

ERNEST HARRINGTON'S REWARD.

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CHAPTER V.

MAGGIE GIVES DICK A LESSON IN PARROT-SHOOTING—THE SEARCH FOR THE MANIAC.



At this juncture a hungry kaka flew into the dense branches of the tree above them and commenced its evening meal. A berry dropped at Maggie's feet. To seize her gun was the work of a moment, then standing on the spot where the berry had fallen, her practised eye pierced the interstices of the thick dark green foliage, and descried the brown plumage and busily-engaged beak of the bird as it pecked at the ripe berries far overhead. Notwithstanding the fact that her hand shook from her late struggle with herself, the bird fell fluttering to the ground, badly wounded and uttering piteous cries. She did not stoop to pick it up, nor did she attempt to put it out of its pain, but quickly reloaded the empty barrel. Dick ran forward to secure the bird.

'Let it lie,' she exclaimed, 'its cries will attract others. Get your gun ready. We shall have some sport now.'

She was right. From all quarters with swiftly-swirling flight and angry grating shrieks came wheeling overhead dozens of sympathising comrades, ready to fight or die, if need be, in its defence. And in truth death was the reward meted out by a rattling hail of shot from the two guns to many of them for their instinctive devotion. The screeches of the dying only added to the furious disregard of danger of the survivors. The bags were at length filled, and the carriage ceased.

'There you see, Master Dick, if you had despatched that bird we might have missed the chance of all these. Did you never try that dodge before?'

'Oh, yes, often, when we were out prospecting, and it was my week to be cook and provide for the camp, but I must say I always considered it cruel slaughter, not sport. It's all very well for pot-shooting. I hardly expected, I must admit, to see one of your sex adopt it.'

'Ah, well, mine is all pot-shooting, as you call it. I would never shoot for sport. Both brother and father are very fond of kaksas and pigeons, and I have so little time for shooting, I cannot afford to lose such a splendid chance of bountifully replenishing my larder. I suppose it is cruel as you say, but one sees so much cruelty in Nature that one gets hardened, and is apt to ask what does one little bit more matter? Does not God allow thousands—nay, myriads of the animals He has created, to die lingering deaths of agony from wounds inflicted on one another in fights? He does not trouble to cut short their fearful sufferings by so much as one weary moment. Why, then, need we care? We are not allowed to shorten the life of one of our suffering brothers or sisters, even when they beg and implore us to do so, because every moment is a hell of torture to them! No; that would be murder! Why, then, need we be so very particular to do so in the case of animals if it suits us for any reason to do otherwise? What have they done to deserve such consideration—such an incalculable advantage over us?'

Dick did not know, nor did he care to inquire particularly into the matter, so he quickly changed the subject into a more agreeable channel, and spent a very pleasant afternoon, even although he did not get the nap under the trees that he proposed when he set forth. On his return to his host's hut the latter congratulated him on his well-filled bag.

'Yes, I have had good sport. I do not know that I ever enjoyed a day's shooting more. This Catlin's liver isn't half a bad spot after all. I'm not sure whether I won't look out for a farm here myself.'

'Do, old man! I should like nothing better than to see you settle down near us. There are several places for sale that might suit you.'

Dick did not reply. He did not feel quite comfortable. Notwithstanding the arguments which he had advanced to quiet Maggie's scruples, he felt that he had behaved very severely to his old friend. The fact that many other men would have done the same did not comfort him. He had always prided himself on his nice sense of honour, and it cut him to the quick when he reflected that he could do so no longer.

Three years passed by, and we find Dick married and settled down on a large farm he had purchased in the district. It was pointed out as a model. It is not difficult to make a model farm if you have the means and the ability. Dick had the former and his wife the latter. Her early training stood her in good stead, and the farm owed much to her careful supervision and suggestions. Dick knew more about quartz reef and alluvial digging than crops and cattle, but, unlike mankind in general, was very willing to learn even from his wife.

Ernest was generally reported to have taken his loss much better than could have been expected. But, after all, what could report know about it? He did not show much grief or disappointment, but often the exertion of concealing a trouble arguments it tenfold. At first he made up his mind to sell the farm and leave the district, but after due consideration he abandoned the idea.

Maggie had been very humble before him when she acknowledged her defilement. She laid great stress on the point that she was deceived in her own sensations, otherwise she would never have deceived him; that she had not won his affections for passion, and then flung them ruthlessly from her as many do; but that in her heart she honestly believed at the time that it was real love she felt

for him. Her heartfelt pity for him somewhat eased the blow, as being single-minded and truthful himself, he believed every word she told him, and they parted friends.

To Dick he told his mind in a few words, to which Dick listened abashed, not attempting defence, seeing that he was rather short of it. 'You might have left me to my happiness, Dick,' he said, 'and gone elsewhere—you could pick and choose where you pleased. It was cruel of you, very cruel. I would to God it had been anyone but my old mate who had dealt me this blow! But it is done, and I must bear it as best I may. Be kind to her, Dick, and do your best to make her life as bright as she deserves it should be. You owe it to me to do that as well as to her. If any harm should come to her through you, you will have me to reckon with. But, paw! what avail threats? You could not possibly ill-treat her loving her as you say you do.'

'Ill-treat her! I'd sooner cut off my right hand! God bless you, old man, for taking it all so kindly. Remember always though that I used no artifices to draw her love away from you. I did not steal her from you. I merely took what she could not help giving. Still I do not justify myself overmuch. I acknowledge that I ought to have left the district directly I saw what might be, but I miscalculated my powers, and here too, perhaps, till it was too late.'

'That will do, Dick. I'd rather dismiss the subject,' said poor Ernest, turning abruptly away.

He watched anxiously for a time to see if Maggie was happy in her new life, and was compelled to admit to himself that she was. It was very evident that she loved her husband more dearly than she could ever have loved him. This consoled him somewhat; for if they could not both be happy, it was surely well that one should be, he reasoned thus vainly trying to reason away his grief. But it stubbornly refused to be so summarily dismissed. It oft times came back forcibly to its old quarters, especially when he happened to meet his old sweetheart with her husband. Still, strange as it may appear, he preferred this occasional renewal of his trouble to the obviously easy escape from it by leaving the district and never setting eyes on the fair lady again. He could not divest himself of a curious presentiment that he might yet be of great service to Maggie at some future time. In what manner he had not the slightest idea.

There was also another reason for remaining where he was. While paying his attentions to Maggie, he had with his considerate, kindly manner greatly endeared himself to the rest of her family. They liked him much better than they did the careless, easy-going and somewhat selfish Dick, and after his rejection they often allowed him to see that they deeply regretted Maggie's conduct, and wished she had remained true to him. Although Dick provided his wife with the means to pay a man to work on her father's farm, as Ernest had proposed doing, Ernest undoubtedly did much more. His wise counsel and ready assistance at any hour, day or night, either by the bedside of the invalids or in the bush after a battle, were always at their service. At odd hours he assisted greatly in clearing and fencing a large paddock for the milking cows, thereby saving infinite labour hunting them up night and morning in the bush, and increasing materially their milk-producing powers. It was he who kept the wages man up to the mark; it was his ingenuity that constructed a handy go-cart, whereby Davie could cast aside for a time his crutches and propel himself along the smoothest of the roads in the vicinity. But it would take far too much space to record all the advantages the Martins reaped from their friendship with Ernest.

And so time wore on. Hard work is an excellent specific for trouble. It is 'the labour we delight in' which physics pain. That sort of labour, however, is sometimes scarce.

With many of us in truth very few descriptions of toil come under that category, and those few are not always obtainable. Still, the other sort—that for which we have no inordinate affection—is far better than none. Ernest was lucky in this respect. There were any quantity of acres of primeval forest on his section which required clearing, and bushfelling was his delight. He went in, he would tell you, for the science of the thing. See how carefully he chooses his axe from the careful at the store. Its weight must be right to an ounce; the handle must have exactly the correct amount of swing in it. There are perhaps two in the whole case which please him; the rest he would hardly take at a gift. Fortunately, the store-keeper has other customers who are not so particular, and could not discern a shade of difference in the tools. As he enters the bush with his axe in his hand to commence the new clearing which he has planned for the season's operations of himself and man, Ernest pauses awhile and reflects. Here before him stands a mighty forest which has withstood for centuries the dread forces of nature—the blinding storm, the blasting lightning, the raging tempest. But to what avail? It is undeniably and majestically grand, but it covers the earth, and therefore it must go. In a few short weeks with the keen little tool in his hand he will level it to the ground where it will lie a tangled mass of broken dead wood, heavy trunks, tender saplings, and scrubby undergrowth mingled together in the general destruction, till the time shall come when, dried and withered, he deems it fit for burning. A good breeze is blowing. The match is struck; a tiny flame arises which in a moment or two the wind fans into a raging and terrible conflagration. Flames leap up amid showers of meteoric sparks, till they are lost in the lurid pall of smoke overhead. The roar and crackle, as they curl their scorching tongues round the objects before them, are appalling. In front is a wall of quivering, all devouring fire, behind will shortly be the blackness of desolation, smouldering stumps and charred trunks too massive for consumption, alone

showing where once stood the evergreen luxuriance and cool shades of New Zealand bush. Some people doubtless would greatly deplore this devastating ruin, but Ernest did not. He laughed gleefully to himself as he contemplated it. To him it was no mournful sight. In its blackened heaps of ashes he saw but the well-prepared seed bed for the grass and clover seed he meant to sow broadcast, which would presently burst forth and transform the ruin of the bush into a luxuriant grass paddock, producing succulent herbage and ample sustenance for increased flocks and herds.

And truly Ernest's way of looking at it was the better one. It is ever best to work for and look forward to what may be the bright outcome of present destruction. It is awful to contemplate the time which is lost in mourning and whining over what we regard as ruin, whether of our own working or that of others. Our hopes in life are perchance shattered, it may be unavoidably, but what boots grieving overmuch. The time will be so much better employed in sowing good seeds on the ashes—seeds sifted clear of evil weeds; then when the harvest comes, as come it assuredly must, we may regard the past desolation with as little concern as Ernest did the destruction of the bush. My simile does not seem exactly to fit, but the lesson I seek to teach from it is nearly as hard to hear as to learn. 'It is as old as the hills,' says one. True, but age has not rusted it, and when you have learnt, and, what is more to the point, applied all the old lessons, my dear reader, we will try and teach you something new. But that will not be just yet.

I do not pretend to say that Ernest dreamt of likening his trouble to the work he had in hand, or that he reflected that there might yet be for him, as for it, a blossoming forth of smiling, sweet-scented verdure which would hide for ever the ugly, ash-strewn surface—one which, perchance, he would not for worlds exchange even for the pristine beauty of the native bush. Still, the possibility was before him; but there was a proviso, the right seed must be sown. Would he stretch forth his arm to sow it, or would he withhold his hand, saying, 'There can be in the future no good thing for me.' We have yet to see. He this as it may, it is very certain that this pet work of his prevented him from thinking too much over his loss.

It will be remembered he was slight of stature and but poorly endowed with physical strength, but he was, nevertheless, a splendid axeman. He possessed the knack, the perfect swing of his axe, compared to which mere brute force is as nothing. The merry ring of his keen edge against the hard grained timber was music to him. The resonant creaking groan and crashing sound as the heartstrings of a hoary big limbed birch gave way, and it quivered, tottered, and fell exactly as he had intended, knocking down with it, like a row of nine pins, several others which he had previously cut half through, thus economising labour, made him laugh gleefully. The scent of the flying fresh-cut chips was sweet in his nostrils. Life even without Maggie was really not to be utterly despised after all; yet with her it would have been—But of this it was best not to think.

About this time he had occasion to visit Dunedin on business. He was absent some weeks, and on his return he was surprised and deeply pained to hear it currently reported that Dick Porter had lately shown signs of being a little queer in his head. That was the way the neighbours expressed it. It appeared that about a fortnight previously he had been thrown from his horse, but was judged at the time to be little or none the worse for the fall. Now, however, it was stated that the accident had left serious results. As yet it was not deemed necessary to put him under restraint. A complete change was what the doctor recommended, together with constant care and supervision. Maggie was only waiting till Ernest returned to ask him to secure someone to look after the farm, so that she could carry out this recommendation by taking a trip to the North Island. It was reported that he occasionally talked of suicide, and that Maggie never allowed him out of her sight if she could avoid it. A neighbour had at first been engaged to assist in watching him, but this so irritated him that it was discontinued. Ernest soon found a man to act as overseer at the farm, and everything was in order for their departure on the proposed journey, which was to take place in two days' time. But suddenly news flew round the settlement one evening that poor Dick had eluded his wife's vigilance by some means, and had been missing since the morning. A few of the nearest neighbours had been hunting for him, but had not found him. It was too late to organize a regular search party that night, but at daylight next morning every able-bodied man and boy in the settlement turned out. The ladies, it is said, acted even more promptly, for not one of them, from the youngest to the oldest, retired to rest on the night they received the intelligence without searching ever conceivable and inconceivable crink and cranny of their respective homes, in no way forgetting the weird and ghostly spaces beneath their beds, but Dick was under none of them.

When Ernest first heard the news he was human or heartless enough—which you will, it matters little—to feel some sort of a sensation of pleasure at it. It flashed through his mind that if the man had destroyed himself—might he not, after a decent period of mourning had elapsed, comfort the sweet young widow in a manner which made the blood dance in his veins even to contemplate. The devil—I will call him by his ordinary name, and leave others to invest him fulsomely with the rank and title of majesty—the devil, I say, is popularly credited with putting such ideas into men's heads, when they happen to be prematurely entertained, as in the present case. That makes all the difference. With reliable evidence of his successful rival's decease before him, Ernest's ardent desire to administer consolation to the poor widow at the cost of his own freedom could not but be regarded as meritorious in the extreme (save perhaps by a few single girls, whose opinions being prejudicial do not count), and far, very far, from being an emanation from the evil one; but he had not that reliable evidence. I might here remark, by the way, that, if the generally conceived opinion quoted above is correct, the devil is about the hardest worked old fellow of his age about. Whoever put this idea into Ernest's head, he very soon drove it out at all events temporarily, and was the most untrusting and energetic of the search party. He went first to the house to gather every particular which might aid them in their labours. The sight of the woman he still loved in her dire distress, with her little sorrow and his father's peril, would have made a far worse man than Ernest vow within himself to do his utmost to save the life of the man who was so