

With Edged Tools

By HENRY SETON MERRIMAN
Author of "The Sowers," "Roden's Corner," "From
One Generation to Another," Etc.

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BY HARPER & BROTHERS

two others, the boy and girl, were playing on the doorstep with some unconsidered trifles from the dust heap, after the manner of children all the world over.

"He was not a good man," said Marie, turning to Jocelyn, as if she alone of all present would understand. "He was not a good husband, but—she shrugged her shoulders with one of her patient, shadowy smiles—"it makes so little difference—yes?"

Jocelyn said nothing. None of them had room to say to her, for each in that room could lay a separate sin at Victor Dumrovo's door. He was gone beyond reach of human justice to the slight court where the extenuating circumstance is fully understood. The generosity of that silence was infectious, and they told her nothing. Had they spoken she would perforce have believed them, but then, as she herself said, it would have made so little difference. So Victor Dumrovo leaves these pages, and all we can do is to remember the writing on the ground. Who among us dares to withhold the extenuating circumstance? Who is ready to leave this world without that crutch to lean upon? Given a mixed blood—evil black with given white—and what can the result be but evil? Given the climate of western Africa and the mental irritation thereof, added to a lack of education and the natural vice inherent in man, and you have—Victor Dumrovo.

Nestorius—the shameless—stretched out his little bare limbs and turned half over on his side. He looked from one face to the other with the grave wonder that was his. He had never been taken much notice of. His short walk in life had been very near the ground, where trifles look very large, and from whence those larger stumbling blocks which occupy our attention are quite invisible. He had been the third—the solitary third child who usually makes his own interest in life, and is left by or leaves the rest of his family.

It was not quite clear to him why he was the center of so much attention. His mind did not run to the comprehension of the fact that he was the wearer of borrowed plumes—the sable plumes of King Death.

He had always wanted to get on to the kitchen table. There was much there that interested him and supplied him with food for thought. He had risked his life on more than one occasion in attempts to scotch that height with the assistance of a companion that turned over and perhaps a sleeping cat that got up and walked away as much annoyed. And now that he was at last at this dizzy height he was sorry to find that he was too tired to crawl about and explore the vast possibilities of it. He was rather too tired to convey his forefinger to his mouth, and was forced to work out mental problems without that aid to thought.

Presently his eyes fell on Guy Osgard's face, and again his own small features expanded into a smile.

"Bad case," he said, and, turning over, he nestled down into the pillow, and he had the answer to the many questions that puzzled his small brain.

As through an opera runs the rhythm of one dominant air, so through men's lives there rings a dominant note, soft in youth, strong in manhood and soft again in old age. But it is always there, and whether soft in the gentler periods or strong amid the noise and clang of the perihelion, it dominates always and gives its tone to the whole life.

The dominant tone of Sir John Meredith's existence had been the high, clear note of battle. He had always found something or some one to fight from the very beginning, and now, in his old age, he was fighting still. His had never been the din and crash of warfare by sword and cannon, but the subtler, deeper combat of the pen. In his active days he had got through a vast amount of work; that unchronicled work of the foreign office which never comes through the cheap newspapers to the voracious maw of a chattering public. His name was better known on the banks of the Neva, the Seine, the Bosphorus, or the swift rolling Isar, than by the Thames, and grim Sir John was content to have it so.

His face had never been public property; the comic papers had never used his personality as a peg upon which to hang their ever changing political principles. But he had always been "there," as he himself vaguely put it. That is to say, he had always been at the back—one of those invisible powers of the stage by whose command the scene is shifted, the lights are lowered for the tragedy or the gay music plays on the buffoon. Sir John had no sympathy with a generation of men and women who would rather be laughed at and despised than unnoticed. He belonged to an age wherein it was held better to be a gentleman than the object of a cheap and evanescent notoriety, and he was at once the despair and the dread of newspaper interviewers and enterprising publishers and turf hunters.

He was so little known out of his own select circle that the porters in Euston station asked each other in vain who the old swell waiting for the 4 o'clock "up" from Liverpool could be. The 4 o'clock was, moreover, not the first express which Sir John had met that day. His stately carriage and pair had pushed its way into the crowd of smaller and humbler vehicular fry earlier in the afternoon, and on that occasion also the old gentleman had indulged in a grave promenade upon the platform.

He was walking up and down there now, with his hand in the small of his back, where of late he had been aware

of a constant aching pain. He was very upright, however, and supremely unconscious of the curiosity aroused by his presence in the mind of the station "canaille." His lips were rather more troublesome than usual, and his keen eyes twinkled with a suppressed excitement.

In former days there had been no one equal to him in certain diplomatic crises, where it was a question of browbeating suavely the uppish representative of some foreign state. No man could then rival him in the insolently aristocratic school of diplomacy which his England has made her own. But in his most dangerous crisis he had never been restless, apprehensive, pessimistic, as he was at this moment. And, after all, it was a very simple matter that had brought him here. It was merely the question of meeting a man as if by accident, and then afterward making that man do certain things required of him. Moreover, the man was only Guy Osgard, learned, if you will, in forest craft, but a mere child in the hands of so old a diplomatist as Sir John Meredith.

That which made Sir John so uneasy was the abiding knowledge that Jack's wedding day would dawn in twelve hours. The margin was much too small, through, however, no fault of Sir John's. The west African steamer had been delayed, unaccountably, two days. A third day lost in the Atlantic would have overthrown Sir John Meredith's plan. He had often cut things fine before, but somehow now—not that he was getting old, oh, no!—but somehow the suspense was too much for his nerves. He soon became irritated and distrustful. Besides, the pain in his back worried him and interfered with the clear sequence of his thoughts.

The owners of the west African steamer had telegraphed that the passengers had left for London in two separate trains. Guy Osgard was not in the first—there was no positive reason why he should be in the second. More depended upon his being in this second express than Sir John cared to contemplate.

The course of his peregrinations brought him into the vicinity of an inspector whose attitude betokened respect while his presence raised hope.

"Is there any reason to suppose that your train is coming?" he inquired of the official.

"Signaled now, my lord," replied the inspector, touching his cap.

"And what does that mean?" unconpromisingly ignorant of technical parlance.

"It will be in in one minute, my lord."

Sir John's hand was over his lips as he walked back to the carriage, casting as it were the commander's eye over the field.

"When the crowd is round the train you come and look for me," he said to the footman, who touched his cocked hat in silence.

At that moment the train lumbered in, the engine wearing that innately self important air affected by locomotives of the larger build. From all quarters an army of porters besieged the platform, and in a few seconds Sir John was in the center of an agitated crowd. There was one other calm man on that platform—another man with no parcels, whom no one sought to embrace. His brown face and close cropped head towered above a sea of agitated bonnets. Sir John, whose walk in life had been through crowds, elbowed his way forward and deliberately walked against Guy Osgard.

"Hang it!" he exclaimed, turning round. "Ah—Mr. Osgard—how d'ye do?"

"How are you?" replied Guy Osgard, really glad to see him.

"You are a good man for a crowd. I think I will follow in your wake," said Sir John. "A number of people, of the baser sort. Got my carriage here somewhere. Fool of a man looking for me in the wrong place no doubt. Where are you going? May I offer you a lift? This way. Here, John, take Mr. Osgard's parcels."

He could not have done it better in his keenest day. Guy Osgard was



—Ah—Mr. Osgard—how d'ye do?—

"Yes," replied Guy; "although he is not my man. He is Jack's man Joseph."

"Ah, of course! Excellent servant too. Jack told me he had left him with you."

Sir John leaned out of the window and asked the footman whether he knew his colleague Joseph, and upon receiving an answer in the affirmative he gave orders, acting as Guy's mouthpiece, that the luggage was to be conveyed to Russell square. While these orders were being executed the two men sat waiting in the carriage, and Sir John lost no time.

"It is my glad," he said, "to have this opportunity of thanking you for all your kindness to my son in this wild expedition of yours."

"Yes," replied Osgard, with a transparent reserve which rather puzzled Sir John.

"You must excuse me," said the old gentleman, sitting rather stiffly, "if I appear to be a somewhat limited interest in this great simacine discovery, of which there has been considerable talk in some circles. The limit to my interest is drawn by a lamentable ignorance. I am afraid the business details are rather unintelligible to me. My son has endeavored, somewhat cursorily perhaps, to explain the matter to me, but I have never mastered the—er—commercial technicalities. However, I understand that you have made quite a mint of money, which is the chief thing—nowadays."

"I drew the rug more closely round his knees and looked out of the window, deeply interested in a dispute between two cabmen.

"Yes—we have been very successful," said Osgard. "How is your son now? When I last saw him he was in a very bad way. Indeed, I hardly expected to see him again."

Sir John was still interested in the dispute which was not yet settled.

"He is well, thank you. You know that he is going to be married."

"He told me that he was engaged," replied Osgard, "but I did not know that anything definite was fixed."

"The most definite thing of all is fixed—the date. It is tomorrow."

"Yes, you have not much time to prepare your wedding garments."

"Oh," replied Osgard, with a laugh. "I have not been bitten."

"I expect the invitation is awaiting you at your house. No doubt my son will want you to be present—they would both like you to be there no doubt. But come with me now; we will call and see Jack. I know where to find him. In fact, I have an appointment with him at a quarter to 5."

It may seem strange that Guy Osgard should not have asked the name of his friend's prospective bride, but Sir John was ready for that. He gave his companion no time. Whenever he opened his lips Sir John turned Osgard's thoughts aside.

What he had told him was strictly true. He had an appointment with Jack—an appointment of his own making.

"Yes," he said, in pursuance of his policy of choking questions, "he is wonderfully well, as you will see for yourself."

Osgard submitted silently to this high handed arrangement. He had not known Sir John well. Indeed, all his intercourse with him has been noted in these pages. He was rather surprised to find him so talkative and so very friendly. But Guy Osgard was not a very deep person. He was sublimely indifferent to the long drawn motive. He presumed that Sir John made friends of his son's friends, and in his straightforward acceptance of facts he was perfectly well aware that by his timely rescue he had saved Jack Meredith from the hands of the tribes. The presumption was that Sir John knew of this, and it was only natural that he should be somewhat exceptionally gracious to the man who had saved his son's life.

It would seem that Sir John divined these thoughts, for he presently spoke of them.

"Owing to an unfortunate difference of opinion with my son we have not been very communicative lately," he said, with that deliberation which he knew how to assume when he desired to be heard without interruption. "I am therefore almost entirely ignorant of your African affairs, but I imagine Jack owes more to your pluck and promptness than has yet transpired. I gathered as much from one of two conversations I had with Miss Gordon when she was in England. I am one of Miss Gordon's many admirers."

"And I am another," said Osgard frankly.

"Ah! Then you are happy enough to be the object of a reciprocal feeling which for myself I could scarcely expect. She spoke of you in no measured language. I gathered from her that if you had not acted with great promptitude the—er—happy event of tomorrow could not have taken place."

The old man paused, and Guy Osgard, who looked somewhat distressed and distinctly uncomfortable, could find no graceful way of changing the conversation.

"In a word," went on Sir John in a very severe tone, "I owe you a great debt. You saved my boy's life."

"Yes, but you see," argued Osgard, finding his tongue at last, "out there things like that don't count for so much."

"Oh, don't they? There was the suggestion of a smile beneath Sir John's grim eyebrows."

"No," returned Osgard, rather lamely. "It is a sort of thing that happens every day out there."

Sir John turned suddenly, and with the courtliness that was ever his indulged in a rare exhibition of feeling. He laid his hand on Guy Osgard's stalwart knee.

"Here we are at Lady Cantourne's," continued Sir John, "where, as it happens, I expect to meet Jack. Her ladyship is naturally interested in the affair of tomorrow, and has kindly undertaken to keep us up to date in our behavior. You will come in with me?"

Osgard remembered afterward that he was rather puzzled, that there was perhaps in his simple mind the faintest trace of suspicion. At the moment, however, there was no time to do anything but follow. The man had already

rung the bell and Lady Cantourne's butler was holding the door open. There was something in his attitude vaguely suggestive of expectation. He never took his eyes from Sir John Meredith's face, as if on the alert for an unspoken order.

Guy Osgard followed his companion into the hall, and the very scent of the house—for each house speaks to more senses than one—made his heart leap in his broad breast. It seemed as if Millicent's presence was in the very air. This was more than he could have hoped. He had not intended to call this afternoon, although the visit was only to have been postponed for twenty-four hours.

Sir John Meredith's face was a marvel to see. It was quite steady. He was upright and alert, with all the intrepidity of his mind up in arms. There was a light in his eyes, a gleam of light from other days not yet burned out.

He laid aside his good headed cane and threw back his shoulders.

"Is Mr. Meredith upstairs?" he said to the butler.

"Yes, sir."

The man moved toward the stairs.

"You need not come!" said Sir John, holding up his hand.

The butler stood aside and Sir John led the way up to the drawing room. At the door he paused for a moment. Guy Osgard was at his heels. Then he opened the door rather slowly and motioned gracefully with his left hand to Osgard to pass in before him.

Osgard stepped forward. When he had crossed the threshold Sir John closed the door sharply behind him and turned to go downstairs.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GUY OSGARD stood for a moment on the threshold. He heard the door closed behind him, and he took two steps farther forward.

Jack Meredith and Millicent were at the fireplace. There was a heap of disordered paper and a string upon the table, and a few wedding presents standing in the midst of their packing.

Millicent's pretty face was quite white. She looked from Meredith to Osgard with a sudden horror in her eyes. For the first time in her life she was at a loss, quite taken aback.

"Oh-h!" she whispered, and that was all.

The silence that followed was tense, as if something in the atmosphere was about to snap, and in the midst of it the wheels of Sir John's retreating carriage came to the ears of the three persons in the drawing room.

It was only for a moment, but at that moment the two men saw clearly. It was as if the veil from the girl's mind had fallen—leaving her thoughts confessed, bare before them. In the same instant they both saw—they both sped back in thought to their first meeting, to the hundred links of the chain that brought them to the present moment—they knew; and Millicent felt that they knew.

"Are you going to be married tomorrow?" asked Guy Osgard deliberately. He never was a man to whom a successful appeal for the slightest mitigation of justice could have been made. His dealings had ever been with men, from whom he had exacted as scrupulously an honor as he had given. He did not know that women are different—that honor is not their strong point.

Millicent did not answer for her, but Meredith was looking at Osgard, and in his lazy eyes there glowed the singular affection and admiration which he had bestowed long time before on this simple gentleman—his mental inferior.

"Are you going to be married tomorrow?" repeated Osgard, standing quite still, with a calmness that frightened her.

"Yes," she answered, rather feebly.

She knew that she could explain it all. She could have explained it to either of them separately, but to both together, somehow it was difficult. Her mind was filled with clamoring arguments and explanations and plausible excuses, but she did not know which to select first. None of them seemed quite equal to this occasion. These men required something deeper and stronger and simpler than she had to offer them.

Moreover, she was paralyzed by a feeling that was quite new to her—a horrid feeling that something had gone from her. She had lost her strongest, her single arm—her beauty. This she seemed to count for nothing at this time. There was a time that comes as surely as death will come in the life of every beautiful woman—a time when she suddenly realizes how trivial a thing her beauty is; how limited, how useless, how ineffectual!

Millicent Chyne made a little appealing movement toward Meredith, who relentlessly stopped back. It was the magic of the love that filled his heart for Osgard. Had she wronged any man in the world but Guy Osgard, that little movement, full of love and tenderness and sweet contrition, might have saved her. But it was Osgard's heart that she had broken; for broken they both knew it to be, and Jack Meredith stepped back from her touch as from pollution. His superficial, assigned love for her had been killed at a single blow. Her beauty was no more to him at that moment than the beauty of a picture.

"Oh, Jack!" she gasped; and had there been another woman in the room that woman would have known that Millicent loved him with the love that comes once only. But men are not very acute in such matters; they either read wrong or not at all.

"It is all a mistake," she said breathlessly, looking from one to the other. "A most awkward mistake," suggested Meredith, with a cruel smile that made her wince.

"Mr. Osgard must have mistaken me altogether," the girl went on, volubly addressing herself to Meredith; she wanted nothing from Osgard. "I may have been silly, perhaps, or merely ignorant and blind. How was I to know that he meant what he said?"

"How, indeed?" agreed Meredith, with a grave bow.

"Besides, he has no business to come here bringing false accusations against me. He has no right—it is cruel and unjustifiably. He cannot prove any-

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thing; he cannot say that I ever dishonestly gave him to understand—er—anything—that I ever promised to be engaged or anything like that."

She turned upon Osgard, whose demeanor was stolid, almost dense. He looked very large and somewhat difficult to move.

"He has not attempted to do so yet," suggested Jack suavely, looking at his friend.

"I do not see that it is quite a question of proofs," said Osgard quietly in a voice that did not sound like his at all. "We are not in a court of justice, where ladies like to settle these questions now. If we were I could challenge you to produce my letters. There is no doubt of my meaning in them."

"There are also my poor contributions to your collection," chimed in Jack Meredith. "A comparison must have been interesting to you, by the same mail presumably, under the same postmark."

"I made no comparison," the girl cried defiantly; "there was no question of comparison."

She said it shamelessly, and it hurt Meredith more than it hurt Guy Osgard, for whom the sting was intended.

"Comparison or no comparison," said Jack Meredith quickly, with the keenness of a good fencer who has been touched, "there can be no doubt of the fact that you were engaged to me both at the same time. If you told us both to go out and make a fortune where can only presume that the highest bidder—the owner of the largest fortune—was to be the happy man. Unfortunately, we became partners, and—such was the power of your fascination—we made the fortune, but we share and share alike in that. We are equal, so far as the price is concerned. The situation is interesting and rather amusing. It is your turn to move. We await your further instructions in considerable suspense."

She stared at him with bloodless lips. She did not seem to understand what he was saying. At last she spoke, ignoring Guy Osgard's presence altogether.

"Considering that we are to be married tomorrow, I do not think that you should speak to me like that," she said, with a strange, concentrated eagerness.

"Pardon me, we are not going to be married tomorrow."

Her brilliant teeth closed on her lower lip with a snap, and she stood looking at him, breathing so hard that the sound was almost a sob.

"What do you mean?" she whispered hoarsely.

He raised his shoulders in polite surprise at her dullness of comprehension.

"In the unfortunate circumstances in which you are placed," he explained, "it seems to me that the least one can do is to offer every assistance in one's power. In a word—I scratch."

"Please consider me horsing concerns. In a word—I scratch."

"You are fighting for that which some deem dearer than life—namely, her love. For it is not only the good women who love, though these understand it best and see further into it."

"Then you can never have cared for me!" she cried. "All that you have told me"—and her eyes flashed triumphantly across Osgard—"all that you have promised and vowed was utterly false if you turn against me at the first word of a man who who me at thinking things that he had no business to say."

"Guy Osgard was no great adept at wordy warfare, he was at all events strong in his reception of punishment. He stood upright and quiescent, betraying by neither sign nor movement that her words could hurt him.

"I beg to suggest again," said Jack composedly, "that Osgard has not yet seemed to have fallen for nothing at this time. There is a time that comes as surely as death will come in the life of every beautiful woman—a time when she suddenly realizes how trivial a thing her beauty is; how limited, how useless, how ineffectual!"

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