BUNNER HENRY CUYLER

THE STORY OF A NEW YORK HOUSE

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Содержание

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I

"I hear," said Mrs. Abram Van Riper, seated at her breakfast-table, and watching the morning sunlight dance on the front of the great Burrell house on the opposite side of Pine Street, "that the Dolphs are going to build a prodigious fine house out of town – somewhere up near the Rynders's place."

"And I hear," said Abram Van Riper, laying down last night's *Evening Post*, "that Jacob Dolph is going to give up business. And if he does, it's a disgrace to the town."

It was in the summer of 1807, and Abram Van Riper was getting well over what he considered the meridian line of sixty years. He was hale and hearty; his business was flourishing; his boy was turning out all that should have been expected of one of the Van Riper stock; the refracted sunlight from the walls of the stately house occupied by the Cashier of the Bank of the United States lit with a subdued secondary glimmer the Van Riper silver on the breakfast-table – the squat teapot and slop-bowl, the milk-pitcher, that held a quart, and the apostle-spoon in the broken loaf-sugar on the Delft plate. Abram Van Riper was decorously happy, as a New York merchant should be. In all other respects, he was pleased to think, he was what a New York merchant should be, and the word of the law and the prophets was fulfilled with him and in his house.

"I'm sure," Mrs. Van Riper began again, somewhat querulously, "I can't see why Jacob Dolph shouldn't give up business, if he's so minded. He's a monstrous fortune, from all I hear – a good hundred thousand dollars."

"A hundred thousand dollars!" repeated her husband, scornfully. "Ay, and twice twenty thousand pounds on the top of that. He's done well, has Dolph. All the more reason he should stick to his trade; and not go to lolling in the sun, like a runner at the Custom-House door. He's not within ten years of me, and here he must build his country house, and set up for the fine gentleman. Jacob Dolph! Did I go on his note, when he came back from France, brave as my master, in '94, or did I not? And where 'ud he have raised twenty thousand in this town, if I hadn't? What's got into folks nowadays? Damn me if I can see!"

His wife protested, in wifely fashion. "I'm sure, Van Riper," she began, "you've no need to fly in such a huff if I so much as speak of folks who have some conceit of being genteel. It's only proper pride of Mr. Dolph to have a country house, and – "(her voice faltering a little, timorously) "ride in and – and out – "

"*Ride!*" snorted Mr. Van Riper. "In a carriage, maybe?"

"In a carriage, Van Riper. You may think to ride in a carriage is like being the Pope of Rome; but there's some that knows better. And if you'd set up your carriage," went on the undaunted Mrs. Van Riper, "and gone over to Greenwich Street two years ago, as I'd have had you, and made yourself friendly with those people there, I'd have been on the Orphan Asylum Board at this very minute; and *you* would – "

Mr. Van Riper knew all that speech by heart, in all its variations. He knew perfectly well what it would end in, this time, although he was not a man of quick perception: "He would have been a member of the new Historical Society."

"Yes," he thought to himself, as he found his hat and shuffled out into Pine Street; "and John Pintard would have had my good check in his pocket for his tuppenny society. Pine Street is fine enough for me."

Mr. Van Riper had more cause for his petulancy than he would have acknowledged even to himself. He was a man who had kept his shop open all through Clinton's occupancy, and who had had no trouble with the British. And when they were gone he had had to do enough to clear his skirts of any smirch of Toryism, and to implant in his own breast a settled feeling of militant Americanism. He did not like it that the order of things should change – and the order of things was changing. The town was growing out of all knowledge of itself. Here they had their Orphan Asylum, and their Botanical Garden, and their Historical Society; and the Jews were having it all their own way; and now people were talking of free schools, and of laying out a map for the upper end of the town to grow on, in the "system" of straight streets and avenues. To the devil with systems and avenues! said he. That was all the doing of those cursed Frenchmen. He knew how it would be when they brought their plaguy frigate here in the first fever year – '93 – and the fools marched up from Peck's Slip after a red nightcap, and howled their cut-throat song all night long.

It began to hum itself in his head as he walked toward Water Street —*Ça ira – ça ira – les aristocrats à la lanterne*. A whiff of the wind that blew through Paris streets in the terrible times had come across the Atlantic and tickled his dull old Dutch nostrils.

But something worse than this vexed the conservative spirit of Abram Van Riper. He could forgive John Pintard – whose inspiration, I think, foreran the twentieth century – his fancy for free schools and historical societies, as he had forgiven him his sidewalk-building fifteen years before; he could proudly overlook the fact that the women were busying themselves with all manner of wild charities; he could be contented though he knew that the Hebrew Hart was president of that merchants' club at Baker's, of which he himself would fain have been a member. But there was some thing in the air that he could neither forgive nor overlook, nor be contented with.

There was a change coming over the town – a change which he could not clearly define, even in his own mind. There was a great keeping of carriages, he knew. A dozen men had bought carriages, or were likely to buy them at any time. The women were forming societies for the improvement of this and that. And he, who had moved up-town from Dock Street, was now in an old-fashioned quarter. All this he knew, but the something which made him uneasy was more subtile.

Within the last few years he had observed an introduction of certain strange distinctions in the social code of the town. It had been vaguely intimated to him – perhaps by his wife, he could not remember – that there was a difference between his trade and Jacob Dolph's trade. He was a ship-chandler. Jacob Dolph sold timber. Their shops were side by side; Jacob Dolph's rafts lay in the river in front of Abram Van Riper's shop, and Abram Van Riper had gone on Jacob Dolph's note, only a few years ago. Yet, it seemed that it was *genteel* of Jacob Dolph to sell timber, and it was not genteel of Abram Van Riper to be a ship-chandler. There was, then, a difference between Jacob Dolph and Abram Van Riper – a difference which, in forty years, Abram Van Riper had never conceived of. There were folks who held thus. For himself, he did not understand it. What difference there was between selling the wood to make a ship, and selling the stores to go inside of her, he could not understand.

The town was changing for the worse; he saw that. He did not wish – God forbid! – that his son John should go running about to pleasure-gardens. But it would be no more than neighborly if these young bucks who went out every night should ask him to go with them. Were William Irving's boys and Harry Brevoort and those young Kembles too fine to be friends with his boy? Not that he'd go with them a-rollicking – no, not that – but 'twould be neighborly. It was all wrong, he thought; they were going whither they knew not, and wherefore they knew not; and with that he cursed their airs and their graces, and pounded down to the Tontine, to put his name at the head of the list of those who subscribed for a testimonial service of plate, to be presented to our esteemed fellow-citizen and valued associate, Jacob Dolph, on his retirement from active business.

Jacob Dolph at this moment was setting forth from his house in State Street, whose pillared balcony, rising from the second floor to the roof, caught a side glance of the morning sun, that loved

the Battery far better than Pine Street. He had his little boy by the hand – young Jacob, his miniature, his heir, and the last and only living one of his eight children. Mr. Dolph walked with his stock thrust out and the lower end of his waistcoat drawn in – he was Colonel Dolph, if he had cared to keep the title; and had come back from Monmouth with a hole in his hip that gave him a bit of a limp, even now in eighteen-hundred-and-seven. He and the boy marched forth like an army with a small but enthusiastic left wing, into the poplar-studded Battery. The wind blew fresh off the bay; the waves beat up against the seawall, and swirled with a chuckle under Castle Garden bridge. A large brig was coming up before the wind, all her sails set, as though she were afraid – and she was – of British frigates outside the Hook. Two or three fat little boats, cat-rigged, after the good old New York fashion, were beating down toward Staten Island, to hunt for the earliest blue-fish.

The two Dolphs crossed the Battery, where the elder bowed to his friends among the merchants who lounged about the city's pleasure-ground, lazily chatting over their business affairs. Then they turned up past Bowling Green into Broadway, where Mr. Dolph kept on bowing, for half the town was out, taking the fresh morning for marketing and all manner of shopping. Everybody knew Jacob Dolph afar off by his blue coat with the silver buttons, his nankeen waistcoat, and his red-checked Indian silk neckcloth. He made it a sort of uniform. Captain Beare had brought him a bolt of nankeen and a silk kerchief every year since 1793, when Mr. Dolph gave him credit for the timber of which the *Ursa Minor* was built.

And everybody seemed willing to make acquaintance with young Jacob's London-made kerseymere breeches, of a bright canary color, and with his lavender silk coat, and with his little *chapeau de Paris*. Indeed, young Jacob was quite the most prominent moving spectacle on Broadway, until they came to John Street, and saw something rolling down the street that quite cut the yellow kerseymeres out of all popular attention.

This was a carriage, the body of which was shaped like a huge section of a cheese, set up on its small end upon broad, swinging straps between two pairs of wheels. It was not unlike a piece of cheese in color, for it was of a dull and faded grayish-green, like mould, relieved by pale-yellow panels and gilt ornaments. It was truly an interesting structure, and it attracted nearly as much notice on Broadway in 1807 as it might to-day. But it was received with far more reverence, for it was a court coach, and it belonged to the Des Anges family, the rich Huguenots of New Rochelle. It had been built in France, thirty years before, and had been sent over as a present to his brother from the Count des Anges, who had himself neglected to make use of his opportunities to embrace the Protestant religion.

When the white-haired old lady who sat in this coach, with a very little girl by her side, saw Mr. Dolph and his son, she leaned out of the window and signalled to the old periwigged driver to stop, and he drew up close to the sidewalk. And then Mr. Dolph and his son came up to the window and took off their hats, and made a great low bow and a small low bow to the old lady and the little girl.

"Madam Des Anges," said Mr. Dolph, with an idiom which he had learned when he was presented at the court of Louis the Sixteenth, "has surely not driven down from New Rochelle this morning? That would tax even her powers."

Madam Des Anges did not smile – she had no taste for smiling – but she bridled amiably.

"No, Mr. Dolph," she replied; "I have been staying with my daughter-in-law, at her house at King's Bridge, and I have come to town to put my little granddaughter to school. She is to have the privilege of being a pupil of Mme. Dumesnil."

Madam Des Anges indicated the little girl with a slight movement, as though she did not wish to allow the child more consideration than a child deserved. The little girl turned a great pair of awed eyes, first on her grandmother, and then on the gentlemen, and spoke no word. Young Jacob Dolph stared hard at her, and then contemplated his kerseymeres with lazy satisfaction. He had no time for girls. And a boy who had his breeches made in London was a boy of consequence, and need not concern himself about every one he saw.

"And this is your son, I make no doubt," went on Madam Des Anges; "you must bring him to see us at King's Bridge, while we are so near you. These young people should know each other."

Mr. Dolph said he would, and showed a becoming sense of the honor of the invitation; and he made young Jacob say a little speech of thanks, which he did with a doubtful grace; and then Mr. Dolph sent his compliments to Madam Des Anges' daughter-in-law, and Madam Des Anges sent her compliments to Mrs. Dolph, and there was more stately bowing, and the carriage lumbered on, with the little girl looking timorously out of the window, her great eyes fixed on the yellow kerseymeres, as they twinkled up the street.

"Papa," said young Jacob, as they turned the corner of Ann Street, "when may I go to a boys' school? I'm monstrous big to be at Mrs. Kilmaster's. And I don't like to be a girl-boy."

"Are you a girl-boy?" inquired his father, smiling.

"Aleck Cameron called me one yesterday. He said I was a girl-boy because I went to dame-school. He called me Missy, too!" the boy went on, with his breast swelling.

"We'll see about it," said Mr. Dolph, smiling again; and they walked on in silence to Mrs. Kilmaster's door, where he struck the knocker, and a neat mulatto girl opened the narrow door. Then he patted his boy on the head and bade him good-by for the morning, and told him to be a good boy at school. He took a step or two and looked back. Young Jacob lingered on the step, as if he had a further communication to make. He paused.

"I thumped him," said young Jacob, and the narrow door swallowed him up.

Mr. Dolph continued on his walk up Broadway. As he passed the upper end of the Common he looked with interest at the piles of red sandstone among the piles of white marble, where they were building the new City Hall. The Council had ordered that the rear or northward end of the edifice should be constructed of red stone; because red stone was cheap, and none but a few suburbans would ever look down on it from above Chambers Street. Mr. Dolph shook his head. He thought he knew better. He had watched the growth of trade; he knew the room for further growth; he had noticed the long converging lines of river-front, with their unbounded accommodation for wharves and slips. He believed that the day would come – and his own boy might see it – when the business of the city would crowd the dwelling-houses from the river side, east and west, as far, maybe, as Chambers Street. He had no doubt that the boy might find himself, forty years from then, in a populous and genteel neighborhood. Perhaps he foresaw too much; but he had a jealous yearning for a house that should be a home for him, and for his child, and for his grandchildren. He wanted a place where his wife might have a garden; a place which the boy would grow up to love and cherish, where the boy might bring a wife some day. And even if it were a little out of town – why, his wife did not want a rout every night; and it was likely his old friends would come out and see him once in a while, and smoke a pipe in his garden and eat a dish of strawberries, perhaps.

As he thought it all over for the hundredth time, weighing for and against in his gentle and deliberative mind, he strolled far out of town. There was a house here and there on the road – a house with a trim, stiff little garden, full of pink and white and blue flowers in orderly, clam-shell-bordered beds. But it was certainly, he had to admit, as he looked about him, very *countrified* indeed. It seemed that the city must lose itself if it wandered up here among these rolling meadows and wooded hills. Yet even up here, half way to Greenwich Village, there were little outposts of the town – clumps of neighborly houses, mostly of the poorer class, huddling together to form small nuclei for sporadic growth. There was one on his right, near the head of Collect Street. Perhaps that quizzical little old German was right, who had told him that King's Bridge property was a rational investment.

He went across the hill where Grand Street crosses Broadway, and up past what was then North and is to-day Houston Street, and then turned down a straggling road that ran east and west. He walked toward the Hudson, and passed a farmhouse or two, and came to a bare place where there were no trees, and only a few tangled bushes and ground-vines.

Here a man was sitting on a stone, awaiting him. As he came near, the man arose.

"Ah, it's you, Weeks? And have you the plan?"

"Yes, Colonel – Mr. Dolph. I've put the window where you want it – that is, my brother Levi did – though I don't see as you're going to have much trouble in looking over anything that's likely to come between you and the river."

Mr. Dolph took the crisp roll of parchment and studied it with loving interest. It had gone back to Ezra Weeks, the builder, and his brother Levi, the architect, for the twentieth time, perhaps. Was there ever an architect's plan put in the hands of a happy nest-builder where the windows did not go up and down from day to day, and the doors did not crawl all around the house, and the veranda did not contract and expand like a sensitive plant; or where the rooms and closets and corridors did not march backward and forward and in and out at the bidding of every fond, untutored whim?

"It's a monstrous great big place for a country-house, Mr. Dolph," said Ezra Weeks, as he looked over Jacob Dolph's shoulder at the drawings of the house, and shook his head with a sort of pitying admiration for the projector's audacity.

They talked for a while, and looked at the site as if they might see more in it than they saw yesterday, and then Weeks set off for the city, pledged to hire laborers and to begin the work on the morrow.

"I think I can get you some of that stone that's going into the back of the City Hall, if you say so, Mr. Dolph. That stone was bought cheap, you know – bought for the city."

"See what you can do, Weeks," said Mr. Dolph; and Mr. Weeks went whistling down the road.

Jacob Dolph walked around his prospective domain. He kicked a wild blackberry bush aside, to look at the head of a stake, and tried to realize that that would be the corner of his house. He went to where the parlor fireplace would be, and stared at the grass and stones, wondering what it would be like to watch the fire flickering on the new hearth. Then he looked over toward the Hudson, and saw the green woods on Union Hill and the top of a white sail over the high river-bank. He hoped that no one would build a large house between him and the river.

He lingered so long that the smoke of midday dinners was arising from Greenwich Village when he turned back toward town. When he reached the Commons on his homeward way he came across a knot of idlers who were wasting the hour of the noontide meal in gaping at the unfinished municipal building.

They were admiringly critical. One man was vociferously enthusiastic.

"It's a marvellous fine building, say I, sir! Worthy of the classic shades of antiquity. If Europe can show a finer than that will be when she's done, then, in *my* opinion, sir, Europe is doing well."

"You admire the architecture, Mr. Huggins?" asked Mr. Dolph, coming up behind him. Mr. Huggins turned around, slightly disconcerted, and assumed an amiability of manner such as can only be a professional acquirement among us poor creatures of human nature.

"Ah, Mr. Dolph – Colonel, I should say! I have purposed to do myself the honor of presenting myself at your house this afternoon, Colonel Dolph, to inquire if you did not desire to have your peruke *frisée*. For I had taken the liberty of observing you in conversation with Madam Des Anges this morning, in her equipage, and it had occurred to me that possibly the madam might be a-staying with you."

"Madam Des Anges does not honor my house this time, Huggins," returned Mr. Dolph, with an indulgent little laugh; "and my poor old peruke will do very well for to-day."

There was a perceptible diminution in Mr. Huggins's ardor; but he was still suave.

"I hope the madam is in good health," he remarked.

"She is, I believe," said Mr. Dolph.

"And your good lady, sir? I have not had the pleasure of treating Mrs. Dolph professionally for some time, sir, I – "

Mr. Dolph was wary. "I don't think Mrs. Dolph is fond of the latest modes, Huggins. But here comes Mr. Van Riper. Perhaps he will have his peruke *frisée*."

Mr. Huggins got out of a dancing-master's pose with intelligent alacrity, bade Mr. Dolph a hasty "Good-afternoon!" and hurried off toward his shop, one door above Wall Street. Mr. Van Riper did not like "John Richard Desbrosses Huggins, Knight of the Comb."

There was something else that Mr. Van Riper did not like.

"Hullo, Dolph!" he hailed his friend. "What's this I heard about you building a preposterous tom-fool of a town-house out by Greenwich? Why don't you hire that house that Burr had, up near Lispenard's cow-pasture, and be done with it?"

Mr. Dolph seized his chance.

"It's not so preposterous as all that. By the way, talking of Burr, I hear from Richmond that he'll positively be tried next week. Did you know that young Irving – William's son, the youngest, the lad that writes squibs – has gone to Richmond for the defence?"

"William Irving's son might be in better business," grunted Mr. Van Riper, for a moment diverted. "If we'd got at that devil when he murdered poor Hamilton – 'fore gad, we'd have saved the trouble of trying him. Do you remember when we was for going to Philadelphia after him, and there the sly scamp was at home all the time up in his fine house, a-sitting in a tub of water, reading French stuff, as cool as a cowcumber, with the whole town hunting for him?" Then he came back. "But that house of yours. You haven't got this crazy notion that New York's going to turn into London while you smoke your pipe, have you? You're keeping some of your seven business senses, ain't you?"

"I don't know," Mr. Dolph mildly defended his hobby; "there is a great potentiality of growth in this city. Here's an estimate that John Pintard made the other day – "

"John Pintard! He's another like *you*!" said Mr. Van Riper.

"Well, look at it for yourself," pleaded the believer in New York's future.

Mr. Van Riper took the neatly written paper, and simply snorted and gasped as he read this:

> *Statistical.*
>
> By the numeration of the inhabitants of this city, recently published, the progress of population for the last 5 years appears to be at the rate of 25 per cent. Should our city continue to increase in the same proportion during the present century, the aggregate number at its close will far exceed that of any other city in the Old World, Pekin not excepted, as will appear from the following table. Progress of population in the city of New York, computed at the rate of 25 per cent, every 5 years:

1805	75,770	1855	705,650
1810	95,715	1860	882,062
1815	110,390	1865	1,102,577
1820	147,987	1870	1,378,221
1825	184,923	1875	1,722,776
1830	231,228	1880	2,153,470
1835	289,035	1885	2,691,837
1840	361,293	1890	3,364,796
1845	451,616	1895	4,205,995
1850	564,520	1900	5,257,493

When he had read it through he was a-quivering, crimson with that rage of Conservative indignation which is even more fervent than the flames of Radical enthusiasm.

"Yes," he said; "there's seventy-five thousand people in this town, and there'll be seventy-five thousand bankrupts if this lunacy goes on. And there's seventy-five thousand maggots in your brain, and seventy-five thousand in John Pintard's; and if you two live to see nineteen hundred, you'll have twice five million two hundred and fifty-seven thousand four hundred and ninety-three – whatever

that may be!" And he thrust the paper back at Jacob Dolph, and made for the Tontine and the society of sensible men.

The house was built, in spite of Abram Van Riper's remonstrance. It had a stone front, almost flush with the road, and brick gable-ends, in each one of which, high up near the roof, stood an arched window, to lift an eyebrow to the sun, morning and evening. But it was only a country-house, after all; and the Dolphs set up their carriage and drove out and in, from June to September.

There was a garden at the side, where Mrs. Dolph could have the flowers her heart had yearned after ever since Jacob Dolph brought her from her home at Rondout, when she was seventeen.

Strengthened by the country air – so they said – young Jacob grew clean out of his dame-school days and into and out of Columbia College, and was sent abroad, a sturdy youth, to have a year's holiday. It was to the new house that he came back the next summer, with a wonderful stock of fine clothes and of finer manners, and with a pair of mustaches that scandalized everybody but Madam Des Anges, who had seen the like in France when she visited her brother. And a very fine young buck was young Jacob, altogether, with his knowledge of French and his ignorance of Dutch, and a way he had with the women, and another way he had with the men, and his heirship to old Jacob Dolph's money and his two houses.

For they stayed in the old house until 1822.

It was a close, hot night in the early summer; there was a thick, warm mist that turned now and then into a soft rain; yet every window in the Dolphs' house on State Street was closed.

It had been a hideous day for New York. From early morning until long after dark had set in, the streets had been filled with frightened, disordered crowds. The city was again stricken with the old, inevitable, ever-recurring scourge of yellow fever, and the people had lost their heads. In every house, in every office and shop, there was hasty packing, mad confusion, and wild flight. It was only a question of getting out of town as best one might. Wagons and carts creaked and rumbled and rattled through every street, piled high with household chattels, up-heaped in blind haste. Women rode on the swaying loads, or walked beside with the smaller children in their arms. Men bore heavy burdens, and children helped according to their strength. There was only one idea, and that was flight – from a pestilence whose coming might have been prevented, and whose course could have been stayed. To most of these poor creatures the only haven seemed to be Greenwich Village; but some sought the scattered settlements above; some crossed to Hoboken; some to Bushwick; while others made a long journey to Staten Island, across the bay. And when they reached their goals, it was to beg or buy lodgings anywhere and anyhow; to sleep in cellars and garrets, in barns and stables.

The panic was not only among the poor and ignorant. Merchants were moving their offices, and even the Post Office and the Custom House were to be transferred to Greenwich. There were some who remained faithful throughout all, and who labored for the stricken, and whose names are not even written in the memory of their fellow-men. But the city had been so often ravaged before, that at the first sight there was one mere animal impulse of flight that seized upon all alike.

At one o'clock, when some of the better streets had once more taken on their natural quiet, an ox-cart stood before the door of the Dolphs' old house. A little behind it stood the family carriage, its lamps unlit. The horses stirred uneasily, but the oxen waited in dull, indifferent patience. Presently the door opened, and two men came out and awkwardly bore a plain coffin to the cart. Then they mounted to the front of the cart, hiding between them a muffled lantern. They wore cloths over the lower part of their faces, and felt hats drawn low over their eyes. Something in their gait showed them to be seafaring men, or the like.

Then out of the open door came Jacob Dolph, moving with a feeble shuffle between his son and his old negro coachman – this man and his wife the only faithful of all the servants. The young man put his father in the carriage, and the negro went back and locked the doors and brought the keys to his young master. He mounted to the box, and through the darkness could be seen a white towel tied around his arm – the old badge of servitude's mourning.

The oxen were started up, and the two vehicles moved up into Broadway. They travelled with painful slowness; the horses had to be held in to keep them behind the cart, for the oxen could be only guided by the whip, and not by word of mouth. The old man moaned a little at the pace, and quivered when he heard the distant sound of hammers.

"What is it?" he asked, nervously.

"They are boarding up some of the streets," said his son; "do not fear, father. Everything is prepared; and if we make no noise, we shall not be troubled."

"If we can only keep her out of the Potter's Field – the Potter's Field!" cried the father; "I'll thank God – I'll ask no more – I'll ask no more!"

And then he broke down and cried a little, feebly, and got his son's hand in the darkness and put on his own shoulder.

It was nearly two when they came to St. Paul's and turned the corner to the gate. It was dark below, but some frenzied fools were burning tar-barrels far down Ann Street, and the light flickered on the top of the church spire. They crossed the churchyard to where a shallow grave had been dug, half way down the hill. The men lowered the body into it; the old negro gave them a little *rouleau* of coin, and they went hurriedly away into the night.

The clergyman came out by and by, with the sexton behind him. He stood high up above the grave, and drew his long cloak about him and lifted an old pomander-box to his face. He was not more foolish than his fellows; in that evil hour men took to charms and to saying of spells. Below the grave and apart, for the curse rested upon them, too, stood Jacob Dolph and his son, the old man leaning on the arm of the younger. Then the clergyman began to read the service for the burial of the dead, over the departed sister – and wife and mother. He spoke low; but his voice seemed to echo in the stillness. He came forward with a certain shrinking, and cast the handful of dust and ashes into the grave. When it was done, the sexton stepped forward and rapidly threw in the earth until he had filled the little hollow even with the ground. Then, with fearful precaution, he laid down the carefully cut sods, and smoothed them until there was no sign of what had been done. The clergyman turned to the two mourners, without moving nearer to them, and lifted up his hands. The old man tried to kneel; but his son held him up, for he was too feeble, and they bent their heads for a moment of silence. The clergyman went away as he had come; and Jacob Dolph and his son went back to the carriage. When his father was seated, young Jacob Dolph said to the coachman: "To the new house."

The heavy coach swung into Broadway, and climbed up the hill out into the open country. There were lights still burning in the farmhouses, bright gleams to east and west, but the silence of the damp summer night hung over the sparse suburbs, and the darkness seemed to grow more intense as they drove away from the city. The trees by the roadside were almost black in the gray mist; the raw, moist smell of the night, the damp air, chilly upon the high land, came in through the carriage windows. Young Jacob looked out and noted their progress by familiar landmarks on the road; but the old man sat with his head bent on his new black stock.

It was almost three, and the east was beginning to look dark, as though a storm were settling there in the grayness, when they turned down the straggling street and drew up before the great dark mass that was the new house. The carriage-wheels gritted against the loose stones at the edge of the roadway, and the great door of the house swung open. The light of one wavering candle-flame, held high above her head, fell on the black face of old Chloe, the coachman's wife. There were no candles burning on the high-pitched stairway; all was dark behind her in the empty house.

Young Jacob Dolph helped his father to the ground, and between the young man and the negro old Jacob Dolph wearily climbed the steps. Chloe lifted her apron to her face, and turned to lead them up the stair. Her husband went out to his horses, shutting the door softly after him, between Jacob Dolph's old life and the new life that was to begin in the new house.

II

When young Jacob Dolph came down to breakfast the next morning he found his father waiting for him in the breakfast-room. The meal was upon the table. Old Chloe stood with her black hands folded upon her white apron, and her pathetic negro eyes following the old gentleman as he moved wistfully about the room.

Father and son shook hands in silence, and turned to the table. There were three chairs in their accustomed places. They hesitated a half-second, looking at the third great arm-chair, as though they waited for the mistress of the house to take her place. Then they sat down. It was six years before any one took that third chair, but every morning Jacob Dolph the elder made that little pause before he put himself at the foot of the table.

On this first morning there was very little said and very little eaten. But when they had made an end of sitting at the table old Jacob Dolph said, with something almost like testiness in his husky voice:

"Jacob, I want to sell the house."

"Father!"

"The old house, I mean; I shall never go back there."

His son looked at him with a further inquiry. He felt a sudden new apprehension. The father sat back in his easy-chair, drumming on the arms with nervous fingers.

"I shall never go back there," he said again.

"Of course you know best, sir," said young Jacob, gently; "but would it be well to be precipitate? It is possible that you may feel differently some time – "

"There is no 'some time' for me!" broke in the old man, gripping the chair-arms, fiercely; "my time's done – done, sir!"

Then his voice broke and became plaintively kind.

"There, there! Forgive me, Jacob, boy. But it's true, my boy, true. The world's done, for me; but there's a world ahead for you, my son, thank God! I'll be patient – I'll be patient. God has been good to me, and I haven't many years to wait, in the course of nature."

He looked vacantly out of the window, trying to see the unforeseen with his mental sight.

"While I'm here, Jacob, let the old man have his way. It's a whimsey; I doubt 'tis hardly rational. But I have no heart to go home. Let me learn to live my life here. 'Twill be easier."

"But do you think it necessary to sell, sir? Could you not hold the house? Are you certain that you would like to have a stranger living there?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.