

MARY THE MAID OF THE INN

A Story of English Life.

By JOSEPH HATTON.

(CHAPTER IV.—Continued.)

At the same time Dick had no greater admirer than Andrew Foster. For the very reason that Morley admired his niece, Dick had qualities Foster did not possess, resources he could not understand, was always merry, and combined with the manners and appearance of a prince, rare generosity.

Unfortunately for the continuation of Foster's good opinion, Dick had of late made nothing and spent much, his gallantries being as expensive as his personal extravagance in other directions. Moreover, he had recently endangered both Foster's neck and his own by a piece of unnecessary recklessness that had rendered it desirable they should seek fresh woods and pastures new for their future operations. This had brought them into Yorkshire; and their quarry, as Foster called it, was this very Bellingham who had supped in the same room with them, and had been spotted by Dick with his usual promptitude.

The next morning when they were getting up the travelers had an interesting conversation.

"He is going to Newcastle," said Foster; "on his return he will stop at York."

"Yes," said Dick.

"Black Diston will shadow him meanwhile, and we will meet him at a convenient bend in the road near the abbey if the time is convenient."

"The money is not in doubt?"

"Not in the least; we have information from a clerk in the bank."

"The young fellow we drank with at Leeds last night?"

"You are devilish quick—the same."

"Ah, now you are quite well again, Andy; you have not paid me a compliment for a week."

"I hope to pay you several before the month is out, and to see ourselves provided for the winter."

"Always practical," said Dick; "and between now and the Bellingham incident, what is your proposal?"

"The program is yours, not mine. We move on today, get acquainted with the roads, visit Harrogate, take a glance at York, and make dispositions for retreat to Whitby, where a sloop will be lying at anchor for us."

"You will forgive me if I change the program."

"Change it," exclaimed Foster; "it is a settled scheme, and we are on it. And I never made a more complete plan of retreat nor a longer one, by your own wish."

"I shall take up my quarters here during those ten days."

"Then by all the oaths which bind us I will not forgive you," said Foster, hissing the words between his broken teeth.

"Why not?" asked Dick, paying more than usual attention to his toilet.

"Because you are at the old game; and I will neither be ruined nor hanged for you, except in the way of business—though, mark me, Dick, I will not tamely give you up. You are necessary to this work—it has got to be done. When it is done, you can come and stay here until you rot; for, whatever happens, I have done with you when this job is over."

"There is something wrong, truly," said Dick. "I have thought so many times these six weeks; you talk so much and so fast—reticent Andy, we used to call you—loquacious would be more truthful now."

"I mean business, Dick—never so much as on this occasion—and neither heaven nor hell nor you shall stop me, and if it comes to a quarrel between you and me, let it come—only don't forget that it ends one of us."

Foster spoke with calm, brutal deliberation. His manner and his language evidently made an unusual impression on the younger traveler, who passed while buckling his shoes, looked up into the sinister face of his companion and bit his lip as if to stop an angry retort.

"Your language is as ugly as your face," said Dick; "you show your teeth like Wild's bull terrier before she springs. What is it? Shall we go out and have a shooting match in the yard, and introduce a funeral into the outdoor entertainment of Kirkstall, or what other delightful surprise have you in store for the natives?"

"I mean friendship, honor, share and share alike; or I mean what we all mean when a comrade turns traitor."

"Who is conducting this business?" asked Dick, standing up and confronting Foster.

"Up to now, you."

"Then listen. I have other schemes beyond the Bellingham business which you will be good enough to allow me to develop in my own way. It is my intention for the next week or so to fish in the Aire. I shall go into Leeds in the morning and buy bait and tackle; you will amuse yourself as you please in the meantime. I think you should reconnoiter Harrogate and York—study the roads—I will be ready to join you when you want me."

"I know you well enough," said Foster, "to understand this change of front. I have said all I intend to say—you know me well enough to know what I mean. I am friend or foe, as you choose—stand in the dock for it or the gallows."

"I shall be in the dock for it or the gallows," said Dick, "if you do not stand in the dock for it or the gallows."

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"The morning, Mr. Morley," said Jack.

"Very well, thank you, sir."

Old Morley liked to have Jack Meadows address him as "sir," and he favored his suit for Mary.

"Do you think your change of program will work?" Foster asked as Dick caught Mary's eye from the window and waved his hand to her.

"I think so," said Dick, as well he might, if the conquest of Mary occupied the important place in his program, which Foster thought it did; for Dick was quick to note the flush that started fresh and ruddy upon Mary's cheek as she responded to his salute with a bend of her graceful head, and the sweet parting of her lips into a pleasant smile.

"He is a stalwart-looking chap," said Foster.

"The young countryman?" remarked Dick interrogatively, as if Foster might be speaking of some one else.

"Her lover," said Foster.

"Do you think he is her lover?"

"Don't you?" asked Foster.

"No; but you seem to think she is the cause of my change of plans."

"You object to my thinking?" said Foster.

"When you doubt the truth and direction of the officer you have sworn to obey."

"Yes; discipline is as necessary in our work as it is in the army; that is Wild's motto, and yours—sometimes."

"Always," said Dick.

"We shall see. But I am off to study the ground, and you will find me three miles this side the last York toll gate, at nine."

With which parting remark Foster left the room, paid his bill, ordered his horse, and presently cantered into the highway, past the little Hark-to-Rover inn.

CHAPTER V.

Andy writhed under the young man's grip and words, grew livid and was clearly afraid.

Suddenly releasing him, Dick flung him to the ground, and drew a pistol from his breeches pocket.

Foster looked up for a moment, then gathered himself together and arose to his feet. He did not speak; neither did Dick. The deadly silence was at last broken by Dick.

"Am I the chief?" he said, replacing his weapon.

"You are the chief," Foster replied.

"This is our first serious quarrel, let it be our last," said Dick.

"It shall," Foster replied; "the man who can twist Andrew Foster about as if he were a weathercock is good enough to follow."

"You think so, truly? And no knife in your thoughts, no knife or pistol on a dark night when your man is off his guard?"

"I am sincere," said Foster, thoroughly cowed.

"Your hand on it."

Foster put out his hand. Dick took it, and as he pressed it in a peculiar way repeated part of the oath which bound the little company of so-called merchants together. "And whosoever he shall break his oath of fealty to the chief then and there in authority, his life shall be forfeit and may be taken by one and all; or, failing this just execution, he shall be deserted by all in the hour of his need."

"Those are the words, I think?"

"They are," said Foster.

"You still subscribe to them?"

"I do."

"Then it is I who spare your life, Andy; not you who spare mine, eh?"

"That is so," said the red-eyed sneak.

"And we will forget all that has occurred to shake our tempers in Kirkstall."

"And at Leeds," said Foster, ready to make the amends more complete.

"We are friends, comrades, brothers, once more," said Dick, with a pleasant smile. "After breakfast you will go on your way—at the end of the week you will report yourself. I will meet you six days hence at York—a mile this side the last turnpike, at 9."

"Right!" said Foster; and such is discipline, when enforced by authority combined with superior skill and strength, that half an hour afterwards the young traveler and his friend were breakfasting together as amicably as if there had never been the shadow of a cloud upon their intercourse.

They preferred to eat in the private room that overlooked the high road; Bellingham and two other guests in the general room.

It was a cozy, wainscoted apartment, this private room that flanked the bar, and matched it with a large bow-window, which commanded a fine view of Kirkstall Abbey, with the Aire and a stretch of green meadows in the foreground, and in the distance glimpses of the river as it flowed in crystal beauty through one of the loveliest valleys in England.

As the two travelers were finishing their morning meal they were attracted by Tom Sheffield, the man of all work, leading to the door a smart cob, which was followed by a young fellow mounted upon a similar animal, the sturdy countryman vaulting out of his saddle to assist a merry-looking girl into her. Not that Mary required his aid. She took his hands, nevertheless. It was offered with the grace of a perfect horseman.

Jack Meadows was Yorkshire born and bred, and if there is one thing a Yorkshireman can do better than any other man it is to ride a horse, and if there is one thing a Yorkshireman knows more than any other it is a good horse when he sees it. Jack Meadows was a rough farmer; he sat with the dignity of an Indian and the confidence and ease of a huntsman. He wore his velvet jacket, drab breeches, figured stock, and all that, and smiled proudly at Mary as her horse curvetted and showed its points, and her own.

"For a spin to Jack's farm," said Mary, answering her uncle, who stood in an attitude of admiration at the inn door. "To see the new colts; and we will be back half an hour before the coach."

"Very well," said the old man, as in time for the coach, and you'll be in time for me, Mary. Now we are ready to go."

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