

CHAPTER VIII - The Wager of Battle

"Owd Sammy Craddock" rose from his chair, and going to the mantel-piece, took down a tobacco jar of red and yellow delft, and proceeded to fill his pipe with solemn ceremony. It was a large, deep clay pipe, and held a great deal of tobacco--particularly when filled from the store of an acquaintance. "It's a good enow pipe to borrow wi'," Sammy was wont to remark. In the second place, Mr. Craddock drew forth a goodly portion of the weed, and pressed it down with ease and precision into the top of the foreign gentleman's turban which constituted the bowl. Then he lighted it with a piece of paper, remarking to his wife between long indrawn puffs, "I'm goin'--to th' Public."

The good woman did not receive the intelligence as amicably as it had been given.

"Aye," she said, "I'll warrant tha art. When tha art no fillin' thy belly tha art generally either goin' to th' Public, or comin' whoam. Aw Rig-gan ud go to ruin if tha wert na at th' Public fro' morn till neet looking after other folkses business. It's well for th' toun as tha'st gotten nowt else to do."

Sammy puffed away at his pipe, without any appearance of disturbance.

"Aye," he consented dryly, "it is, that. It ud be a bad thing to ha' th' pits stop workin' aw because I had na attended to 'em, an' gi'en th'

mes-ters a bit o' encouragement. Tha sees mine's what th' gentlefolk ca' a responsible position i' society. Th' biggest trouble I ha', is settlin' i' my moind what th' world 'ill do when I turn up my toes to th' daisies, an' how the government'll mak' up their moinds who shall ha' th' honor o' payin' for th' moniment."

In Mr. Craddock's opinion, his skill in the solution of political and social problems was only equalled by his aptitude in managing the weaker sex. He never lost his temper with a woman. He might be sarcastic, he was sometimes even severe in his retorts, but he was never violent. In any one else but Mr. Craddock, such conduct might have been considered weak by the male population of Riggan, who not unfrequently settled their trifling domestic difficulties with the poker and tongues, chairs, or flat-irons, or indeed with any portable piece of household furniture. But Mr. Craddock's way of disposing of feminine antagonists was tolerated. It was pretty well known that Mrs. Craddock had a temper, and since he could manage her, it was not worth while to criticise the method.

"Tha'rt an owd yommer-head," said Mrs. Craddock, as oracularly as if she had never made the observation before. "Tha deserves what tha has na gotten."

"Aye, that I do," with an air of amiable regret "Tha'rt reet theer fur once i' thy loife. Th' country has na done its duty by me. If I'd had aw I deserved I'd been th' Lord Mayor o' Lunnon by this toime, an' tha'd a

been th' Lady May-oress, settin' up i' thy parlor wi' a goold crown atop o' thy owd head, sortin' out thy cloathes fur th' wesh woman i'stead o' dollyin' out thy bits o' duds fur thysen. Tha'rt reet, owd lass--tha'rt reet enow."

"Go thy ways to th' Public," retorted the old dame driven to desperation. "I'm tired o' heark-enin' to thee. Get thee gone to th' Public, or we'st ha' th' world standin' still; an' moind tha do'st na set th' horse-ponds afire as tha goes by em."

"I'll be keerful, owd lass," chuckled Sammy, taking his stick. "I'll be keerful for th' sake o' th' town."

He made his way toward the village ale-house in the best of humors. Arriving at The Crown, he found a discussion in progress. Discussions were always being carried on there in fact, but this time it was not Craddock's particular friends who were busy. There were grades even among the visitors at The Crown, and there were several grades below Sammy's. The lowest was composed of the most disreputable of the colliers--men who with Lowrie at their head were generally in some mischief. It was these men who were talking together loudly this evening, and as usual, Lowrie was the loudest in the party. They did not seem to be quarrelling. Three or four sat round a table listening to Lowrie with black looks, and toward them Sammy glanced as he came in.

"What's up in them fellys?" he asked of a friend.

"Summat's wrong at th' pit," was the answer. "I canna mak' out what mysen. Summat about one o' th' mesters as they're out wi'. What'll tha tak', owdlad?"

"A pint o' sixpenny." And then with another sidelong glance at the debaters:

"They're an ill set, that lot, an' up to summat ill too, I'll warrant. He's not the reet soart, that Lowrie."

Lowrie was a burly fellow with a surly, sometimes ferocious, expression. Drink made a madman of him, and among his companions he ruled supreme through sheer physical superiority. The man who quarrelled with him might be sure of broken bones, if not of something worse. He leaned over the table now, scowling as he spoke.

"I'll ha' no lads meddlin' an' settin' th' mesters agen me," Craddock heard him say. "Them on yo' as loikes to tak' cheek mun tak' it, I'm too owd a bird fur that soart o' feed. It sticks i' my crop. Look thee out o' that theer window, Jock, and watch who passes. I'll punse that lad into th' middle o' next week, as sure as he goes by."

"Well," commented one of his companions, "aw I've gotten to say is, as tha'll be loike to ha' a punse on it, fur he's a strappin' youngster,

an' noan so easy feart."

"Da'st ta mean to say as I conna do it?" demanded Lowrie fiercely.

"Nay--nay, mon," was the pacific and rather hasty reply. "Nowt o' th' soart. I on'y meant as it was na ivvery mon as could."

"Aye, to be sure!" said Sammy testily to his friend. "That's th' game is it? Theer's a feight on hond. That's reet, my lads, lay in thy beer, an' mak' dom'd fools o' thysens, an' tha'lt get a chance to sleep on th' soft side o' a paving-stone i' th' lock-ups."

He had been a fighting man himself in his young days, and had prided himself particularly upon "showing his muscle," in Riggan parlance, but he had never been such a man as Lowrie. His comparatively gentlemanly encounters with personal friends had always been fair and square, and in many cases had laid the foundation for future toleration, even amiability. He had never hesitated to "tak' a punse" at an offending individual, but he had always been equally ready to shake hands when all was over, and in some cases, when having temporarily closed a companion's eyes in the heat of an argument, he had been known to lead him to the counter of "th' Public," and bestow nectar upon him in the form of "sixpenny." But of Lowrie, even the fighting community, which was the community predominating in Riggan, could not speak so well. He was "ill-farrant," and revengeful,--ready to fight, but not ready to forgive. He had been known to bear a grudge, and remember it, when it

had been forgotten by other people. His record was not a clean one, and accordingly he was not a favorite of Sammy Craddock's.

A short time afterward somebody passed the window facing the street, and Lowrie started up with an oath.

"Theer he is!" he exclaimed. "Now fur it. I thowt he'd go this road. I'll see what tha's gotten to say fur thysen, my lad."

He was out in the street almost before Craddock and his companion had time to reach the open window, and he had stopped the passer-by, who paused to confront him haughtily.

"Why!" cried Sammy, slapping his knee, "I'm dom'd if it is na th' Lunnon engineer chap."

Fergus Derrick stood before his enemy with anything but a propitiatory air. That this brutal fellow who had caused him trouble enough already, should interfere with his very progress in the street, was too much for his high spirit to bear.

"I comn out here," said Lowrie, "to see if tha had owt to say to me."

"Then," replied Fergus, "you may go in again, for I have nothing."

Lowrie drew a step nearer to him.

"Art tha sure o' that?" he demanded. "Tha wert so ready wi' thy gab about th' Davys this mornin' I thowt happen tha'd loike to say sum-mat more if a mon ud gi' yo' a chance. But happen agen yo're one o' th' soart as sticks to gab an' goes no further."

Derrick's eyes blazed, he flung out his open hand in a contemptuous gesture.

"Out of the way," he said, in a suppressed voice, "and let me pass."

But Lowrie only came nearer.

"Nay, but I wunnot," he said, "until I've said my say. Tha wert goin' to mak' me obey th' rules or let th' mesters hear on it, wert tha? Tha wert goin' to keep thy eye on me, an' report when th' toime come, wert tha? Well, th' toime has na come yet, and now I'm goin' to gi' thee a thrashin'."

He sprang upon him with a ferocity which would have flung to the earth any man who had not possessed the thews and sinews of a lion. Derrick managed to preserve his equilibrium. After the first blow, he could not control himself. Naturally, he had longed to thrash this fellow soundly often enough, and now that he had been attacked by him, he felt forbearance to be no virtue. Brute force could best conquer brute nature. He felt that he would rather die a thousand deaths than be

conquered himself. He put forth all his strength in an effort that awakened the crowd--which had speedily surrounded them, Owd Sammy among the number--to wild admiration.

"Get thee unto it, lad," cried the old sinner in an ecstasy of approbation, "Get thee unto it! Tha'rt shapin' reet I see. Why, I'm dom'd," slapping his knee as usual--"I'm dom'd if he is na goin' to mill Dan Lowrie!"

To the amazement of the by-standers, it became evident in a very short time, that Lowrie had met his match. Finding it necessary to defend himself, Derrick was going to do something more. The result was that the breathless struggle for the mastery ended in a crash, and Lowrie lay upon the pavement, Fergus Derrick standing above him pale, fierce and panting.

"Look to him," he said to the men about him, in a white heat, "and remember that the fellow provoked me to it. If he tries it again, I will try again too." And he turned on his heel and walked away.

He had been far more tolerant, even in his wrath, than most men would have been, but he had disposed of his enemy effectually. The fellow lay stunned upon the ground. In his fall, he had cut his head upon the curbstone, and the blood streamed from the wound when his companions crowded near, and raised him. Owd Sammy Craddock offered no assistance;

he leaned upon his stick, and looked on with grim satisfaction.

"Tha's gotten what tha deserved, owd lad," he said in an undertone. "An' tha'st gotten no more. I'st owe th' Lunnon chap one fro' this on. He's done a bit o' work as I'd ha' takken i' hond mysen long ago, if I'd ha' been thirty years younger, an' a bit less stiff i' th' hinges."

Fergus had not escaped without hurt himself, and the first angry excitement over, he began to feel so sharp an ache in his wrist, that he made up his mind to rest for a few minutes at Grace's lodgings before going home. It would be wise to know the extent of his injury.

Accordingly, he made his appearance in the parlor, somewhat startling his friend, who was at supper.

"My dear Fergus!" exclaimed Paul. "How excited you look!"

Derrick flung himself into a chair, feeling rather dubious about his strength, all at once.

"Do I?" he said, with a faint smile. "Don't be alarmed, Grace, I have no doubt I look as I feel. I have been having a brush with that scoundrel Lowrie, and I believe something has happened to my wrist."

He made an effort to raise his left hand and failed, succumbing to a pain so intense that it forced an exclamation from him.

"I thought it was a sprain," he said, when he recovered himself, "but it is a job for a surgeon. It is broken."

And so it proved under the examination of the nearest practitioner, and then Derrick remembered a wrench and shock which he had felt in Lowrie's last desperate effort to recover himself. Some of the small bones had broken.

Grace called in the surgeon himself, and stood by during the strapping and bandaging with an anxious face, really suffering as much as Derrick, perhaps a trifle more. He would not hear of his going home that night, but insisted that he should remain where he was.

"I can sleep on the lounge myself," he protested. "And though I shall be obliged to leave you for half an hour, I assure you I shall not be away a longer time."

"Where are you going?" asked Derrick.

"To the Rectory. Mr. Barholm sent a mes-sage an hour ago, that he wished to see me upon business."

Fergus agreed to remain. When Grace was on the point of leaving the room, he turned his head.

"You are going to the Rectory, you say?" he remarked.

"Yes."

"Do you think you shall see Anice?"

"It is very probable," confusedly.

"I merely thought I would ask you not to mention this affair to her," said Derrick. The Curate's face assumed an expression at that moment, which it was well that his friend did not see. A shadow of bewilderment and anxiety fell upon it and the color faded away.

"You think--" faltered he.

"Well, I thought that perhaps it would shock or alarm her," answered Derrick. "She might fancy it to have been a more serious matter than it was."

"Very well. I think you are right, perhaps."