

FORCED APART

By W. CLARK RUSSELL.

Author of the "Wreck of the Grosvenor," "A Sailor's Sweetheart," Etc.

CHAPTER IV.
BREAKFAST TIME.

Out of his bed rose Cuthbert, to the tune of the school bell, swung by the man who cleaned the boots and thrived on pocket money errands to the destruction of youthful digestions.

His own mild hint yesterday, by which he had hoped to put his father off from grappling questions, had stirred him into perception of new sympathies in his nature. With thoughts of his wife, and the secret to be divulged before another night should come, had mingled impulses of freedom, a yearning for the shows and struggles of an outer world, and a placid weariness of spirit, when the school room rose in his eyes, with the tasks to be set and the ignorance to be corrected.

His resolution to proclaim his secret was a quickening spirit in the soil of his mind, germinating seeds there which he himself knew not of.

"Why need I fear my father's anger?" he thought, as he threw open his bedroom window, and stood in a stream of sweet warm wind, fresh from the blue water; "I have served him dutifully, and will yet justify all his fine thoughts of his calling by sticking to it, if he will love Jenny, and bear with me for marrying her. If not, the world is big enough to find me work, surely! What I am fitted for shall not trouble me; but what I can get to do, I'll do."

This honest soliloquy done, he betook himself to dressing.

Never a looking glass gave back a handsome face than that into which he glanced. Such a picture of dark auburn hair, white brow and blue eyes, bright with mind, as would set a heartless beauty dreaming like a faithful sweetheart.

And now for the day's dry work, the first stage of which was the meeting of the boys in the schoolroom, to await amid crackling of yawns and restless shuffling of feet, the arrival of Dr. Shaw in that academic gown of his, which he donned only to read the morning prayers in or to burch a boy.

Between prayer time and breakfast time there was a half hour, to employ which profitably to his spirits, that stood sorely in need of regenerating influences, and also to escape his father's eyes, the twist of which, when they all got off their knees, he did not relish, Cuthbert went into the fields before the house; and so, through the glorifying sunshine and the narrow footway in the barley, down to the short grass of the cliff edge, on the swell of which he stood within a fathom of the sheer fall.

A scene of summer beauty and morning splendor was this he overlooked.

But Cuthbert was toiling with a giant in his mind, and nature was only blue and green to him; for there is nothing dainty to a troubled mind but ease, and this our young friend could not get, neither by sitting nor by standing.

But no use standing moodily conjecturing trouble. So back again to the school house through the crops, which went whispering to the passage of the wind, as though they had snatched a secret from it.

To the ushers—this old-fashioned term is very meaning—was conceded the privilege of breakfasting with the boys. But Cuthbert would have been glad to exchange places with any one of them that morning, so little fancy had he for a tete-a-tete with his father.

It was his duty, however, to be in the room when the boys assembled, and observe that grace was duly said by one of the masters, and deliver the order for the boys to fall to.

Under the clock he stood, punctual to the hour, and in a hungry swarm the boys tumbled in.

Grace having been said by a bachelor of arts, and the order to begin given, out sprang forty hands from under the tables, and the pyramids lost their form and substance.

Then Master Cuthbert, with a pleasant smile around him, left the room.

Old Dr. Shaw, with his legs crossed, and showing no prodigy of calf, bent an eye upon his son as he entered the room that seemed to twist round and round into him.

Cuthbert took a chair and waited, with his father, for the servant to bring in the ham and teapot.

Until these things were forthcoming the doctor held his tongue.

Then, wheeling round, cup in hand and the saucer poised on thumb and forefinger, after an old-fashioned habit of drinking tea, he looked hard at Cuthbert.

"I have no right yet, I suppose," said he, in a level voice, "to ask you to explain your mysterious hints of yesterday?"

"It was understood, sir, that I should have a day or two for reflection."

"For reflection on what?" demanded the doctor, sharply.

"All?"

The doctor uttered the exclamation with a most embracing emphasis.

Cuthbert made no answer.

"I should be glad to have my doubts set at rest," continued the doctor, with a gloomy nod of the head, intended to serve as a challenge.

Still no reply from Cuthbert.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Dr. Shaw, with a great deal of the schoolmaster in his face and a flourish of the saucer, "I have a right to demand an answer from you."

"So you have, sir, unquestionably."

"Then give me, in a few words, the meaning of this change in your behavior."

"A few words will convey nothing."

"Then," shouted the doctor, "be elaborate. Give me prolixity if you will, so that you explain."

"Pray, sir, moderate your impatience. I pledge myself to be open with you shortly."

Dr. Shaw grew red in the face, and deposited his cup and saucer, that he might gesture unconstrainedly.

"What," said he, subduing the passion in his voice, "what I desire to know, is this matter—in your mind, that is—not yet ripe for confession?"

more ill-favored for his honesty to gulp at, was the only reason he could have given you for carrying his bit of news to Strangfield first.

Into the school room he went, with his nervous brooding and face of unpeaceful thought, and mounted his stool, loathing the pantomime of his actions.

At ten o'clock, with the punctuality that invites awe, entered Dr. Shaw; up rose the forms and the desks to salute this head, as wigs in the law courts spring into a flourish of vegetation when "my lord" comes rustling to the judgment seat. With a short bow—for pomp is difficult to five foot six of stock and tall, though swelling with frill—the doctor took his seat, and with a smart rap on his desk summoned the Grecians to their labors.

Noon was the hour for a frisk in the playground.

To escape his father, Cuthbert joined the boys, but had no heart to mingle in their sports, though invited by some of the elder lads.

The English master, a cautious, reddish-haired son of the Borderland, but of speech untainted by Ergs, unhaunted by Runic germs, came to him with a trim politeness of air and extolled the sky.

"Sir," said the English master, clapping some book under his arm, "this is weather to make boys fat with pleasure."

Cuthbert smiled.

"When I was a lad I ran most nimbly when the sun was hottest. It must please your father's son, Mr. Cuthbert, to see these boys so hearty and spirited."

"No doubt he is pleased," rejoined Cuthbert, listlessly.

"You will observe, sir, that health is a larger condition in the eyes of parents than education."

"It should be so."

"One should be a boy to lead boys, Mr. Cuthbert."

"Sometimes one gets tired of boys, though."

"It is plain, Mr. Shaw, that you find this business of teaching boys irksome."

"I need not deny it," replied Cuthbert, candidly, with a glance round the playground.

"But—pray pardon my freedom—you are a younger man than I, of bright promise, Mr. Shaw—forgive me—and ardent, as I may fairly presume from your abilities. I sometimes respectfully wonder that your father does not give scope to your ambitions, and deliver you, with such opportunities as his position warrants, to the world you could not fail to grace."

"Ah, Mr. Saunderson, there is much to wonder at," replied Cuthbert, gently. "Times squares everything, if we have patience for the routine of phases. There is the little baronet-crying—who has been bullying him?"—with which excuse he left the English master.

So the day wore away and the evening came, and when the boys had trooped to the dormitories Cuthbert went to his room to prepare his mind and person for the beginning of a difficulty. He had no acquaintance with Mr. Strangfield, but knew him well by sight, of course, as Jenny's father, and by hearsay as a mule of a man in prejudice, rancorous as a mule in his manner of belief, and with those disdains of blood precedence and factitious rights which filled the pot-houses of the time with eloquence, and gave a strut to the low man's stride. So, as a tactician should who knows that big ends are often compassed by small provisions, Cuthbert dressed himself in his soberest apparel—a well-worn monkey jacket and dark small clothes—resolved, at least, with true world cunning, that the hard-eyed Baptist should find nothing foppish in his dress to smell rankly to prepare prejudice.

Then, with his lips twitching to the strength of his silent arguments, our hero went lightly down the staircase, and softly passed his father's study, and out by the house door.

He had hoped to get away unseen; but lo! in front of the garden gate stood Mr. Saunderson, smoking a pipe and contemplatively enjoying the strong evening breeze. The twilight was small, and the moon reedding behind the glowing foreland lamp. Had Cuthbert chosen to walk on Mr. Saunderson would not have recognized him; but in his embarrassment he must needs stop and speak, whereat the master whirled his pipe out of his mouth and stared ceremoniously.

"A fresh evening, Mr. Saunderson. Pray continue to smoke."

"It is, I may truly say, my only indulgence," replied Mr. Saunderson, giving his pipe a loving shake. "There is less chance of my being observed here by the boys, than were I to light my pipe at the back of the house. You are going for a stroll, sir?"

"Ay; one cannot do without exercise."

And with a nod Cuthbert went on his way.

Mr. Saunderson looked after him earnestly, and when the young fellow had vanished in the folding shadows, shook his head and betook himself to his pipe again, sucking strongly.

Mr. Strangfield's house was a long twenty minutes' walk from Graystone school, stepping it briskly; but even if the dust, when the curve was compassed, that drove fall in his face had proved no hindrance to Cuthbert, the obnoxiousness of his mission, and the thoughts that it bred tweaking savagely at his nerves, would account for the frequent drag of his pace.

He had passed his trysting-place, and had turned the elbow of the road which laid the town broad under his eye, when the sounds of men's voices came up with the wind, and, in a few moments, he perceived a crowd of persons approaching him. The moon, stooping clear of a pillow-shaped cloud, threw out a full radiance, by which he saw that the crowd was a company of sailors—some ten of them at least—and that they walked in two gangs, one on either side three men, who strode abreast with heads dejectedly hung and their hands plinked behind them.

"Deserters," thought Cuthbert, stepping aside.

"Stand!" shouted a youthful voice, "in the king's name! Thompson, here is a toe-and-heeler for us. Hell make the complement, and no more sweethearts to break our heads with frying pans."

The word "Stand!" though very forcibly delivered, produced no effect on Cuthbert, who could scarcely credit, indeed, that it was meant for him; and he was passing on when a young man in a cloak stepped in front of him.

"Now, my bantam, turn about! You're wanted!"

"Do you address me?" exclaimed Cuthbert so much amazed that he looked behind him, half persuaded that there must be some one there for whom the accent was intended.

"You or the man in the moon, my hearty; whoever is the nearest."

"Suffer me to pass you, sir."

"Now, this is too bad," cried the young fellow, in a mock voice of consolation. "Oaths we are used to, but politeness in a son of a quid is fit for nothing but to get lashed on tick with. Stand, I tell you! Damn it, don't you understand king's English?" for Cuthbert was pushing past.

"Make way for me. You are overstepping your duty, or laboring under an error."

"Ay, ay, we always do that. Thompson, give him a cheer to port. We'll argue as we go."

A bushy-whiskered fellow approached Cuthbert, who sprang back a yard before the outstretched arm.

"Touch me at your peril!" he shouted.

"Come, come, take it coolly, man. All the

agitation in the world 'I do no good. 'Tis snare you wants ye, so give us your hand upon it." With a bound the bushy-whiskered man grasped Cuthbert's arm.

The three plinked men looked on with a dull interest; the sailors turned their tobacco junks unconcernedly, glancing back at the town or up at the moon, muttering over the wet pluck before them.

Cuthbert had one of those nervous systems which, in a fury, make steel of the hand and steam engines of the muscles. His white fist sped, like a snow flake on a rush of wind, right into the bend of the man Thompson's brow, and a pigtail wriggled in the dust, and a pair of boots tried to hit the moon.

"What should be the matter with her?" demanded Mr. Strangfield, presently. "Her health is sound?"

"I hope so!" cried Mrs. Strangfield, nervously.

"No one has been meddling with her heart, to my knowledge."

"Meddle! Certainly not. Should I not know?"

"Unless," continued Mr. Strangfield, "she be fallen into that state against which the Apostle warned the Corinthian damsels, putting it in this way—that the unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord; which was, doubtless, a true thing to say of those ancient people, but will not hold now."

Mr. Strangfield shook her head softly.

"If she had a sweetheart she would tell me," said she, looking rather vaguely, however, at her husband, as a woman might whose conscience does not place her perfectly at ease.

"I could not imagine that she would not," said the husband, sternly.

"As to Mrs. Mead's gossip, it's idler than the wind. Being known to her somehow," continued Mrs. Strangfield, who was not very easily repressed, and who, when she had a point to get at, always traveled to it along the most roundabout paths—"for the chit will not explain how their acquaintance began—is it not proper that Mr. Shaw, who is a born gentleman and knows manners, should take off his hat to her and pass a pleasant word when they meet? Now, through some blockhead neighbor, Mother Mead hears of their talking on the beach, whither Jenny had gone for shells for a pin cushion. And to me she comes with a wise tossing of the nose. But, says I, 'Ma'am, I am my daughter's mother, and what concerns me shall be my proper trouble, under Providence, that our neighbors may have full time for their own affairs.' That was well said Michael, dost thee not think?"

"Let Mrs. Mead beware how she meddle with Jenny's name! But there should be no cause, neither for her nor any other gossip, to talk."

"Cause!" cried Mrs. Strangfield, opening her mild eyes, with a little toss of the knitting needles. "A pretty pass, truly, if Mr. Shaw cannot pull off his hat to Jenny, and praise the weather, without his politeness being called a cause. A cause to set Mrs. Mead's tongue going! You need not stand on your head to do that."

"I'll not have Mr. Shaw's name chimed with my wench's," exclaimed Strangfield, "Beelzebub himself is not harder on us than the doctor up at the schoolhouse."

"Dear heart alive, I know naught of Mr. Shaw," exclaimed Mrs. Strangfield, with a corner glance at her husband. "If Jenny has set him gazing, his mouth is not the only one her beauty has opened. I like to look at his handsome face in the street when I meet him, and his eyes never were matched for the blue of them. These are the Lord's doings, and a woman may admire the works of creation, I hope. But Jenny would not make a sweetheart of him without opening her heart to me."

"What does Jenny do in her bedroom all these hours?" said he. "These mopings have come upon her since her return from Sydenham. Did she leave her heart behind her there?"

"Now, how you talk! Were that so, would not Rachel have written?"

"Jane, Jane, I do not like thy habit of fleeing. It is an old taint of sauciness."

"I'll go and call Jenny, and she shall argue with thee herself," said Mrs. Strangfield, quite unruffled by her husband's reprimand.

She put down her knitting, and leisurely rising, with a pretty waddle left the room. Up the staircase, aside enough for a big house, she went, and with a smart turn of the door handle, entered a bedroom. Here all was dark, until a few moments' gazing exposed Jenny's figure seated at the window, with the windy moonlight streaming upon her and the summer gale tossing her hair.

"Jenny, Jenny!" exclaimed Mrs. Strangfield, advancing quickly, "what sickness art thou counting at that open window, foolish child!—letting the cold wind fill your bones! Come away from the draught, and shut the window. Father wants thee down stairs."

"It is past nine, mother. What does father want? I like this cool wind, and the stars are pretty to watch, running among the clouds."

"Father does not understand your moping. Here have you been sitting for above an hour. We have been talking about thee, and he has some questions to ask."

"What questions?" exclaimed the girl, quickly. "Let me stay here, mother. It will be time for bed soon. What questions has father to ask?"

"Why, you speak as if you were scared! Jenny, if you would fly in the face of the Lord, the way to do it is to flout thy mother. What ails you? A dozen times I have asked, and you say nothing at all. Are you not well? Is there some secret to trouble you? Are you weary of home? Come down, come down, and open your heart to your parents."

And saying this she took Jenny's hand, but finding it cold as stone, cried out, "See, now, if this wind will not put thee in a sick bed!" And in a little passion of anxiety and annoyance, she closed the window sharply.

The sweet and faithful heart, bidden to watch for her husband's coming, felt the closing of the window to be the true ending of her hopes and fears for that night. It was a relieve that left deep yearning and faint heartedness and sorrowful wonder. Never had he failed her before. It could not be fear that made him shirk the interview he had himself planned; neither fear of her father, nor want of passionate love for her. With ears straining to catch at every sound, she gazed through the closed window at the vision of dancing lights without, and the flare of the moon sweeping beyond the clouds and silvering the tossing tops of the bay trees.

"What questions has father to ask, mother?"

"Why, what these mopings signify. He doubts if you brought your heart back with you from Sydenham. But I say it was your spirits you left there."

"Mother, let me be here. I am low in spirits to-night. Father would easily make me cry, and what would he think to see me in tears?"

"Jenny, just tell me this, then, that I may answer him when I go downstairs—hath Mr. Shaw talked soft things to thee? Come, come, speak up, my child. Surely, I need not be angry, if your beauty has pleased him, and he has saddened you with foolish fancies. Is that it? We will make you smile again when we know what troubles you, sweetheart!"

"Why do you say I mope and am low hearted, mother? Is not my laugh merry? Am I not a cheerful help to you in the house? One cannot always be glad. The noise of the sea, and the cry of the wind to-night, and the struggling of the sweet moon with the clouds have—have—" She faltered, and continued, in a voice as soft as a flute's—"Sometimes one has pleasant sorrows which one

know by your readiness to cast stones."

Mr. Strangfield frowned, but was wise enough to hold his peace.

"What ails Jenny, then?" continued the mother. "You should know. You be a man of long sight. I never could hide a secret from thee."

Mr. Strangfield sat for a space behind his spectacles, pondering, while his wife laid down her needles to pass her hand over her hair.

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likes to nurse. There is no reason that I should mope. I can feel very happy. Ah, dear Lord! would that he had come and saved me from another day of fear!" And breaking out thus, she threw her head upon her mother's breast and cried.

But Jenny wept rarely—at least, in her mother's sight; therefore, the honest losom on which her face was hidden was rent by the unaccustomed sobs, and anxious, plaintive sympathy spoke in the poor woman's voice, as she exclaimed, with her pretty fingers tenderly kneading the girl's rich hair: "Oh, my child, my dear! you will break my heart with your misery! What is your fear? Has any one wronged you? Kind Lord, what trouble is this that hath come upon you! Jenny, Jenny, raise up your eyes—see how bright the moon shines in the room; it makes thy hair like yellow silk. Oh, my pretty lamb, who is he that hath not come! and what is thy fear, Jenny?"

Now, the door of the bedroom and the door of the parlor both standing open, and the staircase measuring but a small space between the low floor and the passage, it was scarcely possible that Mr. Strangfield, sitting in expectation of his daughter's arrival, should fail to catch his wife's words. When, therefore, in her clear, pained voice, she cried, "Who is he that hath not come?" and "What is thy fear, Jenny?" up rose the master shipwright, and the staircase groaned under his boots.

Jenny, hearing him coming, drew away from her mother with a quick movement of terror, and backed through the glare of moonlight into the shadow near the bedstead.

"Wife," exclaimed Strangfield, in his strong voice, "how is it that Jenny does not come to me?"

To which no reply was vouchsafed. He advanced by a stride and said, "What has the girl been saying, and what is her fear! Jenny, come forth. I can see you standing there. Give me thy hand, foolish wench, and now down stairs with us all. If there be ought to fear, pray that the Lord may deliver us from evil."

So speaking, he held forth his hand, and the shrinking girl, not daring to disobey, came to him fearfully and dropped fingers of ice into his palm.