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PRUDENCE PALFREY.

I.

In which Parson Wibird Hawkins retires from Business.

PARSON Wibird Hawkins was in trouble. The trouble was not of a pecuniary nature, for the good man had not only laid up treasures in heaven, but had kept a temporal eye on the fluctuations of real estate in Rivermouth, and was the owner of three or four of the nicest houses in Hollyhock Row. Nor was his trouble of a domestic nature, whatever it once might have been, for Mrs. Wibird Hawkins was dead this quarter of a century. Nor was it of the kind that sometimes befalls too susceptible shepherds, for the parson had reached an age when the prettiest of his flock might have frisked about him without stirring a pulse.

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His trouble was the trouble of all men who, having played their parts nearly if not quite to the end, persist in remaining on the stage to the exclusion of more fiery young actors who have their pieces to speak and their graces to show off. These hapless old men do not perceive that the scene has been changed meanwhile, that twenty or thirty or forty years are supposed to have elapsed; it never occurs to them that they are not the most presentable poets, lunatics, and lovers, until the audience rises up and hoots them, gray hairs and all, from the foot-lights.

Parson Wibird Hawkins had been prattling innocently to half-averted ears for many a summer and winter. The parish, as a parish, had become tired of old man Hawkins. After fifty years he had begun to pall on them. For fifty years he had christened them and married them and buried them, and held out to them the slightest possible hopes of salvation, in accordance with their own grim theology; and now they wanted to get rid of him, and he never once suspected it, — never suspected it, until that day when the deacons waited upon him in

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his study in the cobwebbed old parsonage, and suggested the expediency of his retirement from active parochial duties. Even then he did not take in the full import of the deacons' communication. Retire from the Lord's vineyard just when his experience was ripest and his heart fullest of his Master's work,— surely they did not mean that! Here he was in his prime, as it were; only seventy-nine last Thanksgiving. He had come among them a young man fresh from the University on the Charles, he had given them the enthusiasm of his youth and the wisdom of his mature manhood, and he would, God willing, continue to labor with them to the end. He would die in the harness. It was his prayer that when the Spirit of the Lord came to take him away, it might find him preaching His word from the pulpit of the Old Brick Church.

"It was very good of you, Deacon Wendell, and you, Deacon Twombly," said the poor old parson, wiping the perspiration from his brow with a large red silk handkerchief dotted with yellow moons; "it was, I must say, very con-

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siderate in you to think that I might wish to rest awhile after all these years of labor; but I cannot entertain the idea for a moment."

He had got it into his head that the deacons were proposing a vacation to him, were possibly intending to send him to Europe on a tour through Palestine, as the Saint Ann's parish had sent the Rev. Josiah Jones the year before.

"Not," he went on, "but I should like to visit the Holy Land and behold with my own eyes the places made sacred by the footsteps of our Saviour, — Jerusalem, and Jordan, and the Mount of Olives, — ah! I used to dream of that; but my duties held me here then, and now I cannot bring myself to desert, even temporarily, the flock I have tended so long. Why, I know them all by face and name, and love them all, down to the latest ewe-lamb."

The latest ewe-lamb, by the way, was Deacon Twombly's, and the allusion made him feel very uncomfortable indeed. He glanced uneasily at Deacon Wendell, and Deacon Wendell glanced covertly at him, and they both wished that the duty of dismissing Parson

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Hawkins had fallen upon somebody else. But the duty was to be performed. The matter had been settled, and the new minister all but decided on, before the deacons went up to the parsonage that afternoon. Even before the king was cold, his subjects had in a manner thrown up their caps for the next in succession. All this had not been brought about, however, without a struggle.

Some of the less progressive members of the parish clung to the ancient order of things. Parson Wibird had been their main-stay in life, sickness, and death for full half a century; they had sprung to manhood and grown gray under his ministrations, and they held it a shame to throw him over now that his voice was a little tremulous and his manner not quite so vigorous as it was. They acknowledged he was not the man he used to be. He wrote no new sermons now; he was turning the barrel upside-down, and his latest essay dated back as far as 1850. They admitted it was something of a slip he made, in resurrecting one of those by-gone sermons, to allude to General Jackson as "our lately deceased Presi-

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dent"; but then the sermon was a good sermon, enough sight better than those sugary discourses without a word of sound doctrine in 'em, which they had listened to from flibberty-jibberty young ministers from the city. There was one of them the other day, — the Sabbath Parson Hawkins was ill, — who preached all about somebody named Darwin. Who was Darwin? Darwin was n't one of the Apostles.

"Fur my part," said Mr. Wiggins, the butcher, "I 'll be shot ef I don't stan' by the parson. He buried my Merriah Jane fur me, an' I don't forgit it nuther."

As it was notorious that the late Maria Jane had led Mr. Wiggins something of a dance in this life, the unconscious sarcasm of his gratitude caused ill-natured people to smile.

Uncle Jedd, the sexton of the Old Brick Church, threatened never to dig another grave if they turned off Parson Wibird. Uncle Jedd had a loose idea that such a course on his part would make it rather embarrassing for Rivermouth folks. "Ther' is graves an' ther' is holes," Uncle Jedd would say; "I makes

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graves, myself, an' I 'm th' only man in th' county thet can."

Unfortunately the parson's supporters constituted the minority, and not an influential minority. The voice of the parish was for the dismissal of the Rev. Wibird Hawkins, and dismissed he should be.

Deacons Wendell and Twombly found their mission perplexing. "We tried to let him down easy, of course," remarked Deacon Zeb Twombly, relating the circumstance afterwards to a group of eager listeners in Odiorne's grocery-store; "but, Lord bless you, you never see an old gentleman so unwillin' and so hard to be let down." The parson persisted in not understanding the drift of the deacons' proposition until, at last, they were forced to use the most explicit language, and in no way soften the blow which they suspected rather than knew would be a heavy one, however adroitly delivered. But when, finally, he was made to comprehend the astounding fact that the Old Brick Church of Rivermouth actually wished him to relinquish his pastorate, then the aged clergyman bowed his head, and, wav-

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ing his hands in a sort of benediction over the two deacons, retreated slowly, with his chin on his breast, into a little room adjoining the study, leaving the pillars of the church standing rather awkwardly in the middle of the apartment.

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II.

A Parson of the Old School.

EVER since the death of his wife, some twenty-five years previous to the events I am relating, Parson Hawkins had lived in the small house at the foot of Horseshoe Lane. The house stood in the middle of a garden under the shadow of two towering elms, and was so covered by a network of vines, honeysuckle and Virginia creeper, that the oddities of its architecture were not distinctly visible from the street. Though the cottage was not built by the parson, its interior arrangements were as eccentric and inconvenient as if he had designed it. It consisted of three or four one-story Ls which had apparently been added to the main building at various periods, according to the whim or exigency of the occupant. At the right of the hall, which paused abruptly and went up stairs, so to speak, was the par-

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son's study; opening from this was a smaller chamber, the sanctum sanctorum, lined to the ceiling with theological works; and beyond this again, though not communicating with it, was the room where the parson slept. At the left of the hall was the parlor, redolent of mahogany furniture and the branches of pungent spruce which choked the wide chimney-place summer and winter, for the parlor was seldom used. Then came the dining-room, and next to that the kitchen. Leading from the former were two sleeping-chambers, one occupied by Salome Pinder, the parson's housekeeper. The second story of the main building had been left unfinished on the inside. Viewed from the garden gate, the zigzag roofs, touched here and there with patches of purple and gold moss, presented the appearance of a collection of military cocked-hats.

It was altogether a grotesque, ruinous, tumbledown place, and people wondered why Parson Hawkins should have given up his stately house on Pleasant Street and moved to Horseshoe Lane, and why he remained there. But Salome Pinder understood it.

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"The parson, you see," said Salome, "is gittin' a leetle near in his old age. He 'pears to git nearer an' nearer ev'ry year. When Miss Hawkins was alive, why, bless you! there was n't nothin' too handsum nor expen*sive* for her, an' I won't say she was over an' above grateful, for she was n't; but she 's dead, the poor creeter, an' the best of us lack more 'n wings to be angils. The day after the funeral the parson says, 'S'lome,' says he, 'we 'll move into the cottage, it 's quite good enough for me.' 'Nothin' 's too good for you, Parson Wibird,' says I. But he did n't feel content in the great house, an' it was sort o' lonely; so move we did, to the disapp'intment of some, — I don't mention no names, — who thought that mebbe the parson would invite 'em up to Pleasant Street permanent. P'rhaps the Widder Mugridge was the most disap-p'inted. But, Lord love you, the parson ain't one of them that is always runnin' after wim-min folks. He 's ben married onst."

That was very true, and that Parson Haw-kins's matrimonial venture was not altogether of an encouraging complexion seems likely;

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for he declined to repeat the experiment. For several years after the translation of Mrs. Hawkins, the parish supposed he would take another helpmeet, and, in fact, more than one seductive cap had been sedately set for him; but the parson had shown himself strangely obtuse. He was not an old man at that time, but he loved quiet, and perhaps his life had not been too tranquil under Mrs. Hawkins's reign. Besides, as Salome said, the parson was becoming a little near, not in a general way, but in his personal expenses. The poor knew how broad and practical his charity was. His closeness manifested itself only in matters pertaining to his own comfort. He seemed to regard himself as an unworthy and designing person, who was obtaining food and clothes under false pretences from Parson Hawkins.

These economical tendencies had flowered out occasionally in his wife's time, but had been promptly taken up by the roots. Whenever his coat showed signs of wear or his hat became a trifle dilapidated, Mrs. Hawkins had made him buy a new one. It was whispered in and out of the parish that once, when the

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parson protested against replenishing his wardrobe, Mrs. Hawkins, who appears to have been a person of considerable executive ability, settled the question by putting the parson's best waistcoat on the kitchen fire. I do not vouch for the truth of the story, for, though nothing occurs in Rivermouth without being known, a great many things are known there that never occur at all.

This may have been one of them; but it is certain that after Parson Hawkins took up his abode in the small house he neglected himself frightfully. His linen was always scrupulously neat and fresh, for Salome saw to that; but he wore his coats until the seams stood out pathetically, like the bones of the late Mr. Jamison, the Living Skeleton, who used to travel with Van Amburgh's circus, and must have given Death very little trouble to make a ghost of him. Of course Salome could not put the old gentleman's coats into the kitchen stove when they became shabby. The parson's thriftiness increased with his years, and no doubt sorely cramped Salome, who had a New England housewife's appreciation of bountiful

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living, and to whom a riotous number of mince-pies was a necessity at Thanksgiving. She uttered no complaint, however, and was quick to resent any reflection on her master's domestic parsimony.

"We could live on the fat of the land if we wanted to," said Salome to Mrs. Waldron, who had dropped in of an afternoon to gossip. "The parson he's a rich man as time goes, an' the pore oughter be thankful for it. He feeds the widder an' the fatherless, instead of a-stuffin' hisself."

"I wanter know, now!"

Salome's homely statement was strictly accurate. However severe the internal economy at the small house in Horseshoe Lane, the poor were not scrimped. The Widow Pepperell had her winter fuel regularly; and the two Clemmer boys, whose father had leaned against a circular saw in the Miantonomoh Mills, knew precisely where their winter jackets were coming from. Even wayside tramps — there were no professional mendicants in Rivermouth — halted instinctively at the modest white gate. Doubtless the parson helped many a transpar-

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ent impostor on his winding way. There was a certain yellow dog that used to walk lame up to the scullery door for a bone, and then run away with it very nimbly on four legs. Sandy Marden's Skye-terrier was likely enough only a fair type of many that shared the parson's bounty.

He had been a prosperous man. When he first came to Rivermouth he purchased a lot of land at the west end of the town, as a pasture for a horse which he neglected or forgot to buy. The "minister's pasture" became a standing joke. It turned out a very excellent joke in the end. Several times he was tempted to sell the land for less than he gave for it; but it had cost him little, and he thought that perhaps it might be worth something more by and by; so he held on to it. As the town grew, fashion drifted in that direction. Then Captain Pendexter put up his haughty Gothic mansion at the head of Anchor Street. That settled the business. A colony of French-roof houses sprang up as if by magic along Josselyn Avenue, and the "minister's pasture" was about as valuable a piece of property as

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there was in Rivermouth. So it came to pass that Parson Hawkins was a moderately rich man. The people thought the parson was pretty shrewd, when perhaps he was only pretty lucky: if he had been shrewd he would have sold the land long before it was worth anything. Another speculation he entered into at this time was not so successful. If the local tradition is correct, Colonel Trueworthy Dennett's daughter Dorcas got the best of that bargain.

But for many years now the parson's lines had fallen in pleasant places. The tumult and jar of life never reached him among his books in the seven-by-nine library in Horseshoe Lane. The fateful waves of time and chance that beat about the world surged and broke far away from the little garden with its bright row of sentinel hollyhocks and its annual encampments of marigolds and nasturtiums. To be sure he had had, four or five years before this chronicle opens, what he regarded as a grievous affliction. The parish, contrary to his wishes, had removed the old pine-wood pulpit and replaced it with an ornate new-fangled

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black-walnut affair thick with grotesque carvings like a heathen idol. The old pulpit was hallowed by a hundred associations; it had been built in King George's time; eminent divines whose names are fresh in our colonial history had stood under that antiquated sounding-board; but, after all, what did it matter to him whether he expounded the Scriptures from pine or black-walnut, so long as he was permitted to teach his children the way and the life? His annoyance was but transient, and he came to look upon it as a vanity and vexation of spirit on his part. But now a real trouble had come to him.

While the two deacons were engaged with the parson in the study that May afternoon, Salome Pinder moved about the hall and the dining-room with strange restlessness. Few things went on in the cottage without her cognizance. Not that Salome was given to eavesdropping; but the rooms were contracted, the partitions thin, and words spoken in even the usual conversational tone had a trick of repeating themselves in the adjacent apartments. The study door was ajar, and Salome could

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scarcely help catching scraps of the dialogue from time to time.

Long before the deacons took their departure she knew very well what had happened. In fact, when she saw Deacon Twombly and Deacon Wendell coming up the garden walk, she felt their visit to be ominous. Salome knew of the dissatisfaction that had been brewing in the parish for months past. That Parson Hawkins never dreamed of it shows how unfitted he was to serve longer. The appearance of the executioners, with warrant and bow-string, was the first intimation he had of his downfall.

Salome was appalled by what had taken place, though in a degree prepared for it. She was so flustered that she neglected to open the front door for the retreating deacons, but left them, as the parson had done, to find their way out as best they might.

It was some time before she could gather strength to cross the hall and look into the study. The parson was not there; he was in the little inner room, and the door was locked. Salome tried the latch and spoke to him sev-

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eral times without getting a reply. Then the parson told her gently to go away, he was engaged, he would talk with her presently. But Salome did not go away; she sunk into a chair and sat there with her hands folded listlessly in her lap, — a more abject figure, perhaps, than the old parson on the other side of the door.

The scent of the lilacs came in at the open window, and the leaves of the vines trailing over the casement outside made wavering silhouettes on the uncarpeted floor of the study. The robins sang full-throated in the garden, as if there were no such thing in the world as care. Salome listened, and wondered vaguely at their merriment.

The afternoon sunlight slipped from the eaves and the shadows deepened under the great elms. The phantom leaves at Salome's feet had vanished; the songs of the robins had died away to faint and intermittent twitterings, and the early twilight crept into the study. Now and then she fancied she heard the parson moving in the little room; he seemed to be walking to and fro at intervals,

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like some poor caged animal. She could not tell.

It was nearly dark when the garden gate swung to with a sharp click, and a quick, light footstep sounded on the gravel-walk. Salome rose hastily from the chair, and reached the street-door just as some one stepped upon the porch.

It was a girl of nineteen or twenty, but looking younger with her hair blown about her brows by the fresh May wind. She held in one hand a chip-straw hat which had slipped from its place, and with the other was pushing back an enviable mass of brown hair, showing a serious, pale face, a little flushed at the cheeks with walking. It was a face which, passing it heedlessly in the street, you would be likely to retain in your memory unconsciously. The wide gray eyes, capable of great tenderness and great haughtiness, would come back to you vividly, maybe, years afterwards. The girl was not a beauty in the ordinary sense, but she had what some one has described as a haunting face. Who has not caught a chance expression on some face in a crowd, — a lift-

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ing of the eye, a turn of the lip, an instantaneous revelation of strength or weakness, — and never forgotten it? I have a fancy, which I do not thrust upon the reader, that the person who casts this spell on us would exert a marked influence over our destiny if circumstance brought us in contact with him or her. He or she would be our good angel or our evil star.

As the girl stood there now on the porch, she looked little enough like playing the part of a Fate. With her heavy hair blown in clouds over her eyes, she looked rather like a Shetland pony.

"O Miss Prue! is that you, honey?" cried Salome. "Do jest step in an' speak to the parson; he 's in a peck of trouble."

"I was afraid so, Salome. Where is he?" asked the girl, pushing open the door of the study and seeing it unoccupied.

"He 's locked hisself in the sanctrum," whispered Salome.

"Locked himself in?"

"Yes, an' there he 's ben ever sence them plaguey deacons went away, more 'n two hours."

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"Maybe he will not care to see me just now, Salome?"

"Mebbe,—dunno; but do jest speak a word to him."

"If you think I had better?"

"I do, honey."

"How strange,—to lock himself in!"

Then Prudence Palfrey crossed the study, and tapped softly on the panel of the inner door.

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III.

Mr. Dent and his Ward.

AND there we must leave her, with uplifted hand and listening ear, while the reader is made acquainted with the personages who figure in this little drama, and is put into possession of certain facts necessary to a clear understanding of it.

Among those who had been instrumental in removing Parson Hawkins from the pastorate of the Brick Church was Mr. Ralph Dent, a retired brewer of considerable wealth and much local influence. He was not, as a general thing, deeply concerned in parish affairs; he contributed liberally to every worthy charitable project, and was always to be seen in his pew at the morning service; but it was of comparatively small moment to him whether the parson's discourse was long or short, brilliant or dull, for he invariably went to sleep. Mr.

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Dent, for reasons which will appear, did not admire Parson Hawkins warmly; but if Mr. Dent had loved him he would have gone to sleep all the same. There are men who cannot, to save themselves from perdition, keep awake in sermon-time.

So Mr. Dent had no objection to Parson Hawkins as a parson; but he was aware that many in the parish had rather strong objections. The congregation embraced a large number of young people, chiefly women, who always like their minister sleek and interesting, and they were not content with what had satisfied their grandparents. The old pastor was visibly breaking up, and a new man was wanted. Now it chanced that Mr. Dent, in one of his periodical visits to New York, had made the acquaintance of a Mr. James Dillingham, a young gentleman of fortune and aristocratic Southern connections, who was travelling in the North for his health. Mr. Dillingham had been educated for the ministry, but, owing to ill-health, and perhaps to his passion for travel, had never been settled permanently over a society. A quick friendship sprung up

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between the two men, despite the disparity of their years, for Mr. Dillingham was not more than twenty-eight, and Mr. Dent was well on in the second half of that ridiculously brief term allotted to moderns. In the course of various conversations, Mr. Dillingham became interested in Rivermouth, and thought that perhaps he would visit the lovely New England seaport before returning South. He would certainly do so, if he undertook his proposed pilgrimage to Quebec. But the Canadian tour, and even his return South, were involved in considerable uncertainty. The bombardment of Fort Sumter by the South-Carolinians had brought matters to a crisis; war was inevitable. Mr. Dillingham's property was largely invested in Western and Northern securities, fortunately for him; for, though he was Southern born and bred, he had no sympathy with the disunionists of his native State. In the mean time it might be necessary for him to make the North his home.

It flashed on Mr. Dent that here was the very man for the Old Brick Church. Young, wealthy, in good social position, and of unusu-

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ally winning address, he would be a notable acquisition to Rivermouth society. He broached the subject indirectly to his friend, who was not at first disposed to discuss it as a possibility; then Mr. Dent urged the matter warmly; and had nearly carried his point, when he was obliged to go back to Rivermouth.

At Rivermouth he laid the case before the deacons; they opened a correspondence with Mr. Dillingham, which resulted in his agreement to preach for them on the last Sunday in May following. "Then," he wrote, "we shall be in a position to decide on the best course, should the vacancy occur to which you allude in your letter." This was satisfactory. Mr. Dillingham was not to be drawn into an inconsiderate engagement. But then Mr. Dillingham was rich, and not like those poor, drowning clergymen, dragged down by large families, ready to clutch at such frail straws of salary as Rivermouth could hold out. Upon this it was decided to relieve Parson Hawkins of his charge, and take the chances of securing Mr. Dillingham.

Throughout the matter Mr. Dent had acted

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on impulse, as the most practical man sometimes will, and had been in no way swayed by personal animosity towards Parson Hawkins, for he felt none. But when all was said and done, a misgiving shot across him. What would Prue say? She all but worshipped the old parson. Mr. Dent himself, as I have more than intimated, did not worship the parson. There had been an occasion, a painful passage in Prue's life, when it seemed to Mr. Dent that Parson Hawkins had stood between him and the girl. All that was past and nearly forgotten now; but the time had been when he thought the minister was alienating Prue's affections from him.

Prudence Palfrey was Mr. Dent's ward. His guardianship had a certain tinge of romance to it, though perhaps no man was less romantic than Mr. Dent. He was a straightforward, practical man, naturally amiable and accidentally peppery, who had had his living to make, and had made it by making beer. A romantic brewer would be an anomaly. There is something essentially prosaic in vats and barrels; but this did not restrain Mr. Dent in early life

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from falling in love with Mercy Gardner,—for brewers are human, though they may not be poetical,—nor is it likely that the brewery, which was then a flourishing establishment, had anything to do with her refusal to marry him. She married his book-keeper, Edward Palfrey, and went to the Bermudas, where Palfrey had obtained a clerkship in an English house. There, after five years, he fell a victim to an epidemic, and the widow, with her three-year-old girl, drifted back to Rivermouth. Dent bore a constant mind, and would probably have married his old love; but Mrs. Palfrey died suddenly, leaving Prudence and what small property there was to his charge.

He had been faithful to the trust, and had had his reward. The pretty ways and laughter of the child had been pleasant in his lonely home, for he never married. Then the straight, slim girl, looking at him with Mercy Gardner's eyes and speaking to him with Mercy Gardner's voice, had nearly consoled him for all; and now the bloom of her womanhood filled his house with subtile light and beauty. In all his plans Prue's interest was the end.

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Whatever tenderness there was in his nature turned itself towards her. For her sake he acquired a knowledge of books, and became an insatiable reader, as men always do who take to books late in life. He sold out the brewery, not so much because he was tired of it as that he did not want the townspeople to be able to say that Prudence Palfrey was only the brewer's girl. When she was of age to go into society, the best houses in town were open to Mr. Dent and his ward, — the Goldstones', the Blydenburghs', and the Grimses', — which might not have been the case if the old brewery had not faded into the dim and blessed past.

It must be understood that there are circles in Rivermouth into which a brewer in the present tense could no more penetrate than a particularly fat camel could go through the eye of a remarkably fine cambric-needle, — charmed circles, where the atmosphere is so rarefied that after you have got into it the best thing you can do, perhaps, is to get out of it again. It is not well to analyze the thing closely. It is all a mystery. One is pained to find that

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the most exclusive people have frequently passed their early manhood in selling tape or West India groceries in homœopathic quantities. This is not an immoral thing in itself, but it is certainly illogical in these people to be so intolerant of those less fortunate folks who have not yet disposed of their stock. However, this is much too vast and gloomy a subject for my narrow canvas.

Mr. Dent was proud of social position for Prue's sake. There was no girl like her in Rockingham County. When he bought Willowbrook, a spacious house with grounds and outbuildings, a mile from the town, she sat at the head of his table like a lady as she was, for she had honest New England blood in her veins. That Prudence was as dear to him as if she had been his own daughter, he fully believed; but how completely she had curled about his heart, like a vine, he did not discover until his nephew, John Dent, fell in love with her and all but married her out of hand. This must also be told while Prue is kept waiting at the parson's study door.

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IV.

Dragons.

WHEN Prudence was turning seventeen,— that is to say, nearly three years before that afternoon in May when she is introduced to the reader, — John Dent had come to Rivermouth. He had recently graduated, with not too many honors, and was taking a breathing-spell previous to setting out on his adventures in the world; for he had his dragons to overcome and his spurs to win, like any young knight in a legend. Poverty and Inexperience, among the rest, are very formidable dragons. They slay more young men every year than are ever heard of. The stripling knight, with his valise neatly packed by the tearful baroness, his mother, sallies forth in a spick-and-span new armor from the paternal castle, — and, snap! that is the last of him. Now and then one comes back with gold-pieces and dec-

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orations, but, ah! for the numbers that go down before the walls of great towns like New York and Boston and Chicago!

John Dent's family had formerly lived in Rivermouth, where he had lost his mother in infancy. At this time his father was associated in the proprietorship of the brewery, from which he subsequently withdrew to engage in some Western railroad enterprise. When Mr. Benjamin Dent moved to Illinois, John was a mere child; he had not been in Rivermouth since; his vacations had been passed with his father, and he had only the vaguest memory of his childhood's home. It was a cherished memory, nevertheless; for an unwavering affection for the place of one's nativity seems to be one of the conditions of birth in New England. It was during John Dent's last term in college that his father had died, leaving his railroad affairs hopelessly complicated. Though communication between the two brothers had been infrequent of late years, the warmest feeling had existed on both sides, and Mr. Ralph Dent was eager with purse and advice to assist his nephew in any business or profession he might select.

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John Dent was quite undecided what to do with himself. When some outlying personal debts were paid off there would be enough left to keep him afloat a year. Within that year of course he must have his plans definitely settled. He had come to Rivermouth to talk over those plans with his uncle, and a room had been provided for him at Willowbrook.

"Look here, Prue," Mr. Dent had said, laughingly, the day his nephew was expected, "I won't have you making eyes at him."

"But I will, though!" Prudence had cried, glancing back over her shoulder, "if he is anything like his uncle."

But John Dent did not resemble his uncle, and Prue did not make eyes at him. She found him very agreeable, nevertheless, a tall, frank-hearted young fellow with dark hair and alert black eyes,—in every way different from the abstracted young student her fancy had taken the liberty to paint for her. He smoked his uncle's cabañas as if he had been born to them, and amused Prue vastly with descriptions of his college life and with the funny little profiles of his college chums which he

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drew on blotting-paper in the library. If he could have been examined in caricature, or allowed to graduate from the gymnasium, he would not have come off so poorly for honors.

Prudence had rather dreaded the advent of the gloomy scholastic, and had been rather curious about him also. They had played together at a period when Prue was learning to walk and John Dent wore pinafores. They had not met since then. It was odd for her old playfellow to be an utter stranger to her now. What sort of man was that little boy whom she had lost so long ago in the misty fairyland of babyhood? A solemn young man in black, she had fancied. She had pictured him prowling about the house and lawn, brooding like the young Prince of Denmark, not on psychological subtleties indeed, but on sordid questions as to how on earth he was going to get his living. How he was going to get his living did not seem to trouble John Dent in the least.

Reading one of Thackeray's novels in a hammock on the piazza, or strolling in the garden after supper, with his cigar glowing here and

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there among the shrubbery like a panther's eye, he did not appear much appalled by prospective struggles for existence. The Dents were always that way, Mr. Ralph Dent remarked; free and easy, with lots of latent energy. Put a Dent in a desert, and he would directly build some kind of a manufactory. A brewery likely enough.

And indeed there was something under John Dent's careless manner which seemed to give the assurance that when the time arrived he would overthrow the wicked giants and slay the enchanted dragons with neatness and despatch, like a brave modern knight in an English walking-coat and a mauve silk neckerchief drawn through an amethyst ring. Uncle Ralph thought there was a good deal to the boy,— and so did Prue.

He was superior to any young man she had ever seen. She had seen few, to be sure, for Rivermouth is a sterile spot in which to pick up a sustenance, and her young male eagles generally fly from the nest as soon as they are fledged, some seaward and others to the neighboring inland cities. They are mostly sickly

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eagles that are left. So Prudence had encountered few young men in her time, and those she had not liked; but she did like John Dent.

John Dent had come to Rivermouth bearing about his person some concealed wounds inflicted by the eldest daughter of his Greek professor; he had, in fact, been "stabbed with a white wench's black eye, shot through the ear with a love-song," as Mercutio phrases it; but before ten days were gone at Willowbrook these wounds had somehow healed over, leaving scarcely a cicatrice on his memory.

Given a country-house, with a lawn and a pine grove, and two young people with nothing in the world to do, — let the season be springtime or winter, — and it requires no wizard to tell the result. Prue, with her genuine fresh nature and trim figure and rich hair and gray eyes, was easy to like, and very much easier to love. I am not trying to find reasons for these young people. If people who pair were obliged to have good reasons for pairing, there would be a falling off in the census.

It came to pass, then, at the end of four weeks, that John Dent found himself thinking

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night and day of his uncle's ward. He knew it was a hopeless thing from the start. He was twenty-three, penniless, and without a profession. Nothing was less tenable than the idea that his uncle would permit Prudence to engage herself to a man who might not be in a position these five years to give her a home. Then as to Prudence herself, he had no grounds for assuming that she cared for him. She had been very frank and pleasant, as was permissible to the nephew of her guardian; her conduct had been from the beginning without a shadow of coquetry. She had made no eyes at him.

Prudence would not have been a woman and eighteen if she had not seen somewhat how matters were going with the young gentleman. She did not love him, as yet; but she liked him more than any one she had ever known. She knew as well as he that anything beyond friendship between them would be unfortunate. She determined to afford him no opportunity to speak to her of love, if he were so unwise. She would keep him at such a distance as would render it difficult for him to indulge in

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the slightest sentiment with her. Prue had passed to her eighteenth birthday without so much as a flirtation; but she at once set to work managing John Dent with the cool skill of a seaside belle in her second season. It is so a young duck takes to water.

There were no moonlight walks on the lawn any more; but it fell out so naturally that John Dent saw no diplomacy in it. Household duties, which she could have no hand in conjuring, rose up between them and the pine grove. People from the town, very stupid people, dropped into the drawing-room of an evening, or his uncle failed to drop out. When they were alone together, and frequently when Mr. Dent was present, Prudence would rally the young man about the professor's daughter whom he had mentioned incidentally early in his visit. She suspected a tenderness in that direction, and in handling the subject developed powers of sarcasm quite surprising to herself. She was full of liveliness those days.

John Dent was not lively now; he was gradually merging into that saturnine and melancholy-eyed student whom Prue had so dreaded.

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Mr. Ralph Dent was struck by this phenomenon. It seemed to him latterly that his ward laughed too much and his nephew not enough. It had been the other way. Mr. Dent was, as I have said, a practical man, except in this, that he expected other people to be practical. He did not dream that his nephew would have the audacity to fall in love with Prue. But the change that had come over the two gave Mr. Dent a twinge of uneasiness. Perhaps he had not been wholly wise in having John Dent at Willowbrook.

The more he reflected on Prue's high spirits and his nephew's sudden low ones, the less he admired it. If there had been any nonsense between them, he would put a stop to it before it went any further.

Running through the Willowbrook grounds was a winding rivulet spanned by a rustic bridge, at the farther end of which, under a clump of willows, stood a summer-house, — an octagon-shaped piece of lattice-work with four gilt balls suspended from a little blue spire on the roof: a Yankee's idea of a pagoda. Here John Dent was thoughtfully smoking a cigar

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one morning when he saw his uncle cross the birch-bark bridge and come towards him. Mr. Dent stepped into the summer-house, seated himself opposite the young man, took out his cigar-case, and went directly to the business in hand.

"Jack," said Mr. Dent, "I hope you have n't been talking any nonsense to Prue."

"I don't think I understand you," said Jack, with a little start. "I have n't, to my knowledge, been talking any nonsense to her."

"For the last week or so you have not seemed like yourself, and I fancied that perhaps something had happened between you and Prue, — a little tiff maybe."

"Nothing in the world, sir."

Mr. Dent, like Hamlet, wanted something "more relative than this."

"You are sure you have not been making love to her, Jack?"

"I have certainly not been making love to Miss Palfrey, if that is what you mean."

Mr. Dent drew a breath of relief. If his nephew had one trait stronger than another, it

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was truthfulness. Mr. Dent was satisfied that no mischief had been done so far, and he intended to preclude the possibility of mischief. "How stupid of me," he reflected, "to put the notion into the fellow's head!" He would cover his maladroit move by getting his nephew into a New York banking-house or an insurance office at once. The sooner Jack made a start in life the better. Mr. Dent bit off the end of his cigar, and, taking a light from the young man, said, "Of course, Jack, I did n't seriously think you had."

With this he rose and was about to leave the summer-house.

"Are you going to town, uncle?" inquired John Dent, looking up.

"Yes."

"I 'll walk a bit of the way with you, if you like."

"Certainly, Jack."

As the garden gate closed on uncle and nephew, Prudence looked out of the bay-window over the hall door, and her busy, intelligent needle came to a dead halt half-way through a piece of cambric muslin. She was aware that

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her guardian was going to town; but it was not one of John Dent's habits to take long walks with his uncle. Prue pondered the circumstance for a minute or so, and then the needle went on again as busily as before.

"Uncle Ralph," said John Dent, as they reached a rise of ground overlooking the spires and gables of Rivermouth and the picturesque harbor, where a man-of-war lay at anchor with its masts and spars black against the sparkling atmosphere, "I had half resolved to say something to you this morning, but after your question in the summer-house I feel it my duty to say it."

"What is that, Jack?"

"I told you I had not been making love to Miss Palfrey, but I am bound to tell you that I love her all the same."

"What! why, I never heard of such madness!" And Mr. Dent stopped short in the middle of the road.

"I did n't suppose it would meet with your approval, sir."

"My approval? I tell you I never heard of such insanity!"

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"I know it is unfortunate," said John Dent, humbly; "but there are things which no man can help."

"But a man should help falling in love with a girl when he is not able to provide birdseed for a canary."

"The birdseed will come in good time; it always does."

Mr. Dent's glance, by the merest accident, rested on the red-brick Almshouse which loomed up on the left. John Dent followed his glance, and colored.

"Do you expect a young woman to waste the bloom of her life waiting for you, and finally go with you over there?"

"The girl who will not wait a year or two, or ten years, for the man she loves, is not worth working for," said John Dent, nettled.

Then Mr. Dent cursed himself for his blindness in bringing these two together.

"And Prue loves you?" he gasped.

"I did n't say that, sir."

"What in the devil did you say, then?"

"I said I loved her. I think she does n't care a straw for me."

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"But you spoke of her waiting for you a year or two."

"That was merely a supposititious case."

"Have you hinted anything of this to Prue?"

"No, sir."

"Then I depend on your honor not to. I won't have it! I won't have it!" And Mr. Dent stood there quite white with anger.

"You will bear in mind, Uncle Ralph, that I need not have told you this."

"That would have been dishonorable."

"It would have been dishonorable, sir; and so I came to you directly, without breathing a word to Miss Palfrey. I did not forget I was under your roof."

Certainly John Dent had not been dishonorable, however mad. Mr. Dent knew that his nephew was wrong in falling in love with his ward, and that he himself was right in being indignant; yet he was conscious that his young kinsman had in a fashion disarmed him.

"This is exceedingly awkward," he said, after a silence. "I was very glad to have you at Willowbrook, but with this extraordinary avowal —"

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John Dent interrupted him: "Of course my visit is at an end. I knew that. I shall leave to-day."

"What are your plans?"

"I have none, that is, nothing definite."

"I mean, where are you going?"

"O, I shall take a room somewhere in the town for the present."

Mr. Dent did not like that. The nice sense of honor which had sealed the young man's lips while beneath the avuncular roof might take wing under different circumstances. Rivermouth was a strong strategical position from which to lay siege to Willowbrook. Mr. Dent did not like that at all.

"Why waste your time in Rivermouth? There is no opening for you there. Why not go to Boston, or, better still, to New York" (or to Jericho, Mr. Dent interpolated mentally), "where there are countless chances for a young man like you?"

"I can live more economically in the town. Besides, I do not intend to settle in any of our Eastern cities. I shall go to some new country where there are wider and less crowd-

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ed fields for enterprise, where fortunes are made rapidly. I wish to make my pile at once."

"Quite a unique case," Mr. Dent could not refrain from remarking.

"Then," continued John Dent, shedding the sarcasm placidly, "I shall come back and ask Miss Palfrey to be my wife, if her heart and hand are free."

"You will do me the favor to delay the question until you come back," cried Mr. Dent, whose wrath was fanned into flame again. "If you insist on idling about Rivermouth, I insist on your promise that you will not explain your views to Miss Palfrey."

"I will not make any promises," returned John Dent, "because I have an unfortunate habit of keeping them."

Was it possible that Prue was tangled, even ever so slightly, in the meshes of the same net that had caught this luckless devil-fish? After his nephew's confession, Mr. Dent was prepared for almost anything.

Mr. Dent said: "But unless you do give me some such assurance, I shall be constrained

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to forbid your visits to the house, and that would cause people to talk."

"Even with that alternative I cannot make you any promise. To be candid, I have n't at this moment the faintest intention of telling Miss Palfrey what my sentiments are. It is not likely I shall see her again, since you have walled up the doors of Willowbrook," he added, with a smile. "Uncle Ralph, let us talk sense."

"Thanks for the compliment implied."

"Don't mention it," said Jack, politely.

"Look here," said Mr. Dent, resting his hand on his young kinsman's shoulder, "I do not want to shut my doors on you. It annoys me beyond measure to have my brother Ben's boy flying in the face of reason in this way, and setting himself up in antagonism to me, his best friend. Come, now, Jack, don't be a simpleton. Go to New York, look up some business or profession to your taste, and you shall have any capital you require, if you will give over this foolishness about Prue."

"I could not do it, Uncle Ralph. I love her."

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He had said that before quietly enough. The words were spoken passionately this time, and they went through Mr. Dent's heart with inexplicable sharpness.

"I love her, and I should despise myself if I could be bought. All the chances are against me, I know; but if I cannot have her, I can at least try to be worthy of her."

"Stuff and nonsense! How many girls have you fallen in love with before now?"

"Seven or eight, first and last, as nearly as I can remember," replied young Dent, candidly; "but there was no Prudence Palfrey among them. I think that when a man loves a girl like her, he loves but once."

"All this comes of your verse-writing and moonshine. I don't know where you got them from. Your father was a plain, practical man, and kept his head cool. When I was a young fellow—"

"You fell in love with Mercy Gardner," cried John Dent, "and never loved any but her."

Mr. Dent winced a little as he parried the thrust.

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"But I could not have her, and I made the best of it, like a sensible man. You cannot have her daughter, and you are making the worst of it, like an obstinate fellow."

"But I am not sure I cannot have the daughter — some time."

"I tell you so."

John Dent decapitated a thistle with one impatient stroke of his cane. Off came his uncle's head — by proxy!

"When Miss Palfrey tells me with her own lips to go about my business, then it will be time enough for me to draw on those stores of philosophy and hard common-sense which are supposed to be handed down in the Dent family."

Mr. Dent's anger flashed out at that, and it must be owned his nephew was exasperating.

"I command you never to speak to her of this!"

"But I must, one of these days."

"You refuse positively to quit Rivermouth?"

"At present I do."

"And you will make no promise relative to Miss Palfrey?"

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"I cannot do that, either, sir."

"Then you cannot call at the house, you know," cries Mr. Dent. "I forbid you to speak to her when you meet her, on the street or elsewhere, and I'll have nothing to do with you from this out!"

And Mr. Dent turned on his heel and walked rapidly down the road in the direction of Willowbrook, forgetful of those two ounces and a half of scarlet Saxony wool which he had been commissioned by Prue to purchase at Rivermouth.

"'How poor are they that have not patience'!" said the young man to himself; then he added, a second after, "How poor are they that have not prudence!" probably meaning Prudence Palfrey.

John Dent looked at his cigar. It had gone out. He threw the stump among some barberry-bushes by the stone-wall, and set his face towards the town.

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V.

The Romance of Horseshoe Lane.

JOHN DENT did not return to Willowbrook to dinner. The meal was passed in unwonted silence. Mr. Dent was preoccupied, and Prudence was conscious of something in the atmosphere inimical to conversation. Once or twice her guardian looked up from his plate as if to address her, and then seemed to change his mind.

"Where is Cousin John?" at length asked Prudence, setting the almonds and raisins nearer to Mr. Dent.

"O, by the way, I forgot to say he was not coming to dinner! He — he dines in town."

"At the Blydenburghs'?"

There was a certain Miss Veronica Blydenburgh, and a very pretty girl, let me tell you.

"I don't know. How should I know?" replied Mr. Dent, crisply.

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"Will he return to tea?" ventured Prudence, after a pause.

"I don't think he will," Mr. Dent said, pushing back his chair. "In fact, I do not think he will return here at all; he has some matters in town requiring his attention for a few days, and then he is off. He sent good-by to you," added Mr. Dent, committing a little amiable perjury in the attempt to rob his nephew's sudden departure of its brusqueness.

Then Mr. Dent walked out of the dining-room.

"Not coming back at all, and sent good-by to me?" said Prudence to herself. "Assuredly, Cousin John has not strained many points to be polite, after being our guest for six weeks."

Then she recalled the walk which Cousin John had taken with his uncle in the morning; she put this and that together, and became contemplative.

As Prudence and her guardian were sitting on the piazza an hour or two later, Clem Hoyt, the local Mercury and expressman, drove up to the gate with an order for Mr. J. Dent's

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trunk, and an unsealed note for Miss Palfrey which Mr. Dent handed to her with an indescribable grimace.

The writer expressed his regret on not being able to say his adieux to her in person; he had been called away unexpectedly; he would never forget her kindness to him during the past six weeks, but would always be her very faithful cousin John Dent. That was all.

Prudence turned the paper over and over, and upside down, to see if a postscript had not escaped her; but that was the whole of it. It was almost as telegrammatic as the royal epistle to the queen in "Ruy Blas," — *Madam, the wind is high, and I have killed six wolves.*

"Uncle Ralph," said Prue, folding up the note and slipping it back into the envelope, "I know that something unpleasant has happened."

"What does he say?"

"He? — nothing. But something has happened."

Mr. Dent tilted back his chair and made no rejoinder.

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"What is it? Have you quarrelled with him?"

"We did have a misunderstanding."

"What about, uncle?"

"About money matters chiefly."

"If it was all about money," said Prudence, "I have no business to ask questions."

"The boy made a fool of himself generally," returned Mr. Dent incautiously.

"Then it was not money chiefly?" said Prudence, walking up to him and looking into his eyes. "Uncle Ralph, was it anything connected with me?"

"Prue, my dear, I would rather not discuss the subject."

"But, uncle, if it was about me, I ought to know it. It would make me very unhappy to be the cause of dissension between you and your nephew, and not know what I have done. I might keep on doing it all the time, you know."

"You have n't done anything, child; it is Jack's doing."

"*What* is Jack's doing?"

"Since you will have it, I suppose I must tell you."

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But Mr. Dent was at a loss how to tell her, and hesitated. Should he treat the affair lightly or seriously? The idea of Prue having a lover was both comical and alarming to him.

"Well, what did Cousin John do?"

"He did me the honor, this morning, to say that he was in love with you, — did you ever hear anything so absurd?"

Prudence opened her eyes wide.

"Well?"

"Well? Well, I thought it rather absurd myself."

"That anybody should love me?" said Prue, slyly.

"Not at all; but that Jack should allow himself to be interested in any one under the circumstances. I pointed out to him the mistake of his even dreaming of marriage in his present position. What folly! Setting you entirely aside, what could Jack do with a wife? She would be a millstone tied to his neck. Of course I refused to sanction his insanity, and offered to establish him in business if he would behave himself sensibly."

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"That is, if he would n't love anybody?"

"Precisely."

"And then what did *he* say?" asked Prudence, leaning on her guardian's arm persuasively, and smiling up in his face.

Mr. Dent was pleased to see that his ward took the matter with so much composure, and felt that the subject was one which could be treated best from a facetious point of view.

"He said he 'd see me — no, he did not say that exactly; but he meant it. He declared he would go off somewhere and make his fortune in a few weeks, or hours, I forget which, and then come back and marry you — pretty much without consulting anybody's taste but his own. Upon my word, Prue, I think there is something wrong with his brain. He refused my advice and assistance point-blank."

"Then you quarrelled?"

"Yes, I suppose we quarrelled. He was as unreasonable as a lunatic. He cut off my head," said Mr. Dent, grimly.

"Cut off — your head?"

"Substantially. He snipped off the top of a thistle with his walking-stick, and looked me

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