St. Cuthbert's Tower

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

RISHTON HALL FARM was let at last. Lord Stannington had had it on his hands a long time, and had offered it at a lower and ever lower rent. It was an open secret that John Oldshaw, who had a long lease of Lower Rishton Farm at the other end of the village, had expected the Rishton Hall lease to drop into his hands at last for a very trifling rent indeed. He was a careful man; the property under his hands throve; and he was fond of saying that his lordship would make a better bargain by letting him have the land at £10 an acre than by letting another man have it at £15. However, Lord Stannington had apparently thought otherwise; at any rate, when a stranger appeared upon the scene and offered him a fair rent for the land without any haggling, they came to terms without delay, and John Oldshaw found that his hoped-for bargain had escaped him.

This West Riding farmer was not a nice person to deal with when he was disappointed. He drove over to Sheffield to the agent's office, and stamped into that gentleman's presence, his square, heavy face purple with ill-suppressed rage.

"Na then, Maister Garrett, be pleased to tell mah if yender's true as Ah hear, that Rishton Hall Farm's let to a stranger?" he bellowed, thumping the table with his broad fist, and glaring at the agent with the unreasoning fierceness of an angry bull.

Mr. Garrett was a slight, fair man of uncertain age, whose light eyes were accustomed, by long practice, to read men pretty accurately.

“Quite true, Mr. Oldshaw,” he answered, civilly, with imperturbable coolness. “It was let a fortnight ago; and the new tenant comes in—let me see—” referring to his papers—“on the 16th; this day week in fact.”

“And dost tha’ knaw, Maister Garrett, that Ah’re had ma mahnd set on Rishton Hall Farm for this twelvemonth and mair?”

“How could we know it, Mr. Oldshaw, since the farm’s been in the market more than twice that time, and we have never had any intimation from you of a wish for it?”

“We Yarkshiremen doan’t do thing’s in a hurry. But every mon in t’ village knawed Ah’d set ma heeart on t’ farm, and noo Ah’m to be t’ laughin’-stock o’ a’ t’ feeals i’ t’ coontry, and Rishton Farm let ower ma yead to a stranger as nawbody’s ever heeard on!”

And the farmer gave an apoplectic snort of malignant anger.

“Oh, but that is not the case, Mr. Oldshaw,” said the agent as quietly as ever; “Mr. Denison, the gentleman who has taken the farm, is a friend of friends of his lordship, and in every way a tenant of the most desirable kind.”

John Oldshaw calmed down suddenly, and into his small, bloodshot blue eyes there came a satisfied twinkle.

“A gentleman, ye say. A gentleman’s got the farm!” in a tone of the deepest contempt. “Thank ye, Maister Garrett, Ah’m quite satisfied. It’s not for me to grumble at his lordship, then. Ah can pity him. The’ never was t’ gentleman barn could do any good at farming, and if a gentleman barn’s got Rishton Hall Farm, all

t' ill I wish his lordship is—may t' gentleman barn stick to's bargain."

And with these words, uttered in a tone of fierce triumph, the farmer, who had not removed his hat on entering the office, turned and stalked out with every appearance of enjoying, as he had intimated, a complete revenge.

The village of Rishton boasted two inns, both of the most unpretending kind. The larger and more important of these was the Chequers, a stone building of the simplest kind of architecture, to which were attached numerous small outbuildings, forming three sides of a quadrangle for Mr. Tew's gig and Mrs. Tew's hens. The Chequers stood just outside the gate of Rishton Hall Farm, and its windows commanded the approach from Matherham, the nearest market town, which was three miles away. On the 16th of January, the day of the expected arrival of the new tenant of Rishton Hall, John Oldshaw took up his stand at one of the inn windows, watching with malevolent eyes for the approach of his rival. It was a bitterly cold day, grey overhead and black under foot; and the frost, which had held for three days, was growing harder as the afternoon wore on. John Oldshaw, with a sense of keen disappointment, had at last to acquiesce in the general belief that the new tenant would not come to-day.

"If he's coom as far as Matherham he'll stop there t' night, Maister Oldshaw," said Tew, the landlord, a small man, ruled by his wife. "T' ground's too slaippery for e'er a horse to stand on, lettin' alone t' road's all hill and dale 'tween this and Matherham. Besides, t' awd house is as bare as a barn; he'd

never coom till he'd sent some stuff to put in it, and a coople o' servants to set it to rights a bit."

"Well, it ain't ma way o' doin' things, to neame wan day for coomin' and then to coom another," said Oldshaw, contemptuously. "But, then, Ah'm naw gentleman, and my lord Stannington 'll mighty soon wish as he could say same o' t' new tenant, Maister Tew."

Mr. Tew could not afford to have an independent opinion in the presence of the great man of the village, with that miserable Cock and Bottle, not five hundred yards away, gaping for first place as the hostelry of the *elite*.

"It's ta mooch to expect to get another tenant like you, Maister Oldshaw," he said, discreetly.

It was by this time nearly four o'clock, and the grey day was already beginning to darken towards a black evening when Mat Oldshaw, the farmer's oldest son, who had been sent by his father to the top of the hill on the look-out, re-entered the inn at a pace somewhat faster than his usual shambling gait. He was a tall, round-shouldered lad of about twenty, with fair hair and a weather-tanned face, whose heavy dulness was for the moment lightened by a passing gleam of great excitement.

"Weel, Mat, hast seean a ghoost?" asked his father.

"Naw, feyther; but there's a cab coomin' down t' hill——"

"So Maister Gentleman's coom, has he?" shouted the farmer, triumphantly; and he had seized his stout ash stick, and was making with ponderous strides for the door, as if with the

intention of inflicting bodily chastisement on the insolent new comer, when his son interposed, blushing a deep brick-red to the roots of his hair.

“Eh, but feyther,” he stammered, turning the door handle uneasily, and dividing his glances between the floor, the window, and his father’s boorish face, “it’s na t’ gentleman; it’s nobbut twea lasses.”

After which admission, he fell to blushing more violently than before.

“Twea lasses?” echoed Oldshaw, incredulously.

“Hey, feyther. An’ wan o’ them’s got a feace lik’ a rose.”

“Feace lik’ a rose?” thundered the farmer. “Doan’t thee daze tha dull wits lookin’ at wenches’ faces, for Ah tell tha Ah’ll have na son o’ mine hangin’ aboot t’ Hall noo.”

“She bain’t na lass for t’ likes o’ mea, feyther; yon lass is a leady,” said the lad, simply.

If the stranger’s fair face had not, as his father suggested, dazed his dull wits already, the young man would surely have had the tact to restrain these rash words, which fanned the flame of his father’s coarse malevolence.

“A leady! A foine leady! ta foine for any son o’ mine? Ah tell thee, feeal, t’ day’ll coom when tha foine leady’ll wish she wur good enoo for t’ loikes o’ thee; and good enoo she shall never be—tha heears?”

Though the young man's head was bent in a listening attitude, and he assented in the meekest of gruff voices, the father guessed that this deep attention was not all for his discourse, when the sound of hoofs and wheels on the hard ground outside attracted him to the outer door, which he reached in time to see a luggage-laden cab slowly descend the hill and pass the inn door, giving time for a look at the two young faces inside. Mistress and maid evidently; both bright, eager, and rather anxious. The former met full the surly stare of the farmer, and she drew back her head as if a blast of chilling wind had met her on her approach to her new home. The little maid, who had rosy cheeks and what one may call retrousse features, was less sensitive, and she looked out to resent this cold unwelcome with a contemptuous toss of the head.

"They're reg'lar savages in these parts, Miss Olivia," she said, in a slightly raised tone. "I only hope we may be uneaten by the time the master comes!"

The cab had passed the front of the inn, and was rounding the sharp turn which led up a slight ascent through the open farmyard gate, when suddenly, without any warning except a few rough jolts over the uneven ground, it turned over on its side, to the accompaniment of shrill screams from one female throat, and a less loud but more plaintive cry from the other. Mat Oldshaw, who was standing on the inn doorstep behind his father, made a spring forward to help them. But the elder man, with a movement quicker than one would have expected from his clumsy form and ponderous gait, grasped his arm with a violence which made the lad reel, and giving him a push back against the wall of the house, said, in a low, thick voice—

“Doan’t thoo meddle with what darn’t concern thee. Wheer there’s so mooch cry, there ain’t mooch hurt, tak’ ma word for’t.”

“Feyther!” said Mat, indignantly, entreatingly. Then he was dumb, for even through his not over-bright brains came a suspicion that this accident was perhaps not wholly unexpected by one of its witnesses.

As this brief scene passed between father and son, a man in a short frieze coat, knickerbockers, gaiters, and deer-stalker cap, who had quickened his pace down the hill into a run on seeing the accident, looked full into the faces of both men with a keen, shrewd expression as he dashed by.

“It’s parson Brander, o’ S’ Cuthbert’s, feyther. He heeard thee,” said the young man in a husky, awed whisper.

“An’ wha not? Ah’d loike to see sik as him say a word to me!” said the farmer, in a loud voice of boastful contempt.

And the attitudes respectively of father and son, the one of contemptuous disgust, the other of awestruck respect, represented the two views most commonly taken in the country-side of the Reverend Vernon Brander, vicar of Saint Cuthbert’s.

Before the last disdainful word was out of John Oldshaw’s mouth, the new comer had opened the cab door, and extricated the two girls from their unpleasant position. The maid was uppermost, but she was a little creature, and had probably inflicted far less inconvenience on her more massively built mistress than that young lady would have inflicted on her had

their positions been reversed. Her rosy cheeks had lost their color, and from her forehead, which had been cut by the broken glass of the carriage window, blood was trickling down.

In answer to the gentleman's inquiries as to whether she was hurt, she said in a trembling voice that she didn't know yet, and begged him to get her mistress out. This he at once proceeded to do, and was rewarded by the thanks of a young lady whom he at once decided to be one of the handsomest girls that this or any other country ever produced.

Olivia Denison was indeed an unchallenged beauty, and had occupied that proud position almost ever since, twenty years ago, she had been pronounced to be "a lovely baby." She was tall—of that cruel height which forces short admirers, on pain of looking ridiculous, to keep their distance; of figure rather massive than slender, with a fair skin, a fresh color, dark hair, blue eyes, and a winning expression of energy and honesty which gave to the whole face its greatest charm. For the moment, however, the rose color had left her cheeks, too, and her lips were drawn tightly together.

"You are hurt, I am afraid," said the stranger, with concern.

"I've only—pinched—my finger," she answered, trying to laugh.

But the effort of speaking brought the tears to her eyes, much to her indignation. For she was brave, and she liked to have the credit of it.

"Let me see," said he, with kindly authority.

She presented her right hand, from which he drew the glove very gently, disclosing bruised and slightly discolored finger tips.

“They do hurt a little, but it’s nothing very dreadful. I don’t know how I did it,” she said.

“Lucky it’s no worse,” said the stranger, kindly. “Now for the lad.”

The young driver was looking ruefully at the overturned vehicle. He proved to have escaped with no worse damage than a battered hat. Lucy, the maid, who had ascertained that her head was still on her shoulders, had bound up her cut forehead with her handkerchief, and was scolding the driver for his carelessness as she pointed to the scattered luggage. The traces having broken as the cab fell, the horse had sustained very little hurt, so that, on the whole, the accident had been without tragic consequences. The rescuer took hold of the girl, and shook her by the arm.

“Now, don’t you think, considering all things, you might find some better use for your tongue than scolding. You might have been upset a mile away on the road, instead of which you are turned out comfortably at your own door. For, I suppose, you are coming to the Hall?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Lucy, abashed, but still rather mutinous, not having the least idea that she was speaking to a clergyman.

“So that the real sufferer by this spill is neither you nor your mistress, but the poor lad who has driven you safely more than three miles over a very dangerously slippery road, and who

will perhaps get discharged by his master for having injured the cab. Your mistress does not scold you for half an hour if you break a plate."

"Yes she does, sir," fired up Lucy, so unexpectedly that Mr. Brander involuntarily glanced with surprise at the young lady. "Oh, not Miss Olivia," added the little maid almost indignantly; "it's Mrs. Denison I mean."

"Well, then, if you find the habit so unamiable in Mrs. Denison, as I see you do, you should take the greatest care not to fall into it yourself," said the vicar, suppressing a smile.

Then he turned again to the lady.

"Is everything ready for your coming?" he asked, doubtfully.

For he had passed the house that morning, and found it deserted, mildewed, and shuttered-up as usual.

"No, nothing," said the girl. "We've come on in advance to prepare things for papa and mamma and the rest," she added rather tremulously.

The frightful immensity of the undertaking perhaps struck her now for the first time, as she stood, still shaking from the shock of the accident, staring at the smokeless chimneys and shuttered windows of the new home. Mr. Brander looked from one girl to the other, very sorry for both, wondering what kind of idiots the parents could be to send two inexperienced young lasses to grapple with all the difficulties of installation.

"And the furniture? I suppose that has come?" he suggested, dubiously.

“Oh, I hope so,” said the girl, anxiously.

“I’ll ask at the inn here. If it has come they will have seen it pass. And Mrs. Tew will give you both a cup of tea. You don’t mind going into an inn, do you? It’s a very respectable place.”

“Oh, no; of course we don’t,” said Miss Denison. “Indeed, it is very, very kind of you to take so much trouble for us.”

“Trouble! Nonsense. It’s a splendid excitement. As far as I am concerned, I should like a pair of travellers overturned here once a week.”

He beckoned to Lucy, and led them the few steps back to the inn door. John Oldshaw was still standing in a defiant attitude on the doorstep, whence he had watched the proceedings with malicious interest. His son was still peeping out, sheepish and ashamed, from behind him.

“Here, Mat, will you run round to Mrs. Wall’s—tell her that Miss Denison has come, and ask for the key of the Hall?” said he. “And then you might lend me a hand to take some of the lady’s trunks into the house.”

Mat’s face brightened and flushed.

“All right, sir,” he said, and tried to push past his father.

But the elder man blocked the doorway with his arms, and stood like a rock.

“Nay,” he said, obstinately; “Mat doesna’ stir at tha’ bidding. Help the wenches thasel’; thoo’s used to ’t.”

Olivia drew back; she was shocked, frightened, by the dogged ferocity of the farmer's face and by the sudden expression of some strong feelings—whether anger or anguish she could not quite tell—which for a moment convulsed the features of her unknown companion. As for Oldshaw's coarse words, the strong Yorkshire dialect rendered them unintelligible to her. They, however, roused the spirit of the phlegmatic Mat.

"For shame, feyther!" cried he, in a voice which was a new terror for the young lady whose champion he thus declared himself to be. "Maister Brander, Ah'll go loike a reace horse."

And ducking his long body under his father's left arm with an unceremonious roughness which shook that mighty man from his dignity, he touched his cap to Olivia with oafish respect, and ran off down the lane past the Hall barns with the best speed of his long legs.

"We won't go in there, thank you very much," said Olivia, when Mr. Brander had come back to the spot to which she had retreated. "I could not pass that man; I would rather not go near him."

"Will you wait here while I find out about the furniture, then?"

"Please promise not to quarrel with that horrid man about his rudeness to us. I can see he is one of those people who can't help being rude and horrid, just as some other people can't help being unselfish and kind," said the girl, shyly, but with much warmth. "Will you please promise?"

“Yes,” said he, simply, looking into her face with a grave, straightforward expression of interest and, as it seemed to her, of gratitude which surprised and touched her.

Then he turned without another word, almost as if afraid to say another word, and going back rapidly to the inn, passed the farmer, who sullenly made way for him, and disappeared into the house. When he came back, his face was full of deep concern of a different kind.

“I bring bad news,” he said to the girls, who, mistress and maid, were shrinking together in their desolation. “I am afraid your furniture has not come, and—they say they haven’t a room to spare in the inn for to-night. But if Mrs. Tew could see you and speak to you herself——”

“I wouldn’t stay in the house,” burst out Olivia, indignantly. “If we can only get into the Hall, Lucy and I can manage very well indeed.”

“But the place is sure to be hideously damp, and there are no carpets; in fact, there’s nothing,” said Mr. Brander, in dismay.

“The resources of the feminine mind are infinite,” said Olivia, who was again blinking behind her veil. “Here comes the old woman who has the keys, I suppose. I shall get her to take us in for a little while—at least, she’ll have a cottage and a fire somewhere or other. And perhaps while we are waiting there the furniture will come.”

Mr. Brander looked at her with renewed compassion. He thought this last a forlorn hope.

“Don’t be disappointed if it doesn’t come yet,” he said, encouragingly. “Old Sarah Wall will do her best for you, I’m sure, and all the better if she doesn’t see me talking to you. For you won’t hear any good of me from her.”

And before Olivia could detain him to pour out again the thanks for his kindness with which her heart was overflowing, he had raised his hat with a sudden cold withdrawal into himself, and turning with the rapidity of the most accomplished athlete, disappeared along the road which led through Lower Rishton, leaving her overwhelmed with surprise at the abrupt change in his manner and with desolation at this unexpectedly sudden loss of their only friend.