

CHAPTER XI.

THE COMING OF THE RED-HEADED MAN.

HALF of the three years of probation had gone by and once more we found ourselves at Dunchester in August. Under circumstances still too recent to need explanation, the Government of which I was a member had decided to appeal to the country, the General Election being fixed for the end of September, after the termination of harvest. Dunchester was considered to be a safe Radical seat, and, as a matter of parliamentary tactics, the poll for this city, together with that of eight or ten other boroughs, was fixed for the earliest possible day, in the hope that the results might encourage more doubtful places to give us their support. Constituencies are very like sheep, and if the leaders jump through a certain gap in the political hedge the flock, or a large proportion of it, will generally follow. All of us like to be on the winning side.

Few people who are old enough to remember it will ever forget the August of two years ago, if only because of its phenomenal heat. Up to that month the year had been very cold, so cold that even during July there were some evenings when a fire was welcome, while on several days I saw people driving about the roads wrapped up in heavy ulsters. But with the first day of August all this changed, and suddenly the climate became torrid, the nights especially being extraordinarily hot. From every quarter of the country came complaints of the great heat, while each issue of the newspapers contained lists of those who had fallen victims to it.

One evening, feeling oppressed in the tree-enclosed park of Ashfields, I strolled out of it into the suburb of which I have spoken. Almost opposite the private gate of the park stands a board-school, and in front of this board-school I had laid out an acre of land presented by myself, as a playground and open space for the use of the public. In the centre of this garden was a fountain that fell into a marble basin, and around the fountain, but at some distance from it, stood iron seats. To these I made my way and sat down on one of them, which was empty, in order to enjoy the cool sound of the splashing water, about which a large number of children were playing.

Presently, as I sat thus, I lifted my eyes and saw the figure of a man approaching towards the other side of the fountain. He was quite fifty yards away from me, so that his features were invisible, but there was something about his general aspect which attracted my attention at once. To begin with, he looked small and lonely, all by himself out there on the wide expanse of gravel: moreover, the last rays of the setting sun, striking

full upon him, gave him a fiery and unnatural appearance against the dense background of shadows beyond. It is a strange and dreadful coincidence, but by some extraordinary action of the mind, so subtle that I cannot trace the link, the apparition of this man out of the gloom into the fierce light of the sunset reminded me of a picture that I had once seen representing the approach to the Norwegian harbour of the ship which brought the plague to the shores of Scandinavia. In the picture that ship also was clothed with the fires of sunset, while behind it lay the blackness of approaching night. Like the wanderer that ship also came forward, slowly indeed, but without pause, as though alive with a purpose of its own, and I remember that awaiting it upon the quay were a number of merry children.

Shaking myself free from this ridiculous but unpleasant thought, I continued to observe the man idly. Clearly he was one of the great army of tramps, for his coat was wide and ragged and his hat half innocent of rim, although there was something about his figure that suggested to me that he had seen better days. I could even imagine that under certain circumstances I might have come to look very much like this poor man, now doubtless turned into a mere animal by drink. He drew on with a long slow step, his head stretched forward, his eyes fixed upon the water, as he walked now and again lifting a long thin hand and scraping impatiently at his face and head.

"That poor fellow has got a touch of prickly heat and is thirsty," I thought, nor was I mistaken, for, on arriving at the edge of the fountain, the tramp knelt down and drank copiously, making a moaning sound as he gulped the water, which was very peculiar and unpleasant to hear. When he had satisfied his thirst, he sat himself upon the marble edge of the basin and suddenly plunged his legs, boots and all, into the water. Its touch seemed to please him, for with a single swift movement he slipped in altogether, sitting himself down on the bottom of the basin in such fashion that only his face and fiery red head, from which the hat had fallen, remained above the surface, whereon they seemed to float like some monstrous and unnatural growth.

This unusual proceeding on the part of the tramping stranger at once excited the most intense interest in the mind of every child on the playground, with the result that in another minute forty or fifty of them had gathered round the fountain, laughing and jeering at its occupant. Again the sight brought to my mind a strained and disagreeable simile, for I bethought me of the dreadful tale of Elisha and of the fate which overtook the children who mocked him. Decidedly