

# His Heart's Desire

By SIR WALTER BESANT

## CHAPTER IX.—(Continued.)

"What was his accident?"  
"He fell from his pony coming home at night. Some say he was in drink; but then he was always a sober man. Mr. George Sidcot it was that found him lying in the road. He was insensible for three days. When he came to he couldn't remember nor tell anybody how the accident happened; but he said he'd been robbed, though his pocket was full of money, and his watch and chain hadn't been taken. Papers they were, he said, that he was robbed of. But there's many things he must have put those papers somewhere, and forgotten because of the knock on his head."

"Oh! the stranger rubbed his hands. 'I'm better now,' he said; 'I am much better. Out in Australia I caught a fever, and it gives me a shock now and again. Much better now. So—Old Dan Leighan fell from his pony—he had an accident and he fell—from his pony—on his head—and was senseless for three days—and was robbed of papers? Now, who could have robbed him of papers? Were they valuable papers?'"

"Well, that I cannot say."  
"Did you ever see a man in an hysterical fit? It is pretty bad to look at a woman laughing and crying with uncontrolled and uncontrollable passion, but it is far worse to see a man. This strong, rugged man, seized with an hysterical fit, rolled about upon the bench, rolling his shoulders and crying at the same time, but his laugh was not mirthful and his crying was a scream, and he staggered as he laughed. Then he staid himself with one hand on the table; he caught at another man's shoulder with the other hand; and all the time, while the villagers looked on open-mouthed, he laughed and cried, and laughed again, without reason apparent, without restraint, without mirth, without grief, while the tears coursed down his cheeks. Some of the men held him by force; but they could not stop the strong sobbing or the hiccuping laugh or the shaking of his limbs. At last, the fit spent, he lay back on the settee, propped against the corner, exhausted, but outwardly calm and composed again."

"Are you better now?" asked the landlady.

"I've been ill," he said, "and something shook me. Seems as if I've had a kind of a fit, and talked foolishly, like. What did I say—what did I talk about?"

"You were asking after Mr. Leighan. Who are you? What do you want to know about Mr. Leighan? You asked about his health and his accident. And then you had a fit of hysterics. I never saw a man—nor a woman, neither—in such hysterics. You'd best go home and get to bed. Where are you going to sleep? Where are you going to?"

"Where's your husband, Mrs. Exon? Where's Joseph?" he asked, unexpectedly.

Mrs. Exon started and gasped. "Joseph's gone to Bovey with the cart. He ought to have been home an hour ago. But who are you?"

"William Shears"—he turned to one of the men—"you don't seem to remember me?"

"Why, no," William replied with a jump, because it is terrifying to be recognized by a stranger who has fits and talks about live men's ghosts. "No; I can't rightly say I do."

"Grandfather Derge"—he applied to the oldest inhabitant, who is generally found to have just outlived his memory, though if you had asked him a week or two ago he could have told the most wonderful things—"Grandfather Derge, don't you remember me?"

"No, I don't. Seems as if I be old enough to remember everybody. But my memory isn't what it was. No, I don't remember you. Yet I should say, now, as you might belong to these parts, because you seem to know my name."

"I remember you, Grandfather, when you used to cane the boys in church."  
"Ay, ay," said the old man. "So I did, so I did. Did I ever cane you, master? You must have a wonderful memory, now, to remember that."  
"Don't you remember me, William Clampt?" he asked a third man.

"No, I don't," replied William, shortly, as if he did not wish to tax his memory about a man so ragged.

"I've been away a good many years," he said, "and I've come back pretty well as poor as when I left and a night more ragged. I didn't think that a beard and rags would alter me so that nobody should know me. Why, Mrs. Exon, does a man leave the parish every week for Australia, that I should be so soon forgotten?"

He did not speak in the least like one of themselves. His manner of speech was not refined, it is true; but there are shades, so to speak, which differentiate the talk of the masters from the talk of the rustics.

"I have come back without anything except a little money in my pocket. Now, Mrs. Exon, give me some bread and cheese for supper; I've had no dinner. Being ill, you see, and shaken more than a bit, I didn't want any dinner. Then I'll have a pipe, and you shall tell me the news and all that has happened. Perhaps by that time you will find out who I am."

When he had eaten his bread and cheese he began to smoke, showing no trace at all of his late fit. He talked about the parish, and showed that he knew everybody in it; he asked who had married and who were dead; he inquired into the position and prospects of all the farms; he showed the most intimate acquaintance with everybody and the greatest interest in the affairs of all the families. Yet no one could remember who he was.

Leighan came back again, and him in rags!  
"So it is—it's Mr. David," cried Mrs. Exon, clapping her hands. "To think that none of us knew him at first sight! And that you should come to my house, of all the houses in the parish, first, and me not to know you! and you in this condition! But you'll soon change all that; and I'll make up the bed for you—and your uncle and Miss Mary will be downright glad to see you, Mr. David! To think of my not knowing Mr. David!"

It was exactly 12 o'clock Sunday morning when Mr. Leighan was suddenly startled by a man's step. He knew the step somehow, but could not at the moment remember to whom it belonged. The man, whoever he was, knew his way about the place, because he came from the back and walked straight, treading heavily, to the room where Mr. Leighan was sitting and opened the door. It was David coming to call upon his uncle on his return. There was some improvement in his appearance. Joseph Exon had lent him certain garments in place of those he had worn the day before; the canvas trousers, for instance, had gone, and the terrible felt hat with the hole in the crown. His dress was now of a nondescript and incongruous kind, the sailor's jacket ill assorting with the rustic corduroy trousers and waistcoat.

He threw open the door and stood confronting the man whom he had just seen dead, as he thought, killed by his own hand. He tried to face him brazenly, but broke down and stood before him with hanging head and guilty eyes.

"So," said Daniel Leighan, "it is David come back again. We thought you were dead."

"You hoped I was dead; say it out," said David, with a rosy voice.

"Dead or alive, it makes no difference to me. Stay; you were in my debt when you went away. Have you come to settle that long-outstanding account?"

David stepped into the room and shut the door behind him.

"You have got something to say to me first," he said in a husky voice. "Have it out now, and get it over. Something you've kept dark, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Outside they knew nothing about it. That was well done. No occasion to make a family scandal—and me gone away and all—was there? Come, let us have it out, old man. Who robbed me of my land?"

His words were defiant, but his eyes were uneasy and suspicious.

"Say, rather, who fooled away his inheritance with drink and neglect?"

"Robbed me, I say!"

"If I had not bought your land some one else would. If you've come home in this disposition, David, you had better go away again as soon as you please. Don't waste my time with foolish talk."

"David's gone," you said. "When he comes back, we'll have it out. We won't have a family scandal. Well, I am back. I thought you were dead."

"I am not dead, as you see."

"Well, go on. Say what you've got to say. I'll sit and listen. Come; we owe you so much. Pay it out, then."

"David," said his uncle, quietly, "drink has evidently driven you off your head. Family scandal! What was there to hide? Good heavens! do you suppose that the whole of your family, with its profligacy and drunkenness, was not known to all the countryside? Why, your history is one long scandal. Things to hide? Why, the whole parish was so ashamed of you that it rejoiced when you went away. That is all I have to say to you, David. What are you staring like a black pig for?"

"Oh!" cried David. "Is it possible? What does he mean? Come, old man, don't bottle up. You can't do anything to me now, and I might do a great deal for you; I might, if you didn't bottle up and bear malice. Come—you and me know—let's have it out."

"What do we two know? All I know is that you have been away for six years, and you come back in rags, that you had a fit of some kind last night up at Joseph Exon's. Have you got any account to give of yourself?"

"Don't bottle up," David said, feebly. "There's nobody here but you and me. I'll own up. And then I can help you as nobody else can—if you don't bottle up. If you do—but why should you? What's the good? There's nobody here but you and me. What is the good of pretending that there's nothing? Did you ever forgive anybody in your life? Do you think I believe you are going to forgive me—you of all men in the world?"

"Leave off this nonsense about hiding and pretending and inferring. One would think you had been murdering somebody."

David sat down, staring with the blankest astonishment. He had by this time succeeded in impressing upon his brain the fixed conviction that his uncle kept his murderous assault a secret out of regard for the family name, and he came prepared to be submissive, to express contrition, and to offer, in return for the secret being still kept, to give back to his uncle the long-lost box full of papers. And now, this conviction destroyed, he knew not what to think or what to say.

"It can't be!" he said, "it can't be! Uncle, you are playing some deep game with me. You are like a cat with a mouse. You are old, but you are foxy; you've got a game of your own to play, and you think you'll play that game low down. Come, let's have it out. I had a very good reason to think you were dead. I was quite sure you were dead. I knew you were dead. You know why I knew you were dead. Every night I was assured by

yourself that you were dead. Come, now. Well, when I heard that you were alive and hearty, I said to myself, 'To-morrow I'll go and have it out with him when all the people are at church and there's nobody to listen; because they told me you could not remember—you know what.'

"Couldn't remember? I'd have you to know, sir, that my memory is as good as ever it was."

"Oh!" said David, "then you do remember everything?"

"Of course I do."  
"Then, uncle, have it out. Let us talk open. I've never forgotten it. I have said to myself over and over again, 'I'm sorry I don't do it.' I wished I hadn't done it, especially at night when your ghost came; who ever heard of a live man's ghost?"

## CHAPTER XI.

"The man's stark, staring mad!" cried Daniel Leighan.

"Come, now. Either say, 'David, I forgive you, because there was not much harm done after all; I forgive you if you'll help me in the way that you only can help me,' or else say, 'David, I'll bear malice all the days of my life.' Then we shall know where we are."

"I don't understand one word you say. Stay!" A thought suddenly struck him. "Stay! The last time I set eyes on you it was on the morning you left Ohalla-combe, and on the same day that I met with an accident. The last time I set eyes on you was in this room. You cursed and swore at me. You went on your knees and prayed the Lord in a most disrespectful manner to revenge you, as you put it. Do you wish me to forgive those idle words? Man alive! you might as well ask me to forgive the last night's thunder. Reproach yourself as much as you please—I'm glad you've got such a tender conscience—but don't think I am going out of my way to bear malice because you got into a temper six years ago!"

"Then you do remember, uncle," said David, with a sigh of infinite satisfaction. "Well, I thought you would remember, and bear malice. It was the last you saw of me, you see—and the last I saw of you."

David laughed, not the hysterical laugh of last night, but a low laugh of sweet satisfaction and secret enjoyment.

"Well, uncle, since you don't bear malice, there's no harm done. And now we can be friends again, I suppose? And if it comes to foxiness, perhaps it will be my turn to play fox."

"Play away, David—play away."

"I've come home, you see"—David planted his feet more firmly and leaned forward, one hand on each knee—"I've come home."

"In rags."

"In poverty and rags. I've got nothing but two or three pounds. When they are gone, perhaps before, I shall want more money. The world is everywhere full of rogues—quite full of rogues—besides land thieves like yourself, and there isn't enough work to go around. Mostly they live like you, by plundering and robbing."

"Find work, then. In this country if you don't work you won't get any money. Do you think you are the more likely to get money out of me by calling names?"

"Well, you see, uncle, I think I shall find a way to get some money out of you."

"Not one penny—not one penny, David, will you get." There was a world of determination in Mr. Leighan when it came to refusing money.

"It's natural that you should say so to begin with." His manner had now quite changed. He began by being confused, hesitating and shamefaced; he was now assured, and even braggart. "I expected as much. You would rather see your nephew starve than give him a penny. You've robbed him of his land; you've driven him out of his house; and when he comes back in rags, you tell him he may go and starve."

"Words don't hurt, David," his uncle replied, quietly. "I am too old to be moved by words. Now, if you have nothing more to say, go."

(To be continued.)

## Always Chewed the Rag.

"My grandfather had one curious habit," says a Virginia woman in the Washington Post. "He chewed the rag constantly. I don't mean it in a figurative sense, either. I mean it literally. When he was about 60 the doctors persuaded him to give up the use of tobacco, and he used a rag instead. Grandmother used to cut worn-out tablecloths into little squares and lay them in a drawer ready for grandfather. When he was going out anywhere, she tucked several into his waistcoat pocket. He chewed from daylight till dark. Once grandfather and I went to the funeral of a great man here in town. Grandmother was ill that day, and forgot to tell me about the rags. We sat well up toward the front, and grandfather was no sooner seated than he put two fingers into his waistcoat pockets. No rag. He searched through all his pockets, one after the other. No rag anywhere. He began to wriggle about in his seat uneasily. He was in misery with nothing to work his jaws on. The service went on and when the choir rose to sing, I saw one of grandfather's hands disappear under his waistcoat. His eyes were fixed on the choir and he looked determined. There was a fortissimo burst of music—and then in the instant of absolute stillness which followed, everybody heard something tear. Grandfather turned a vivid purple, but when he raised his head after the prayer a little later, his jaws were at work."

## Fairy Rings.

Probably we have all seen, in the fields or on the edge of the woods, that circle called the fairy ring. Before fairy folk came to be doubted, it was firmly believed these rings were the dancing ground of the fairies. In the moonlight the sprites danced, wearing down the grass under their feet—at least so our grandfathers said, but we must take science's simple explanation of it. A fungus plant will soon exhaust all the fungus food from the soil beneath it, so that only the spores which fall outside this barren spot will take root and flourish. So the ring is always widening outward, forming a perfect circle unless something interferes with it. The rings are abundant in wet weather, of a bluff color or reddish.—St. Nicholas.

## Champion Tract Distributer.

A. E. Eccles, of Chorley, England, who has just celebrated his 75th birthday, claims to be the champion tract distributor of the world. He has circulated no fewer than 40,000,000 publications relating to temperance, hygiene, politics and religion.

The Only Way.  
Nell—I don't see why she should go and marry that old man for his money.  
Belle—Why, how else could she get it?—Philadelphia Ledger.

In the affairs of men the tide may be antied by a divorce judge.

Don't be surprised if love that feeds on beauty should die of starvation.

# Science AND Invention

Among the curious observations made by students at the Bermuda Biological Station is that some of the inhabitants of the water there are able to imitate the color of the rocks and reefs among which they swim. The common fish called the grouper possesses this power. Its chromatic variability runs through a considerable range of colors. A specimen of the Octopus vulgaris, after jerking an oar from the hand of an inquisitive naturalist, escaped pursuit by its ability to imitate the exact shade of any brown or gray rock on which it rested.

Among the results of the recent British Antarctic Expedition, as explained by Capt. R. F. Scott, was the discovery that the edge of the great ice barrier met by Sir James Ross, 60 years before, has retreated in places as much as 20 or 30 miles. Nevertheless, the soundings made by the new expedition show that several hundred fathoms of water still intervene between the bottom of the ice at the present position of the barrier and the floor of the sea. The greater portion of this immense ice-sheet, Captain Scott believes, is afloat, and he regards it not as a result of existing conditions, but as the rapidly wasting remnants of a former age.

Dr. Alexander Agassiz, now exploring the Pacific Ocean in the United States steamer Albatross, recently visited Easter Island, famous for its colossal stone images, the makers of which have escaped the ken of history. The barrenness of the island emphasizes the mystery of its strange sculptures. Mr. Agassiz says that it possesses no trees or native bushes, not even such as characterize the shore tracts of the most isolated coral reefs. The great stone images were cut from quarries in the crater of Rana Roraka, in the interior of the island. They were placed on platforms scattered all over the island and along the shores. The largest of the platforms is 450 feet in length, and behind it lie fifteen huge images which have fallen from their pedestals. There are also many ruined stone houses.

The studies undertaken by Dr. O. F. Cook on the Guatemalan ant called the kelep, which the Department of Agriculture thinks of introducing into Texas to make war on the cotton-boll weevil, have brought out some interesting facts about these curious little creatures. They are not true ants any more than termites are. Their social system, Doctor Cook says, does not follow "the monarchical system of the ants and termites, but represents an entirely different system, more like that of the honey-bees, in that new colonies are founded by the subdivision of the workers of older communities instead of by solitary queens." The keleps have gone a step farther than the bees, for instead of depending upon a queen to lead the colony, "they take her by the jaw and carry her over to the new burrow in case she fails to go voluntarily." They appear to be able to withstand cold weather.

## Are We Getting Darker.

No one could have attended the class day of Columbus College, says the New York World, without being struck by the prevalence of dark young men. Out of 120 or so there were two with hair of fiery red and three with flaxen locks—five blondes in all. The rest were either decidedly dark-looking in their black gowns like young priests in Rome, or were darkish brown of hair and eyes.

A study of names and faces revealed French, Welsh, Flemish, Spanish and Jewish derivation in many cases, but perhaps a majority were native Americans by many generations, and of the native American tint, dark-brown.

The professors, older men, show a much larger proportion of blondes. Gladstone used to say that during his long life the average English complexion visibly darkened. Is the same process going on here more rapidly? By A. D. 2000 will the "sandy-complexioned" American be a rarity?

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