little stable-boy led the horse a few paces on the way before relinquishing his hold; at the same moment a respectably dressed man on foot, with a small black bag in his hand, came up from the opposite direction, along the street leading from the railway. He was a thin, elderly man, with grey hair; that a great anxiety pervaded him was as plainly visible as were his features. Without entering the inn, he came up at once to old John.

'Have you anything going to Knollsea this morning that I can get a lift in?' said the pedestrian--no other than Ethelberta's father.

'Nothing empty, that I know of.'

'Or carrier?'

'No.'

'A matter of fifteen shillings, then, I suppose?'

'Yes--no doubt. But yond there's a young man just now starting; he might not take it ill if ye were to ask him for a seat, and go halves in the hire of the trap. Shall I call out?'

'Ah, do.'

The hostler bawled to the stable-boy, who put the question to Christopher. There was room for two in the dogcart, and Julian had no objection to save the shillings of a fellow-traveller who was evidently not rich. When Chickerel mounted to his seat, Christopher paused to look at him as we pause in some enactment that seems to have been already before us in a dream long ago. Ethelberta's face was there, as the landscape is in the map, the romance in the history, the aim in the deed: denuded, rayless, and sorry, but discernible.

For the moment, however, this did not occur to Julian. He took the whip, the boy loosed his hold upon the horse, and they proceeded on their way.

'What slap-dash jinks may there be going on at Knollsea, then, my sonny?' said the hostler to the lad, as the dogcart and the backs of the two men diminished on the road. 'You be a Knollsea boy: have anything reached your young ears about what's in the wind there, David Straw?'

'No, nothing: except that 'tis going to be Christmas day in five weeks: and then a hide-bound bull is going to be killed if he don't die afore the time, and gi'ed away by my lord in three-pound junks, as a reward to good people who never curse and sing bad songs, except when they be drunk; mother says perhaps she will have some, and 'tis excellent if well stewed, mother says.'

'A very fair chronicle for a boy to give, but not what I asked for. When you try to answer a old man's question, always bear in mind what it was that old man asked. A hide-bound bull is good when well stewed, I make no doubt--for they who like it; but that's not it. What I said was, do you know why three fokes, a rich man, a middling man, and a poor man, should want horses for Knollsea afore seven o'clock in the morning on a blinking day in Fall, when everything is as wet as a dishclout, whereas that's more than often happens in fine summer weather?'

'No--I don't know, John hostler.'

'Then go home and tell your mother that ye be no wide-awake boy, and that old John, who went to school with her father afore she was born or thought o', says so. . . . Chok' it all, why should I think there's sommat going on at Knollsea? Honest travelling have been so rascally abused since I was a boy in pinders, by tribes of nobodies tearing from one end of the country to t'other, to see the sun go down in salt water, or the moon play jack-lantern behind some rotten tower or other, that, upon my song, when life and death's in the wind there's no telling the difference!'

'I like their sixpences ever so much.'

'Young sonny, don't you answer up to me when you baint in the story--stopping my words in that fashion. I won't have it, David. Now

up in the tallet with ye, there's a good boy, and down with another lock or two of hay--as fast as you can do it for me.'

The boy vanished under the archway, and the hostler followed at his heels. Meanwhile the carriage bearing Mr. Mountclere and Sol was speeding on its way to Enckworth. When they reached the spot at which the road forked into two, they left the Knollsea route, and keeping thence under the hills for the distance of five or six miles, drove into Lord Mountclere's park. In ten minutes the house was before them, framed in by dripping trees.

Mountclere jumped out, and entered without ceremony. Sol, being anxious to know if Lord Mountclere was there, ordered the coachman to wait a few moments. It was now nearly eight o'clock, and the smoke which ascended from the newly-lit fires of the Court painted soft blue tints upon the brown and golden leaves of lofty boughs adjoining.

'O, Ethelberta!' said Sol, as he regarded the fair prospect.

The gravel of the drive had been washed clean and smooth by the night's rain, but there were fresh wheelmarks other than their own upon the track. Yet the mansion seemed scarcely awake, and stillness reigned everywhere around.

Not more than three or four minutes had passed when the door was opened for Mountclere, and he came hastily from the doorsteps.

'I must go on with you,' he said, getting into the vehicle. 'He's gone.'

'Where--to Knollsea?' said Sol.

'Yes,' said Mountclere. 'Now, go ahead to Knollsea!' he shouted to the man. 'To think I should be fooled like this! I had no idea that he would be leaving so soon! We might perhaps have been here an hour earlier by hard striving. But who was to dream that he would arrange to leave it at such an unearthly time of the morning at this dark season of the year? Drive--drive!' he called again out of the window, and the pace was increased.

'I have come two or three miles out of my way on account of you,' said Sol sullenly. 'And all this time lost. I don't see why you wanted to come here at all. I knew it would be a waste of time.'

'Damn it all, man,' said Mountclere; 'it is no use for you to be angry with me!'

'I think it is, for 'tis you have brought me into this muddle,' said Sol, in no sweeter tone. 'Ha, ha! Upon my life I should be inclined to laugh, if I were not so much inclined to do the other thing, at Berta's trick of trying to make close family allies of such a cantankerous pair as you and I! So much of one mind as we be, so alike in our ways of living, so close connected in our callings and principles, so matched in

manners and customs! 'twould be a thousand pities to part us--hey, Mr. Mountclere!

Mountclere faintly laughed with the same hideous merriment at the same idea, and then both remained in a withering silence, meant to express the utter contempt of each for the other, both in family and in person. They passed the Lodge, and again swept into the highroad.

'Drive on!' said Mountclere, putting his head again out of the window, and shouting to the man. 'Drive like the devil!' he roared again a few minutes afterwards, in fuming dissatisfaction with their rate of progress.

'Baint I doing of it?' said the driver, turning angrily round. 'I ain't going to ruin my governor's horses for strangers who won't pay double for 'em--not I. I am driving as fast as I can. If other folks get in the way with their traps I suppose I must drive round 'em, sir?'

There was a slight crash.

'There!' continued the coachman. 'That's what comes of my turning round!'

Sol looked out on the other side, and found that the forewheel of their carriage had become locked in the wheel of a dogcart they had overtaken, the road here being very narrow. Their coachman, who knew he was to

blame for this mishap, felt the advantage of taking time by the forelock in a case of accusation, and began swearing at his victim as if he were the sinner. Sol jumped out, and looking up at the occupants of the other conveyance, saw against the sky the back elevation of his father and Christopher Julian, sitting upon a little seat which they overhung, like two big puddings upon a small dish.

'Father--what, you going?' said Sol. 'Is it about Berta that you've come?'

'Yes, I got your letter,' said Chickerel, 'and I felt I should like to come--that I ought to come, to save her from what she'll regret. Luckily, this gentleman, a stranger to me, has given me a lift from Anglebury, or I must have hired.' He pointed to Christopher.

'But he's Mr. Julian!' said Sol.

'You are Mrs. Petherwin's father?--I have travelled in your company without knowing it!' exclaimed Christopher, feeling and looking both astonished and puzzled. At first, it had appeared to him that, in direct antagonism to his own purpose, her friends were favouring Ethelberta's wedding; but it was evidently otherwise.

'Yes, that's father,' said Sol. 'Father, this is Mr. Julian. Mr. Julian, this gentleman here is Lord Mountclere's brother--and, to cut the story short, we all wish to stop the wedding.'

'Then let us get on, in Heaven's name!' said Mountclere. 'You are the lady's father?'

'I am,' said Chickereel.

'Then you had better come into this carriage. We shall go faster than the dogcart. Now, driver, are the wheels right again?'

Chickereel hastily entered with Mountclere, Sol joined them, and they sped on. Christopher drove close in their rear, not quite certain whether he did well in going further, now that there were plenty of people to attend to the business, but anxious to see the end. The other three sat in silence, with their eyes upon their knees, though the clouds were dispersing, and the morning grew bright. In about twenty minutes the square unembattled tower of Knollsea Church appeared below them in the vale, its summit just touching the distant line of sea upon sky. The element by which they had been victimized on the previous evening now smiled falsely to the low morning sun.

They descended the road to the village at a little more mannerly pace than that of the earlier journey, and saw the rays glance upon the hands of the church clock, which marked five-and-twenty minutes to nine.

