

Out of the Running

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Published in Black & White in January 1892.



OUT OF THE RUNNING

It was on the North Side of Butser on the long swell of the Hampshire Downs. Beneath, some two miles away, the grey roofs and red houses of Petersfield peeped out from amid the trees which surrounded it.

From the crest of the low hills downwards the country ran in low, sweeping curves, as though some green primeval sea had congealed in the midst of a ground swell and set for ever into long verdant rollers.

At the bottom, just where the slope borders upon the plain, there stood a comfortable square brick farmhouse, with a grey plume of smoke floating up from the chimney. Two cowhouses, a cluster of hayricks, and a broad stretch of fields, yellow with the ripening wheat, formed a fitting setting to the dwelling of a prosperous farmer.

The green slopes were dotted every here and there with dark clumps of gorse bushes, all alight with the flaming yellow blossoms. To the left lay the broad Portsmouth Road curving over the hill, with a line of gaunt telegraph posts marking its course.

Beyond a huge white chasm opened in the grass, where the great Butser chalk quarry had been sunk.

From its depths rose the distant murmur of voices, and the clinking of hammers. Just above it, between two curves of green hill, might be seen a little triangle of leaden-coloured sea, flecked with a single white sail.

Down the Portsmouth Road two women were walking, one elderly, florid and stout, with a yellow-brown Paisley shawl and a coarse serge dress, the other young and fair, with large grey eyes, and a face which was freckled like a plover's egg.

Her neat white blouse with its trim black belt, and plain, close-cut skirt, gave her an air of refinement which was wanting in her companion, but there was sufficient resemblance between them to show that they were mother and daughter.

The one was gnarled and hardened and wrinkled by rough country work, the other fresh and pliant from the benign influence of the

Board School; but their step, their slope of the shoulders, and the movement of their hips as they walked, all marked them as of one blood.

"Mother, I can see father in the five-acre field," cried the younger, pointing down in the direction of the farm.

The older woman screwed up her eyes, and shaded them with her hand.

"Who's that with him?" she asked.

"There's Bill."

"Oh, he's nobody. He's a-talkin' to some one."

"I don't know, mother. It's some one in a straw hat. Adam Wilson of the Quarry wears a straw hat."

"Aye, of course, it's Adam sure enough. Well, I'm glad we're back home time enough to see him. He'd have been disappointed if he had come over and you'd been away. Drat this dust! It makes one not fit to be seen."

The same idea seemed to have occurred to her daughter, for she had taken out her handkerchief, and was flicking her sleeves and the front of her dress.

"That's right, Dolly. There's some on your flounces. But, Lor' bless you, Dolly, it don't matter to him. It's not your dress he looks at, but your face. Now I shouldn't be very surprised if he hadn't come over to ask you from father."

"I think he'd best begin by asking me from myself," remarked the girl.

"Ah, but you'll have him, Dolly, when he does."

"I'm not so sure of that, mother." The older woman threw up her hands. "There! I don't know what the gals are coming to. I don't indeed. It's the Board Schools as does it. When I was a gal, if a decent young man came a-courtin', we gave him a 'Yes' or a 'No.' We didn't keep him hanging on like a half-clipped sheep. Now, here are you with two of them at your beck, and you can't give an answer to either of them."

"Why, mother, that's it," cried the daughter, with something between a laugh and a sob. "May be if they came one at a time I'd know what to say."

"What have you agin Adam Wilson?"

"Nothing. But I have nothing against Elias Mason."

"Nor I, either. But I know which is the most proper-looking young man."

"Looks isn't everything, mother. You should hear Elias Mason talk. You should hear him repeat poetry."

"Well, then, have Elias."

"Ah, but I haven't the heart to turn against Adam."

"There, now! I never saw such a gal. You're like a calf betwixt two hayricks; you have a nibble at the one and a nibble at the other. There's not one in a hundred as lucky as you. Here's Adam with three pound ten a week, foreman already at the Chalk Works, and likely enough to be manager if he's spared. And there's Elias, head telegraph clerk at the Post Office, and earning good money too. You can't keep 'em both on. You've got to take one or t'other, and it's my belief you'll get neither if you don't stop this shilly-shally."

"I don't care. I don't want them. What do they want to come bothering for?"

"It's human natur', gal. They must do it. If they didn't, you'd be the first to cry out maybe. It's in the Scriptures. 'Man is born for woman, as the sparks fly upwards.'" She looked up out of the corner of her eyes as if not very sure of her quotation. "Why, here be that dratted Bill. The good book says as we are all made of clay, but Bill does show it more than any lad I ever saw."

They had turned from the road into a narrow, deeply rutted lane, which led towards the farm.

A youth was running towards them, loose-jointed and long-limbed, with a boyish, lumbering haste, clumping fearlessly with his great yellow clogs through pool and mire.

He wore brown corduroys, a dingy shirt, and a red handkerchief tied loosely round his neck. A tattered old straw hat was tilted back upon his shock of coarse, matted, brown hair.

His sleeves were turned up to the elbows, and his arms and face were both tanned and roughened until his skin looked like the bark of some young sapling.

As he looked up at the sound of the steps, his face with its blue eyes, brown skin, and first

slight down of a tawny moustache, was not an uncomely one, were it not marred by the heavy, stolid, somewhat sulky expression of the country yokel.

"Please, mum," said he, touching the brim of his wreck of a hat, "measter seed ye coming. He sent to say as 'ow 'e were in the five-acre lot."

"Run back, Bill, and say that we are coming," answered the farmer's wife, and the awkward figure sped away upon its return journey.

"I say, mother, what is Bill's other name?" asked the girl, with languid curiosity.

"He's not got one."

"No name?"

"No, Dolly, he's a found child, and never had no father or mother that ever was heard of. We had him from the work'us when he was seven, to chop mangel wurzel, and here he's been ever since, nigh twelve year. He was Bill there, and he's Bill here."

"What fun! Fancy having only one name. I wonder what they'll call his wife?"

"I don't know. Time to talk of that when he can keep one. But now, Dolly dear, here's your father and Adam Wilson comin' across the field. I want to see you settled, Dolly. He's a steady young man. He's blue ribbon, and has money in the Post Office."

"I wish I knew which liked me best," said her daughter glancing from under her hat-brim at the approaching figures. "That's the one I should like. But it's all right, mother, and I know how to find out, so don't you fret yourself any more."

The suitor was a well-grown young fellow in a grey suit, with a straw hat jauntily ribboned in red and black.

He was smoking, but as he approached he thrust his pipe into his breast-pocket, and came forward with one hand outstretched, and the other gripping nervously at his watch-chain.

"Your servant, Mrs. Foster. And how are you, Miss Dolly? Another fortnight of this and you will be starting on your harvest, I suppose."

"It's bad to say beforehand what you will do in this country," said Farmer Foster, with an apprehensive glance round the heavens.

"It's all God's doing," remarked his wife piously.

"And He does the best for us, of course. Yet He does seem these last seasons to have kind of lost His grip over the weather. Well, maybe it will be made up to us this year. And what did you do at Horndean, mother?"

The old couple walked in front, and the other dropped behind, the young man lingering, and taking short steps to increase the distance.

"I say, Dolly," he murmured at last, flushing slightly as he glanced at her, "I've been speaking to your father about—you know what."

But Dolly didn't know what. She hadn't the slightest idea of what. She turned her pretty little freckled face up to him and was full of curiosity upon the point.

Adam Wilson's face flushed to a deeper red. "You know very well," said he, impatiently, "I spoke to him about marriage."

"Oh, then it's him you want."

"There, that's the way you always go on. It's easy to make fun, but I tell you that I am in earnest, Dolly. Your father says that he would have no objection to me in the family. You know that I love you true."

"How do I know that then?"

"I tell you so. What more can I do?"

"Did you ever do anything to prove it?"

"Set me something and see if I don't do it."

"Then you haven't done anything yet?"

"I don't know. I've done what I could."

"How about this?" She pulled a little crumpled sprig of dog-rose, such as grows wild in the wayside hedges, out of her bosom. "Do you know anything of that?"

He smiled, and was about to answer, when his brows suddenly contracted, his mouth set, and his eyes flashed angrily as they focussed some distant object.

Following his gaze, she saw a slim, dark figure, some three fields off, walking swiftly in their direction. "It's my friend, Mr. Elias Mason," said she.

"Your friend!" He had lost his diffidence in his anger. "I know all about that. What does he want here every second evening?"

"Perhaps he wonders what you want."

"Does he? I wish he'd come and ask me. I'd let him see what I wanted. Quick too."

"He can see it now. He has taken off his hat to me," Dolly said, laughing.

Her laughter was the finishing touch. He had meant to be impressive, and it seemed that he had only been ridiculous. He swung round upon his heel.

"Very well, Miss Foster," said he, in a choking voice, "that's all right. We know where we are now. I didn't come here to be made a fool of, so good day to you." He plucked at his hat, and walked furiously off in the direction from which they had come. She looked after him, half frightened, in the hope of seeing some sign that he had relented, but he strode onwards with a rigid neck, and vanished at a turn of the lane.

When she turned again her other visitor was close upon her—a thin, wiry, sharp-featured man with a sallow face, and a quick, nervous manner.

"Good evening, Miss Foster. I thought that I would walk over as the weather was so beautiful, but I did not expect to have the good fortune to meet you in the fields."

"I am sure that father will be very glad to see you, Mr. Mason. You must come in and have a glass of milk."

"No, thank you, Miss Foster, I should very much prefer to stay out here with you. But I am afraid that I have interrupted you in a chat. Was not that Mr. Adam Wilson who left you this moment?" His manner was subdued, but his questioning eyes and compressed lips told of a deeper and more furious jealousy than that of his rival.

"Yes. It was Mr. Adam Wilson." There was something about Mason, a certain concentration of manner, which made it impossible for the girl to treat him lightly as she had done the other.

"I have noticed him here several times lately."

"Yes. He is head foreman, you know, at the big quarry."

"Oh, indeed. He is fond of your society, Miss Foster. I can't blame him for that, can I, since I am equally so myself. But I should like to come to some understanding with you. You cannot have misunderstood what my feelings are to you? I am in a position to offer you a comfortable home. Will you be my wife, Miss Foster?"

Dolly would have liked to make some jesting reply, but it was hard to be funny with those two eager, fiery eyes fixed so intently upon her own.

She began to walk slowly towards the house, while he paced along beside her, still waiting for his answer.

"You must give me a little time, Mr. Mason," she said at last. "'Marry in haste,' they say, 'and repent at leisure.'"

"But you shall never have cause to repent."

"I don't know. One hears such things."

"You shall be the happiest woman in England."

"That sounds very nice. You are a poet, Mr. Mason, are you not?"

"I am a lover of poetry."

"And poets are fond of flowers?"

"I am very fond of flowers."

"Then perhaps you know something of these?" She took out the humble little sprig, and held it out to him with an arch questioning glance. He took it and pressed it to his lips.

"I know that it has been near you, where I should wish to be," said he.

"Good evening, Mr. Mason!" It was Mrs. Foster who had come out to meet them.

"Where's Mr.—? Oh—ah! Yes, of course. The teapot's on the table, and you'd best come in afore it's over-drawn."

When Elias Mason left the farmhouse that evening, he drew Dolly aside at the door.

"I won't be able to come before Saturday," said he.

"We shall be glad to see you, Mr. Mason."

"I shall want my answer then."

"Oh, I cannot give any promise, you know."

"But I shall live in hope."

"Well, no one can prevent you from doing that." As she came to realize her power over him she had lost something of her fear, and could answer him now nearly as freely as if he were simple Adam Wilson.

She stood at the door, leaning against the wooden porch, with the long trailers of the honeysuckle framing her tall, slight figure.

The great red sun was low in the west, its upper rim peeping over the low hills, shooting long, dark shadows from the beech-tree in the field, from the little group of tawny cows, and

from the man who walked away from her. She smiled to see how immense the legs were, and how tiny the body in the great flat giant which kept pace beside him.

In front of her in the little garden the bees droned, a belated butterfly or an early moth fluttered slowly over the flower-beds, a thousand little creatures buzzed and hummed, all busy working out their tiny destinies, as she, too, was working out hers, and each doubtless looking upon their own as the central point of the universe.

A few months for the gnat, a few years for the girl, but each was happy now in the heavy summer air. A beetle scuttled out upon the gravel path and bored onwards, its six legs all working hard, butting up against stones, upsetting itself on ridges, but still gathering itself up and rushing onwards to some all-important appointment somewhere in the grass plot.

A bat fluttered up from behind the beech-tree. A breath of night air sighed softly over the hillside with a little tinge of the chill sea spray in its coolness. Dolly Foster shivered, and had turned to go in when her mother came out from the passage.

"Whatever is that Bill doing there?" she cried.

Dolly looked, and saw for the first time that the nameless farm-labourer was crouching under the beech, his browns and yellows blending with the bark behind him.

"You go out o' that, Bill!" screamed the farmer's wife.

"What be I to do?" he asked humbly, slouching forward.

"Go, cut chaff in the barn." He nodded and strolled away, a comical figure in his mud-crust boots, his strap-tied corduroys and his almond-coloured skin.

"Well, then, you've taken Elias," said the mother, passing her hand round her daughter's waist. "I seed him a-kissing your flower. Well, I'm sorry for Adam, for he is a well-grown young man, a proper young man, blue ribbon, with money in the Post Office. Still some one must suffer, else how could we be purified. If the milk's left alone it won't ever turn into butter. It wants

troubling and stirring and churning. That's what we want, too, before we can turn angels. It's just the same as butter."

Dolly laughed. "I have not taken Elias yet," said she.

"No? What about Adam then?"

"Nor him either."

"Oh, Dolly girl, can you not take advice from them that is older. I tell you again that you'll lose them both."

"No, no, mother. Don't you fret yourself. It's all right. But you can see how hard it is. I like Elias, for he can speak so well, and is so sure and masterful. And I like Adam because—well, because I know very well that Adam loves me."

"Well, bless my heart, you can't marry them both. You'd like all the pears in the basket."

"No, mother, but I know how to choose. You see this bit of a flower, dear."

"It's a common dog-rose."

"Well, where d'you think I found it?"

"In the hedge likely."

"No, but on my window-ledge."

"Oh, but when?"

"This morning. It was six when I got up, and there it lay fresh and sweet, and new-plucked. 'Twas the same yesterday and the day before. Every morning there it lies. It's a common flower, as you say, mother, but it is not so common to find a man who'll break short his sleep day after day just to show a girl that the thought of her is in his heart."

"And which was it?"

"Ah, if I knew! I think it's Elias. He's a poet, you know, and poets do nice things like that."

"And how will you be sure?"

"I'll know before morning. He will come again, whichever it is. And whichever it is he's the man for me. Did father ever do that for you before you married?"

"I can't say he did, dear. But father was always a powerful heavy sleeper."

"Well then, mother, you needn't fret any more about me, for as sure as I stand here, I'll tell you to-morrow which of them it is to be."

That evening the farmer's daughter set herself to clearing off all those odd jobs which accumulate in a large household.

She polished the dark, old-fashioned furniture in the sitting-room. She cleared out the cellar, re-arranged the bins, counted up the cider, made a great cauldron full of raspberry jam, potted, papered, and labelled it.

Long after the whole household was in bed she pushed on with her self-imposed tasks until the night was far gone and she very spent and weary.

Then she stirred up the smouldering kitchen fire and made herself a cup of tea, and, carrying it up to her own room, she sat sipping it and glancing over an old bound volume of the Leisure Hour. Her seat was behind the little dimity window curtains, whence she could see without being seen.

The morning had broken, and a brisk wind had sprung up with the dawn. The sky was of the lightest, palest blue, with a scud of flying white clouds shredded out over the face of it, dividing, coalescing, overtaking one another, but sweeping ever from the pink of the east to the still shadowy west.

The high, eager voice of the wind whistled and sang outside, rising from moan to shriek, and then sinking again to a dull mutter and grumble. Dolly rose to wrap her shawl around her, and as she sat down again in an instant her doubts were resolved, and she had seen that for which she had waited.

Her window faced the inner yard, and was some eight feet from the ground. A man standing beneath it could not be seen from above. But she saw enough to tell her all that she wished to know.

Silently, suddenly, a hand had appeared from below, had laid a sprig of flower upon her ledge, and had disappeared.

It did not take two seconds; she saw no face, she heard no sound, but she had seen the hand and she wanted nothing more. With a smile she threw herself upon the bed, drew a rug over her, and dropped into a heavy slumber.

She was awakened by her mother plucking at her shoulder.

"It's breakfast time, Dolly, but I thought you would be weary, so I brought you lip some bread and coffee. Sit up, like a dearie, and take it."

"All right, mother. Thank you. I'm all dressed, so I'll be ready to come down soon."

"Bless the gal, she's never had her things off! And, dearie me, here's the flower outside the window, sure enough! Well, and did you see who put it there?"

"Yes, I did."

"Who was it then?"

"It was Adam."

"Was it now? Well, I shouldn't have thought that he had it in him. Then Adam it's to be. Well, he's steady, and that's better than being clever, yea, seven-and-seventy fold. Did he come across the yard?"

"No, along by the wall."

"How did you see him then?"

"I didn't see him."

"Then how can you tell?"

"I saw his hand."

"But d'you tell me you know Adam's hand?"

"It would be a blind man that couldn't tell it from Elias' hand. Why, the one is as brown as that coffee, and the other as white as the cup, with great blue veins all over it."

"Well, now I shouldn't have thought of it, but so it is. Well, it'll be a busy day, Dolly. Just hark to the wind!"

It had, indeed, increased during the few hours since dawn to a very violent tempest. The panes of the window rattled and shook. Glancing out, Dolly saw cabbage leaves and straw whirling up past the casement.

"The great hayrick is giving. They're all out trying to prop it up. My, but it do blow!"

It did indeed! When Dolly came downstairs it was all that she could do to push her way through the porch.

All along the horizon the sky was brassy-yellow, but above the wind screamed and stormed, and the torn, hurrying clouds were now huddled together, and now frayed off into countless tattered streamers.

In the field near the house her father and three or four labourers were working with poles and ropes, hatless, their hair and beards flying, staving up a great bulging hayrick. Dolly watched them for a moment, and then, stooping her head and rounding her shoulders, with one hand up to

her little black straw hat, she staggered off across the fields.

Adam Wilson was at work always on a particular part of the hillside, and hither it was that she bent her steps.

He saw the trim, dapper figure, with its flying skirts and hat-ribbons, and he came forward to meet her with a great white crowbar in his hand. He walked slowly, however, and his eyes were downcast, with the air of a man who still treasures a grievance.

"Good mornin', Miss Foster."

"Good morning, Mr. Wilson. Oh, if you are going to be cross with me, I'd best go home again."

"I'm not cross, Miss Foster. I take it very kindly that you should come out this way on such a day."

"I wanted to say to you—I wanted to say that I was sorry if I made you angry yesterday. I didn't mean to make fun. I didn't, indeed. It is only my way of talking. It was so good of you, so noble of you, to let it make no difference."

"None at all, Dolly." He was quite radiant again. "If I didn't love you so, I wouldn't mind what that other chap said or did. And if I could only think that you cared more for me than for him—"

"I do, Adam."

"God bless you for saying so! You've lightened my heart, Dolly. I have to go to Portsmouth for the firm today. To-morrow night I'll come and see you."

"Very well, Adam, I—Oh, my God, what's that!"

A rending breaking noise in the distance, a dull rumble, and a burst of shouts and cries.

"The rick's down! There's been an accident!" They both started running down the hill.

"Father!" panted the girl, "father!"

"He's all right!" shouted her companion, "I can see him. But there's some one down. They're lifting him now. And here's one running like mad for the doctor."

A farm-labourer came rushing wildly up the lane. "Don't you go, Missey," he cried. "A man's hurt."

"Who?"

"It's Bill. The rick came down and the ridge-pole caught him across the back. He's dead, I think. Leastwise, there's not much life in him. I'm off for Doctor Strong!" He bent his shoulder to the wind, and lumbered off down the road.

"Poor Bill! Thank God it wasn't father!" They were at the edge of the field now in which the accident had taken place. The rick lay, a shapeless mound upon the earth, with a long thick pole protruding from it, which had formerly supported the tarpaulin drawn across it in case of rain.

"Four men were walking slowly away, one shoulder humped, one hanging, and betwixt them they bore a formless clay-coloured bundle. He might have been a clod of the earth that he tilled, so passive, so silent, still brown, for death itself could not have taken the burn from his skin, but with patient, bovine eyes looking out heavily from under half-closed lids. He breathed jerkily, but he neither cried out nor groaned. There was something almost brutal and inhuman in his absolute stolidity. He asked no sympathy, for his life had been without it. It was a broken tool rather than an injured man.

"Can I do anything, father?"

"No, lass, no. This is no place for you. I've sent for the doctor. He'll be here soon."

"But where are they taking him?"

"To the loft where he sleeps."

"I'm sure he's welcome to my room, father."

"No, no, lass. Better leave it alone."

But the little group were passing as they spoke, and the injured lad had heard the girl's words.

"Thank ye kindly, Missey," he murmured, with a little flicker of life, and then sank back again into his stolidity and his silence.

Well, a farm hand is a useful thing, but what is a man to do with one who has an injured spine and half his ribs smashed. Farmer Foster shook his head and scratched his chin as he listened to the doctor's report.

"He can't get better?"

"No."

"Then we had better move him."

"Where to?"

"To the work'us hospital. He came from there just this time eleven years. It'll be like going home to him."

"I fear that he is going home," said the doctor gravely. "But it's out of the question to move him now. He must lie where he is for better or for worse."

And it certainly looked for worse rather than for better. In a little loft above the stable he was stretched upon a tiny blue pallet which lay upon the planks.

Above were the gaunt rafters, hung with saddles, harness, old scythe blades—the hundred things which droop, like bats, from inside such buildings.

Beneath them upon two pegs hung his own pitiable wardrobe, the blue shirt and the grey, the stained trousers, and the muddy coat. A gaunt chaff-cutting machine stood at his head, and a great bin of the chaff behind it.

He lay very quiet, still dumb, still uncomplaining, his eyes fixed upon the small square window looking out at the drifting sky, and at this strange world which God has made so queerly—so very queerly.

An old woman, the wife of a labourer, had been set to nurse him, for the doctor had said that he was not to be left.

She moved about the room, arranging and ordering, grumbling to herself from time to time at this lonely task which had been assigned to her.

There were some flowers in broken jars upon a cross-beam, and these, with a touch of tenderness, she carried over and arranged upon a deal packing-case beside the patient's head.

He lay motionless, and as he breathed there came a gritty rubbing sound from somewhere in his side, but he followed his companion about with his eyes and even smiled once as she grouped the flowers round him.

He smiled again when he heard that Mrs. Foster and her daughter had been to ask after him that evening. They had been down to the Post Office together, where Dolly had sent off a letter which she had very carefully drawn up, addressed to Elias Mason, Esq., and explaining to that gentleman that she had formed her plans

for life, and that he need spare himself the pain of coming for his answer on the Saturday.

As they came back they stopped in the stable and inquired through the loft door as to the sufferer. From where they stood they could hear that horrible grating sound in his breathing. Dolly hurried away with her face quite pale under her freckles.

She was too young to face the horrid details of suffering, and yet she was a year older than this poor waif, who lay in silence, facing death itself.

All night he lay very quiet—so quiet that were it not for that one sinister sound his nurse might have doubted whether life was still in him.

She had watched him and tended him as well as she might, but she was herself feeble and old, and just as the morning light began to steal palely through the small loft window, she sank back in her chair in a dreamless sleep.

Two hours passed, and the first voices of the men as they gathered for their work aroused her. She sprang to her feet. Great heaven! the pallet was empty.

She rushed down into the stables, distracted, wringing her hands. There was no sign of him.

But the stable door was open. He must have walked—but how could he walk?—he must have crawled—have writhed that way.

Out she rushed, and as they heard her tale, the newly risen labourers ran with her, until the farmer with his wife and daughter were called from their breakfast by the bustle, and joined also in this strange chase.

A whoop, a cry, and they were drawn round to the corner of the yard on which Miss Dolly's window opened.

There he lay within a few yards of the window, his face upon the stones, his feet thrusting out from his tattered night-gown, and his track marked by the blood from his wounded knees.

One hand was thrown out before him, and in it he held a little sprig of the pink dog-rose.

They carried him back, cold and stiff, to the pallet in the loft, and the old nurse drew the sheet over him and left him, for there was no need to watch him now.

The girl had gone to her room, and her mother followed her thither, all unnerved by this glimpse of death.

"And to think," said she, "that it was only him, after all."

But Dolly sat at the side of her bed, and sobbed bitterly in her apron.