MR. POSKITT'S NIGHTCAPS

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Stories of a Yorkshire Farmer

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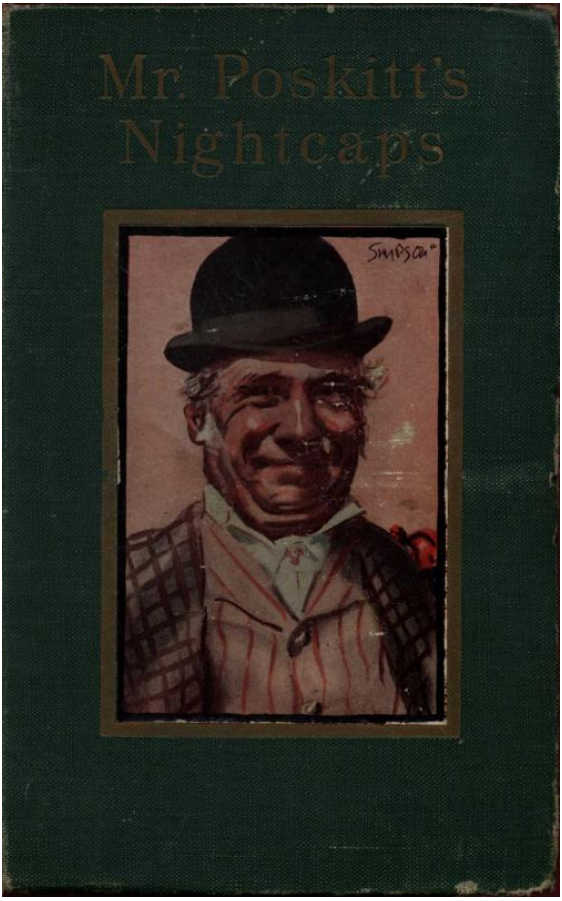
STORIES OF A YORKSHIRE FARMER



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RE-TOLD BY
J. S. FLETCHER

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INTRODUCTION

Everyone who has had the pleasure of Mr. Poskitt's acquaintance knows that that estimable Yorkshireman is not only the cheeriest of hosts, but the best of companions. Those of us who have known the Poskitt High Tea (a much more enjoyable meal than a late dinner) know what follows the consumption of Mrs. Poskitt's tender chickens and her home-fed hams. The parlour fire is stirred into a blaze; the hearth is swept clean; the curtains are drawn; the decanters, the cigars, and the quaint old leaden tobacco-box appear beneath the shaded lamp, and Mr. Poskitt bids his guests to cheer up, to help themselves, and to feel heartily welcome. And when those guests have their glasses at their elbows, their cigars and pipes between their lips, and their legs stretched in comfort, Mr. Poskitt has his story to tell. Few men know the countryside and its people, with their joys, their sorrows, their humours better than he; few people there can surely be who would not enjoy hearing him tell of the big and little dramas of life which he has watched, with a shrewd and sympathetic eye, during his seventy years of work and play, of cloud and sunshine. In some of these Nightcap stories (so termed by their hearers because Mr. Poskitt insists on telling them as preparatory to his own early retirement, which is never later than ten o'clock) he is sometimes humorous and sometimes tragic. I trust the re-telling of them may give some pleasure to folk who must imagine for themselves the cheery glow of Mr. Poskitt's hearth.

J. S. FLETCHER.
London, May 1910.

CONTENTS

MR. POSKITT'S NIGHTCAPS

CHAPTER I
THE GUARDIAN OF HIGH ELMS FARM

In the cold dreariness of that February morning the whole glace looked chilly and repellent in the extreme. There, on a little knoll, which by comparison assumed almost hill-like proportions amongst the low level of the meadows and corn-lands at its feet, stood the farmstead—a rambling mass of rough grey walls and red roofs; house, barns, stables, granary, and byres occurring here and there without evident plan or arrangement. Two or three great elm-trees, now leafless, and black with winter moisture, rose high above the chimneys and gables

like sentinels inclined to sleep at their posts; above their topmost branches half-a-score of rooks flapped lazy wings against the dull grey of the sky; their occasional disconsolate notes added to the melancholy of the scene. And yet to an experienced eye, versed in the craft of the land, there was everything to promise well in the outward aspect of High Elms Farm. The house, if very old, was in good repair, and so were the buildings; the land was of excellent quality. But it only needed one glance to see that the house had not been tenanted for some time; its windows gave an instant impression that neither lamp-light nor fire-light had gleamed through them of late, and to enter the great stone-paved kitchen was to experience the feeling of stepping into a vault. That feeling of dead emptiness was in all the outbuildings, too—the stables, the granary, the byres were lifeless, void; ghostliness of a strange sort seemed to abide in their silence. And beneath the curling mists which lay over the good acres of corn-land, weeds were flourishing instead of growing crops.

On that February morning two young men, so much alike that no one could mistake them for anything else than what they were—twin-brothers—stood at the stone porch of the house, staring at each other with mutually questioning eyes. They were tall, finely built, sturdy fellows of apparently twenty-six years of age, fair of hair, blue of eye, ruddy of cheek, with square, resolute jaws and an air of determination which promised well for their success in life. Closely alike in their looks, they carried their similarity to their dress. Each wore a shooting-coat of somewhat loud pattern; each sported a fancy waistcoat with gilt buttons; each wore natty riding-breeches of whipcord, which terminated in Newmarket gaiters of light fawn colour. Each wore his billycock hat inclined a little to the left side; each had a bit of partridge's feather stuck in his hatband. And at this moment each was nibbling at a straw.

"This is a queer place, Simpson," said one of these young men after a silence which had lasted for several minutes. "A real queer place!"

"It is, Isaac!" assented the other. "It is, my lad. The queerest place ever I set eyes on. You couldn't say a truer word."

Isaac Greaves nibbled more busily at his straw. He lifted the rakish-looking billycock and scratched his head.

"What's the matter with it?" he said. "What's up with it, like? It's a good house; they're good buildings, if they are old-fashioned; it's good land."

"Aye—sadly neglected," said his brother. "Fine crops of thistles."

"That could be put right," said Isaac. "Matter of work and patience that—the main thing is, it's good land. And—why can't they let it?"

Simpson Greaves shook his head. He, too, nibbled more zealously at his straw.

"There's something against it, evidently," he said. "Those two last tenants

they had wouldn't stop—cleared out quick, both of 'em. For why, I don't know."

Isaac threw away his straw and drew a cigar from his waistcoat pocket. He lighted it and took two or three deliberate puffs before he spoke.

"Well," he said at last, "there's no doubt about it, Simpson—if it's to be had at the rent we've heard of it's such a bargain as no man in his senses should miss. I'm in for it, if you are. It's better land, it's a better house, they're better buildings than what we've got at present, and we're paying more than twice as much. And, of course, our time's up come Lady Day. Look here—we've got the lawyer's directions; let's ride on to Sicaster and see him and hear what he's got to say."

"Come on, then," assented Simpson. "It's only another five miles or so."

There were two stout cobs attached by their bridles to the garden gate, and on them the brothers soon rode into the nearest market-town. With no more delay than was necessitated by stabling the cobs and drinking a glass of ale at the Golden Lion, they presented themselves at the office of the solicitor who acted as agent for the estate on which High Elms Farm was situate, and in due course were conducted to his presence.

"I'll leave the talking to you, Isaac," whispered Simpson, who was more reserved than his twin-brother. "Find out all you can."

Isaac was nothing loath—he knew his powers. He plunged straight into the matter as soon as he and Simpson confronted an elderly man, who eyed them with interest.

"Morning, sir," said Isaac. "Our name is Greaves, Isaac and Simpson Greaves, brothers. We're just giving up a farm over Woodbarrow way yonder, and we're on the look-out for another. We heard at Cornchester market that you've a farm to let very cheap—High Elms Farm—so we thought we'd like to have a look at it and see you about it."

The solicitor looked steadily at both brothers, one after the other. Then he cleared his throat with a non-committal sort of cough.

"Yes," he said, "yes. Have you been over the place, Mr. Greaves?"

"We've been over every bit of it this morning," replied Isaac.

"Well?" said the solicitor.

"It's good land—badly neglected," said Isaac.

"Very badly neglected," added Simpson.

"That, of course, is why you're asking such a low rent for it," suggested Isaac, with a shrewd glance at the man of law.

The man of law consulted his delicately polished finger-nails. He suddenly looked at Isaac with a frank smile.

"The fact of the case is that I can't let it," he said. "It's been tenantless four years now. Two men have had it—one stopped a month, the other a fortnight.

Each said he'd rather pay a couple of years' rent to get out than stop there any longer. So—there you are!"

The twin-brothers looked at each other. Each shook his head.

"That's a queer 'un, Isaac!" said Simpson.

"It is a queer 'un, Simpson!" responded Isaac with added emphasis. He turned to the solicitor again. "And pray what's the reason, sir?" he inquired.

The solicitor smiled—not too cheerfully—and spread out his hands.

"They say the place is—haunted," he answered.

"Haunted?" repeated Isaac. "What—ghosts, eh? Well, I don't think a few ghosts more or less would make much difference to us, Simpson, my lad—what?"

"Not that I know of," answered Simpson, stolidly.

The solicitor looked from one to the other and smiled.

"Well, I've told you what happened," he said. "Those other two men were neither of them any more likely to be impressed by ghosts than you seem to be, but I can tell you that I've seen both of them labouring under such intense fear that they were on the very verge of breaking down. That's all."

Two pairs of blue eyes fixed themselves on the man of law's face and grew wider and wider; two mouths gradually opened.

"I'll just tell you about it," said the solicitor, who was plainly not averse to playing the part of narrator, "and then, when you've heard everything, you can decide for yourselves whether you care to go further into the matter or not. Now, until just over four years ago High Elms Farm was tenanted by an old man named Josiah Maidment, who'd been there for quite thirty years. He was a queer, eccentric old chap, who had never married, and who lived almost by himself. He never had a housekeeper, nor a female servant in the house—whatever he needed doing was done for him by the woman at the neighbouring cottage."

"That's where we got the keys of the house," said Isaac.

"Just so. Well," continued the solicitor, "a little more than four years ago old Maidment suddenly disappeared. He went out of the house one morning, dressed in his second-best suit, as if he was going to market—and he was never seen again. Never seen—never heard of! Nor could we find any relation of his. He had money in the bank, and he had securities there which proved him a well-to-do man. We advertised and did everything we could, but all to no purpose. We kept things going for a while; then the stock was sold, and very soon we let the farm to a new tenant. That's just three years since. And that was when all the trouble began."

"With the ghosts?" said Simpson.

"Well, with something," said the solicitor, smiling. "The new tenant had no sooner got his stock in than he became aware that there was something wrong. The very first night he was there his sheep-dog, an animal which he'd had for

years, disappeared. They thought it had gone back to the old home, but it hadn't—it had just disappeared. Then the horses in the stables began to make such noises at night that it was impossible to sleep. If you went to them you found them shivering with fright. Just the same with the cows. As for the sheep, they were always found in the morning huddled together in a corner of whatever field they were in. In short, the whole place was panic-stricken. But by what? Nobody ever saw anything. The farmer and his men watched for nights, without effect. Yet as soon as ever their backs were turned the thing began. And at the end of a month the men went—and were thankful to go."

The twin-brothers were now thoroughly fascinated. Their eyes invited more.

"The second man came, after an interval," continued the solicitor. "Just the same things happened to him. His sheep-dog disappeared—his horses, cattle, and sheep were frightened out of their lives. And then came worse. This man was a young married man who had a wife and one child. The child was a bright, lively boy of about five. One afternoon its mother was busy, and had let it go into the orchard to play under the apple-trees. As it was a long time in coming in she went to seek it. She found it—yes, but how do you think she found it? Mad! Utterly mad! that poor child had lost its reason—through fright. And so that tenant went. There, gentlemen, is the story of High Elms Farm. It's queer, but it's true."

Isaac Greaves drew a long breath, stared hard at his brother, and shook his head.

"Well, of all the things I ever did hear tell of!" he said. "How might you account for it, now, sir?"

The solicitor spread out his hands.

"Account for it!" he exclaimed. "My good sir, ask me to account for all or any of the mysteries which baffle human knowledge! Nobody can account for it. All I know is what happened to these men. I tell you they were frightened—frightened in the worst way."

"I expect everybody hereabouts knows this story?" asked Isaac.

"You may be sure they do, or the farm would have been taken long since at this reduced rental," answered the solicitor. "There's nobody hereabouts would take it—not they!"

Isaac looked at Simpson. They regarded each other for a full moment in silence; then Isaac turned to the solicitor.

"You're asking ten shillings an acre?" he said.

"I should be glad to get a tenant at that," answered the man of law wearily.

"Make it eight, and we'll take it," said Isaac. "And we'll start on to clearing things up at once. Ghosts, sir, don't bother me and Simpson much—we'll take

our chance. But——" and there Isaac branched off into technical details about the conditions of tenancy, which showed the solicitor that he had a shrewd man to deal with.

On Lady Day the twin-brothers brought their live stock to High Elms Farm, and by nightfall everything was in place. The house had already received their furniture, and had been made spick and span by their housekeeper and a strapping maid. There was nothing cold and cheerless about it now.

"We might have been settled down for a year or two, Isaac," said Simpson as the two brothers sat smoking in the parlour that night. "Everything's in order."

"Aye, and the next thing's to finish getting the land in order," said Isaac. "We're not going to shift out of here as quickly as those other chaps did, Simpson, my lad—ghosts or no ghosts."

"I wonder if we shall hear or see anything?" said Simpson, meditatively.

Isaac glanced at a couple of up-to-date fowling-pieces which hung over the mantel-piece.

He wagged his head in a self-assured and threatening manner.

"If I see any ghosts," he said, "I'll let daylight through 'em. It'll be a fine ghost that can stand a charge of Number 4."

"Aye," said Simpson, "but then, according to what some folk say——"

He paused, rubbing his chin, and his brother stared at him with the suspicion of a doubt in his mind.

"Well?" said Isaac, impatiently. "Well?"

"According to some folk," said Simpson, "there's ghosts as you can't see. You can only feel 'em."

Isaac mixed himself a drink and lighted a cigar. He plunged his hands deep in the pockets of his riding-breeches, and facing his brother, stared hard at him.

"I believe you're afraid, Sim!" he said.

Simpson stared just as hard back.

"Well, then, I'm not!" he retorted. "I'm afraid of naught—that I can see and get at. All the same we both agreed that this was a queer place."

"Queer or no queer, here we are, my lad, at a ridiculous rental, and here we stop," said Isaac. "It'll take something that I've never heard of to shift us."

An hour later, it then being nine o'clock—the brothers took a lanthorn and, after their usual custom, went round the farm-buildings to see that everything was safe for the night. They were well-to-do young men, these two, and they had brought a quantity of valuable live stock with them. The stables, the folds, the byres, the cow-houses were all full; the pig-cotes were strained to their utmost capacity, for both Simpson and Isaac believed in pigs as a means of making money. Not for many a year had the old farmstead contained so much life.

They went from stable to stall, from fold to byre, from cote to granary—all

was in order for the night. The horses turned sleepy heads and looked round at the yellow light of the swinging lanthorn; the cows gazed at their owners with silky eyes; the young bullocks and heifers in the knee-deep straw of the folds stared lazily at the two inspectors. Over this bovine life, over the high roofs and quaint gables the deep blue of the night hung, pierced with the shafts of a thousand stars.

"All's right," said Isaac, as they finished up at the pigs. "By the bye, where did Trippett fasten up that new dog?"

"Back-yard, I told him," answered Simpson, laconically.

"Let's have a look at him," said Isaac.

He led the way round to a cobble-paved yard at the rear of the house, where in a corner near the back-kitchen door stood a brick kennel. Out of this, at the sound of their footsteps, came a diminutive collie, who, seeing them, got down on his belly and did obeisance after his fashion. Isaac considered him attentively.

"I never did see such dogs as Trippett contrives to get hold of, Simpson," he said, half peevishly. "Why can't he get something decent to look at?"

"He says this is a rare good one with sheep, anyway," said Simpson.

"He says that about all of 'em," said Isaac. "I'll try him myself to-morrow. Come on—I see they've given him something to eat."

The dog, still grovelling, whined and trembled. He came the length of his chain towards the two brothers, wriggling ridiculously, wagging his tail, gazing slavishly out of his brown eyes.

"Doesn't look much of a plucked one," commented Isaac. "I expect he's another of Trippett's failures. Come on, Sim."

They went off round the house, and the new dog, whom the shepherd had that day purchased from a very particular friend for a sovereign, shivered and whimpered as the light disappeared. Then he retreated into his kennel and curled up ... listening as a frightened child listens in a lonely room.

The two brothers went round the house by the outer paddock. All about them lay the land, silent as the sea is when no wind stirs. There was not a sound to be heard, not a light to be seen save in their own windows. They stood for a moment under the great black-blue, star-pierced dome.

"It's a quietish spot this, Sim, at night," said Isaac, in a whisper which was quite involuntary. "I'd no idea——"

Crash went the lanthorn out of Simpson's hand—that hand, shaking, convulsive, gripped his brother's arm as if with fingers of steel.

"My God, Isaac, what's that! that—there!" he gasped.

Isaac felt himself shiver as he looked. Right in the darkness before him he saw what seemed to be two balls of vivid green fire—no, red fire, yellow fire, all sorts of fire, burning, coruscating, and ... fixed on him. And for a second

he, like Simpson, stood spell-bound; then with a wild cry of "A gun, a gun!" he turned and dashed for the parlour, followed by his brother. But when they dashed back with their guns a moment later the eyes had gone. And from somewhere in the adjacent wood there suddenly rose into the profound stillness of the night a strange cry, such as neither of them had ever heard before. It was a long, wailing cry as of something in infinite despair.

The brothers, breathing hard, went back into the house and shut the door. Inside the parlour, looking at each other, each saw the other's brow to be dripping with sweat; each, after one look, turned away from the other's eyes. And each, as by mutual instinct, poured out a glass of spirit and drank it off at a gulp.

"Isaac," said Simpson, "there is something!"

Isaac put his gun aside, shook himself, and tried to laugh.

"Pooh!" he said. "We're a couple of fools, Simpson. Happen it's because it's our first night here and we're feeling strange, and haven't forgotten what the lawyer told us. It was a fox."

"A fox hasn't eyes that size," said Simpson. "And, what about that cry? You never heard aught like that, Isaac, never! No more did I."

"An owl in the woods," said Isaac.

"You can't deceive me about owls," answered Simpson. "No, nor dogs, nor foxes, nor anything else that makes a noise at night in the country. Isaac, there is something!"

"Oh, confound it!" said Isaac. "You'll make me think you're as bad as the lawyer. Come on, let's go to bed."

And to bed they went, and nothing happening, slept. But very early next morning Isaac was awakened by loud knocking at his door. Then sounded the housekeeper's voice, agitated and frightened.

"Mr. Isaac, sir, Mr. Isaac, will you get up at once, sir!"

"What's the matter?" growled Isaac. "Is the place on fire?"

"That new dog, sir, that Trippett bought yesterday—oh, I do wish you'd come down quick, sir—we're that afraid!"

Isaac suddenly bounced out of bed, bundled on some clothes, and rushed out of his room. On the landing he met Simpson, similarly attired to himself, and very pale.

"I heard her," he said. "Come on!"

They ran down-stairs and through the kitchen to the little yard behind. There stood a group of frightened people—the shepherd, Trippett, a ploughboy or two, the housekeeper, the maid. In their midst, at their feet, lay the unfortunate little collie, dead. And they saw at one glance that his throat had been torn clean out.

Once inside the house again the brothers looked at each other for a long

minute without speaking. They were both very pale and their eyes were queer and their hands shook. Simpson spoke first: his voice was unsteady.

"There is something, Isaac," he said, in a low voice. "There is—something!"

Isaac set his teeth and clenched his hands.

"I'll see it through, Simpson," he said. "I'll see it through."

"Aye, but what is it?" said Simpson.

"Wait," said Isaac.

Then began the same course of events which had signalized the short stay of their predecessors. The horses were frightened in their stables; the cattle were found huddled together and panting in the folds; the sheep were driven off the land into the surrounding roads and woods. And the two brothers watched and watched—and saw nothing, not even the fiery eyes. Until that period of their existence neither Isaac nor Simpson Greaves had known what it was to come in touch with anything outside the purely material elements of life. Coming of a good sound stock which had been on the land and made money out of the land for generations, they had never done anything but manage their affairs, keep shrewd eyes on the markets, and sleep as comfortably as they ate largely. They were well-balanced; they were not cursed with over-much imagination; such things as nerves were unknown to them. But with their arrival at High Elms Farm matters began to alter. The perpetual fright amongst the horses and cattle at night, the cause of which they could not determine; the anxiety of never knowing what might occur at any moment; these things, conspiring with the inevitable loss of sleep, affected health and appetite. Simpson gave way first; he was a shade more susceptible to matters of this sort than his brother, and possibly not so strong physically. And Isaac noticed it and grew more incensed against this secret thing, and all the more so because he felt himself so impotent in respect to combating it.

One night matters came to a climax. In the very hush of midnight pandemonium broke out in the stables. The horses were heard screaming with fear; when the two brothers got to them they found that every beast had broken loose and that they were fighting and struggling for life to force a way out—anywhere. They burst through the door which Isaac opened, knocking him down in their wild rush, leapt the low wall of the fold, and fled screaming into the darkness of the fields. Some were found wandering about the land in the morning; some were brought back from distant villages. But one and all refused, even to desperate resistance, to enter the stables again.

A few mornings after that Simpson came down to breakfast attired for travelling.

"Look here, Isaac," he said, "ask no questions, but trust me. I'm going away—about this business. I'll be back to-morrow night. Things can't go on

like this."

Then he made a pretence of eating and went off, and Isaac heard nothing of him until the next afternoon, when he returned in company with a stranger, a tall, grizzled, soldier-like man, who brought with him a bloodhound in a leash. Over the evening meal the three men discussed matters—the stranger seemed mysteriously confident that he could solve the problem which had hitherto been beyond solution.

There was almost a full moon that night—at nine o'clock it was lighting all the land. The stranger took his bloodhound out into the paddock in front of the house and fastened it to a stake which Isaac had previously driven securely into the ground. At a word from him the great beast barked three times—the deep-chested notes went ringing and echoing into the silent woods. And from somewhere in the woods came in answer the long, despairing wail which the brothers had heard more than once and could never trace.

"That's it!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

"Then whatever it is, it's coming," said the bloodhound's master. "Get ready for it."

He spoke a word to the hound, which immediately settled down trustfully at the foot of the stake. He and the brothers, each armed with a shot-gun, took up a position behind a row of shrubs on the edge of the garden, and waited.

Some minutes passed; then the bloodhound stirred and whined.

"Coming," said the visitor.

The bloodhound began to growl ominously—in the moonlight they saw him bristle.

"Close by," said his master.

In the coppice in front of them they heard the faintest rustling sound as of a body being trailed over dried leaves. Then——

"The eyes!" whispered Simpson. "Look—there!"

Out of the blackness of the coppice the two gleaming eyes which the brothers had seen before shone like malignant stars. They were stationary for a moment; then, as the bloodhound's growls grew fiercer and louder they moved forward, growing larger. And presently into the light of the moon emerged a great, grey, gaunt shape, pushing itself forward on its belly, until at last it lay fully exposed, its head between its paws, its baleful eyes fixed on the hound.

"Steady!" whispered the visitor. "It'll get up—it's wondering which side to go at him from. Wait till I give the word."

The grey thing's tail began to lash from side to side; its body began to quiver. Little by little it lifted itself from the ground and began to creep circle-wise towards the bloodhound, now tearing madly at his chain. The fierce eyes were turned slantwise; there was an ugly gleam of bared white fangs; the tread was

that of a panther. Suddenly its back arched, its limbs seemed to gather themselves together.

"Now!"

The three guns rang out simultaneously, and the grey shape, already springing, jerked convulsively and fell in a heap close to the tethered hound. There it lay—still. Simpson Greaves fetched a lanthorn which he had kept in readiness within the house, and the three men went up to the dead animal and examined it. Till that moment they had felt uncertain as to what it really was that they had destroyed—they now found themselves looking at a great dog of uncertain breed, massive in size, more wolf than dog in appearance, with a wicked jaw and cruel fangs which snarled even in death. And one of them at least began to have some dim comprehension of the mystery.

The noise of the shooting had roused the other inmates of the house; they came running into the paddock to hear what had happened. There, too, came hurrying the woman from the neighbouring cottage who had cooked and tidied for Josiah Maidment in the old days. And gazing at the dead beast in the light of the lanthorn she lifted up her hands with a sharp exclamation.

"Lord ha' mussy, if that there isn't Mr. Maidment's gre't dog!" she said. "It went away wi' him that very mornin' he disappeared."

"Why didn't you tell us Maidment had a dog?" growled Isaac. "I never heard of it."

"Why, mister, I'm sure I never thought of it," said the woman. "But he had, and that's it, as sure as I'm a Christian. It were the savagest beast ever you see—wouldn't let anybody go near the old gentleman. Where can it ha' been all this time?"

"That," said the bloodhound's master, "is just what we are going to find out."

He released the hound from its chain, and putting it in a leash, bade the brothers follow him. Then he set the hound on the dead animal's track—hound and men broke into the deep woods. There was no break in their course, no turning aside, no loss of scent. The baying of the usurper had been instantly answered by the former guardian of High Elms Farm. Through thick undergrowth, by scarcely passable paths, beneath thickets and bushes, the three men, led by the straining hound, pushed on until they came to a deep valley in the woods, where a limestone crag jutted out from beneath overhanging trees. Here, behind a bramble-brake, which concealed it from any one in the valley, the hound stopped at a hole just large enough to admit a fully-grown man. By the light of the lanthorn which Simpson had brought with him they saw the footprints of a dog on the loose soil.

"There's a cave in there," said the bloodhound's master. "Give me the light—I'm going in."

"So shall I, then," said Isaac, stoutly.

"And I," said Simpson.

The tunnel leading into the cave was not more than a few feet in length; they were quickly able to stand upright and to throw the light around them. And with a mutual fear they gripped each other's arms, for there huddled on the floor lay the body of an old, grey-headed man, who had evidently been stricken with death as he was counting over the secret hoard of which he had made this lonely place the receptacle.

"We will give that poor brute a fitting burial," said the bloodhound's master, as they went back to the farmstead. "He was a primitive savage in his ways, but a rare upholder of what he felt to be his rights. Bury him under the big elm-tree."

CHAPTER II
A STRANGER IN ARCADY

Where the animal which subsequently became so famous in the village to whose sober quietude it brought an unexpected breath of romance first came from no one ever knew. Its coming was as mysterious as the falling of rain or growing of corn in the night; it must, indeed, have arrived in the night, for it was certainly a part and parcel of Little St. Peter's when Little St. Peter's awoke one morning. Those early birds who were out and about before the gossamers on the hedgerows had felt the first kiss of the autumn sun were aware of the presence of a remarkably lean pig, who was exploring the one street of the village with inquisitive nose, questioning eyes, and flapping ears. It went from one side of the street to another, and it was obviously on the look-out for whatever might come in its way in the shape of food. There was an oak near the entrance to the churchyard; the stranger paused beneath it as long as there was an acorn to be found amongst the fallen leaves. Farther along, there was a crab-apple-tree in the parson's hedge, the fruit of which was too bitter for even the most hardened boy of the village; it stopped there to devour the fallen sournesses which lay in the shining grass. But always it was going on, searching and inquiring, and its eyes grew hungrier as its swinging gait increased in speed. And coming at last to a gap in the fence of Widow Grooby's garden, it made its way through and set to work on the lone woman's potatoes.

It was an hour later that the marauder was driven out of this harbour of

refuge, bearing upon its lean body the marks of the switch with which Widow Grooby had chased it forth, but within its ribs the comfortable consciousness of a hearty meal. When it had uttered its final protest against the switch, it went along the street again, furtive and friendless, but this time with the more leisurely pace of the thing that has breakfasted. Widow Grooby gazed after it with an irate countenance.

"I could like to know whose gre't hungry beast that there is!" she remarked to a neighbour who had been attracted to her cottage door by the pig's lamentations as he quitted the scene of his misdeeds. "It's been all over my garden and etten half-a-row o' my best potatoes, drat it. And it couldn't have done that, Julia Green, if your Johnny hadn't made that gap in my fence when I ran him out t'other night for being at my winter apples, no it couldn't! I think your William might ha' mended that gap before now—that's what I think."

"Our William's summat else to do than mend gaps," said Mrs. Green sullenly. "And the gap were there before our Johnny came through it. And it's none our pig anyway, for ours is in its sty at this here present moment, a-eating its breakfast, so there!"

The styless and proper-breakfastless pig, unconscious of this discussion and of its possibilities of development into a good, old-fashioned, neighbourly quarrel, went farther along the village street, still prospecting. There were people about now, men and women, and the door of the Fox-and-Fiddle had been thrown open, and one or two habitués stood within the sanded hall, taking their accustomed morning glass. The pig passed by, and as he passed turned an inquisitive nose towards the scent of stale ale and tobacco. He went forward, and as he went, one man put his head out of the door after him.

"Whose pig's that there?" he said, scratching his ear. "I don't rek'lect seein' that pig before, nowhere."

Another man, standing at the bar, strode to the door and looked forth at the stranger. He was a curious-looking individual, very porcine of appearance, very red and greasy of face and hand, and as bald as man could be. He wore a blue linen apron over his clothes, and from his side a formidable steel dangled from a leather belt. He was, in short, the butcher and pig-killer of the village, and had a professional interest in pigs of all classes. And he surveyed the wandering pig with a keen eye, shook his head, and went back to his ale. He knew every pig in Little St. Peter's—this was a stray-away from somewhere else.

"That's none of ours," he said, with a sniff of disdain. "Jack Longbottom's pig's the only one in Peter's that's in a badly way, and it's a stone heavier nor what that pig is."

"It'll be a poorish pig, then!" remarked the other man. "But Jack were never much of a hand at pig-feeding."

The ownerless pig continued his explorations. He went up a by-lane or two, looked in at the gates of a farmstead here and a farmstead there, but always returned to the street unsatisfied. He managed to get a light lunch off a bowl of potato peelings which a woman threw into the road as he passed, but he was still hungry, and had visions of a trough, liberally furnished with pig-meal. And at noon, being famished, and remembering the gap in Widow Grooby's garden fence, he went recklessly back to it, and finding that William Green had not yet repaired it, pushed his way through and once more entered on work of a destructive nature.

This time Widow Grooby on discovering him made no personal effort to dislodge the intruder. She was doing a day's starching and ironing, being by profession a laundrywoman, and she and her assistant, a young woman from a few doors away, were as throng, said Mrs. Grooby, as Throp's wife, and were not to be interrupted by anything or anybody.

"Blest if that there dratted pig isn't in my garden agen!" exclaimed Widow Grooby. "That's the second time this morning, and now it's at them carrots. Howsumever, it's not a woman's place to take up stray cattle—Martha Jane, slip round to James Burton's, the pinder's, and tell him there's a strange pig on my premises, and I'll thank him to come and take it out at once and put it in the pinfold, which is its lawful place. Them as it belongs to can come and pay for it—and then I'll talk to 'em about paying me for the damage it's done."

The pinder, interrupted at his dinner, came slowly and unwillingly to perform his duty. It was no easy thing to drive a stray pig into the village pound; stray horses, donkeys, and cattle were not so difficult to manage, but a pig was a different thing.

"Whose pig is it?" he inquired surlily, as he followed Martha Jane and munched his last mouthfuls. "If it be that rampagious rorp-scorp o' Green's, why don't they fetch it out theirselves?"

"Then it isn't," answered Martha Jane. "It's an animal as comes from nowhere, and you've to put it in the pinfold this minute, Mrs. Grooby says."

"Aw, indeed!" remarked the pinder. "An' I wonder how she'd like breaking off her dinner to put pigs in pound. Howsumever——"

There were boys and girls coming from school just then, and Mr. Burton enlisted their services in driving the stray pig out of the widow's garden and conducting it to the place of incarceration. Pig-like, as soon as it began to be chivied it showed a powerful inclination to go anywhere but where it was wanted to go. In a few moments the quiet street was riotous with noise and commotion.

The pinfold lay in the shadow of the old lych-gate which gave admittance to the churchyard, the spreading yew-trees, and the ancient church itself. Like all the rest of the things about it, it was grey and time-worn, and redolent of a

long-dead past. A square enclosure of grey, lichen-covered walls, against one of which stood the village stocks, against another the mounting-steps from which many a fine old squire and sprightly damsel had taken saddle to ride homeward after church, its interior, now rarely used, was a mass of docks and nettles; its door was green and mouldy, and would scarce have withstood a couple of sturdy kicks from a stout ass. When that door was opened, however, for the reception of captives, most of them backed away.

The pig proved himself as unwilling to enter the pound as any of his many predecessors. He looked in, saw the uninviting gloom, the nettles, the docks, the absence of anything amongst which he could root, and he turned and made valiant efforts to escape his captors. He doubled this way and that; he struggled out of corners; he tried to wriggle through the lych-gate. The pinder, remembering his interrupted dinner, shouted; the boys yelled; the girls screamed. But the stray pig, dodging hither and thither, still eluded their attempts to impound him, though he now screamed a little and was getting short of breath. Suddenly he collapsed against the churchyard wall, as if wearied out.

It was at this moment that Miss Lavinia Dorney, who occupied the pretty house and garden close to the church, came down to the foot of her lawn, attracted by the unwonted commotion, and beheld the exhausted pig and his tormentors. Miss Lavinia was a spinster lady of fine presence, very noble and dignified in manner, who was noted for her shawls and her caps, both of which she wore with distinction. She looked very imposing as she stood there, half-concealed by the shining holly-hedge whose neatly clipped edges fitted in so well with the elegance of their surroundings, and Burton touched his cap, the boys pulled their forelocks, and the girls curtsied.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Miss Lavinia, lifting a pair of elegantly-mounted pince-nez to the bridge of her aristocratic nose. "Dear me, what a noise! Oh, that's you, James Burton, isn't it? And what is all this commotion about?"

"We want to get that there pig into the pinfold, mum," answered the pinder, wiping his forehead. "But it's the contrariest beast ever I see! It's eaten up nearly all Mistress Grooby's kitchen garden."

Miss Lavinia looked more closely and saw the fugitive.

"Dear me!" she said. "It must be hungry, Burton. Whose animal is it?"

"Dunno, mum," answered the pinder, in a tone that suggested an utter lack of interest in the subject. "But it's none a Little Peter's pig—it's too thin, there's naught but skin and bone on it. It's my opinion, mum, it would eat anything, that pig would, if it had the chance."

"And who is going to feed it in the pound?" asked Miss Lavinia.

Burton shook his head. He was much more concerned about feeding himself than about feeding the pig.

"Dunno, mum," he replied. "It's none of my business. And nobody might never come for that there pig, and it's naught but skin and bone as it is."

"The poor animal needs food and rest," said Miss Lavinia with decision. She turned and called across her lawn. "Mitchell—come here," she commanded.

A man who was obviously a gardener approached, looking his curiosity. Miss Lavinia indicated the group in the road below the holly-hedge.

"Mitchell," she said, "isn't there a piggery in the stable-yard?"

Mitchell, coachman, gardener, general factotum in Miss Lavinia's small establishment, gathered an idea of what his mistress meant and almost gasped. A pig in his scrupulously kept preserves!

"Well, ma'am," he said, rubbing his chin, "there is certainly a sty, ma'am. But it's never been used since we came here, ma'am."

"Then we will use it now, Mitchell," said Miss Lavinia. "There is a poor animal which needs rest and refreshment. Burton and the bigger boys will help you to drive it in, and Burton may have a pint of ale, and the boys some apples. See that the pig has straw, or hay, or whatever is proper, Mitchell, and feed it well. Now, all you smaller children, run home to your dinners."

No one ever dreamed of questioning any order which Miss Lavinia Dorney issued, and the stray pig was ere long safely housed in a sty which had certainly never been used before.

"Nice new job for you, Mitchell!" said Burton, over a jug of ale in the kitchen. "And if you want a word of advice, keep the beast fastened in—he's a good 'un for gardens."

"You don't know what direction he came from?" asked Mitchell, anxiously.

"Not I!" answered the pinder. "What for?"

"Nothing," said Mitchell. "At least, if you did, I'd send my son on the road, making inquiries about him. He must belong to somebody, and I don't want no pigs in my stableyard. And you know what the missis is?—if she takes a fancy to anything, well——"

Mitchell ended with an expressive grimace, and Burton nodded his head sympathetically. Then he remembered his dinner and hurried off, and the gardener, who had not kept pigs for many years, begged another jug of ale from the cook in order to help him to remember what the staple sustenance of those animals really was. As he consumed it his ideas on the subject became more and more generous, and when Miss Lavinia Dorney went into the stable-yard after luncheon to see how her latest protégé was getting on she found the new-comer living and housed in a style which he himself may have dreamed of, but certainly never expected two hours previously.

"I'm glad to see you have made the poor thing so comfortable, Mitchell," said Miss Lavinia. "Of course, you understand what pigs require?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am!" replied Mitchell. "What a fine pig like that wants is plenty of good wheat straw to lie in, and the best pig-meal—that's crushed peas and beans and maize and such-like, ma'am—and boiled potatoes, and they're none the worse for a nice hot mash now and again. They're very nice eaters, is pigs, ma'am, as well as uncommon hearty."

"Don't you think this is a very thin pig, Mitchell?" asked the mistress.

"Yes, ma'am, he's uncommon thin," replied Mitchell. "I should say, ma'am, that that there pig had known what it was to feel hungry."

"Poor thing!" said Miss Lavinia. "Well, see that he has all he can eat, Mitchell. Of course, I must advertise for his owner—you're sure he doesn't belong to any one in the village?"

"I'm certain he doesn't, ma'am!" replied Mitchell. "There isn't another pig in Little St. Peter's as thin as what he is. Nor in Great St. Peter's, neither, ma'am," he added as by an afterthought.

"Well, as his former owner, or owners, seems to have neglected him," said Miss Lavinia with severe firmness, "I shall feed him well before advertising that he is found. So see to it, Mitchell. And by the bye, Mitchell, don't you think he is very dirty?"

Mitchell eyed the pig over. His glance was expressive.

"I think he must have been sleeping out, ma'am," he replied. "When an animal's homeless it gets neglected shocking."

"Couldn't you wash him, Mitchell?" suggested Miss Lavinia. "I'm sure it would do him good."

Mitchell stroked his chin.

"Well, ma'am," he said, "I never heard of a pig being washed unless it was for show or after it had been killed, ma'am, but I dare say I could, ma'am. As soon as I've an hour to spare, ma'am," he continued, "I'll get my son to help me, and we'll have some hot water and turn the biggest hosepipe on him in the little yard—I'll get it off him, ma'am!"

Miss Lavinia cordially approved this proposition and went away, and Mitchell remarked to himself that no man ever knew what a day might not bring forth, and went to smoke in the loneliest part of the garden. Later in the afternoon he and his son performed the pig's ablutions, and the junior Mitchell, remarking that it was no use doing things by halves, got a stout scrubbing-brush from the scullery and so successfully polished the animal that he looked as if he had just been killed and scalded. Miss Lavinia, going to see him next morning on her usual round of the stables and poultry-yard, was delighted with his changed appearance, and praised her gardener unreservedly.

Mitchell, however, was not so much enamoured of his new occupation as he professed to be in his mistress's presence. For one thing, he was just then very

busy in the garden; for another, the pig began to make more and more calls upon his time. It speedily developed, or, rather, made manifest, a most extraordinary appetite, and by some almost malevolent prescience discovered that it had only to call loudly for anything that it wanted to have its desires immediately satisfied. No one who had chanced to see its entry into Little St. Peter's would have recognized it at the end of a fortnight. Its ribs were no longer visible; it was beginning to get a certain breadth across its back; its twinkling eyes were disappearing in its cheeks. The weekly bill for its board and lodging amounted to a considerable figure in shillings, but Miss Lavinia neither questioned nor grumbled at it. She was delighted with the pig's progress, and she believed it had come to recognize her. There was distinct regret in her voice when one morning she remarked—

"Now that the animal is so much better after its wanderings, Mitchell, I think we must advertise for its owner. He will no doubt be glad to have his property restored to him. I will write out the advertisement to-day, and send it to the newspaper."

Mitchell stroked his chin. He had different ideas—of his own.

"I don't think there's need to do that, ma'am," he said. "I've been making an inquiry about that pig, and I rather fancy I know who it is as he belongs lawful to. If you'll leave it to me, ma'am, I think I can find out for certain, without advertising of him."

"Very good, Mitchell," agreed Miss Lavinia. Then she added, half-wistfully, "I hope his owner will be glad to have him back."

"I don't think there's much doubt about that, ma'am," said Mitchell, glancing at the pig, who at that moment was stuffing himself out with his third breakfast. "I should think anybody 'ud be glad to see a pig like that come home looking as well as what he does."

"And so beautifully clean, Mitchell, thanks to you," said Miss Lavinia.

Mitchell replied modestly that he had done his best, and when his mistress had gone into the house he slapped the pig's back just to show that he had better thoughts of it than formerly.

"Blest if I don't make something out of you yet, my fine fellow!" he said.

That evening, after he had had his supper, Mitchell put on his second-best suit and went to call on a small farmer who lived up a lonely lane about three miles off. He spent a very pleasant hour or two with the farmer and came away full of that peaceful happiness which always waits on those who do good actions and engineer well-laid schemes to success.

"It'll benefit him and it'll benefit me," he mused, as he went homeward, smoking a two-penny cigar which the small farmer had pressed upon him in the fulness of his gratitude. "And if that isn't as things ought to be, well, then I'm a Dutchman!"

Next day, as Miss Lavinia sat in her morning-room, going through the weekly accounts, the parlour-maid announced the arrival of a person who said he had come about the pig. Miss Lavinia looked dubiously at the spotlessness of the linen carpet-cover, and asked the parlour-maid if the person's boots seemed clean. As it happened to be a bright frosty morning the parlour-maid considered the person suitable for admittance and brought him in—a shifty-eyed man with a shock of red hair who ducked and scraped at Miss Lavinia as if he experienced a strange joy in meeting her.

"So you have come about the pig which I found!" said Miss Lavinia pleasantly. "You must have been very sorry to lose it."

The caller elevated his eyes to the ceiling, examined it carefully, and then contemplated the inside of his old hat.

"I were sorry, mum," he said. "It were a vallyble animal, that there, mum—it's a well-bred 'un."

"But it was so thin and—and dirty, when it came to me," said Miss Lavinia with emphasis. "Painfully thin, and so very, very dirty. My gardener was obliged to wash it with hot water."

The man scratched his head, and then shook it.

"Ah, I dessay, mum!" he said. "Of course, when a pig strays away from its proper home it's like a man as goes on the tramp—it don't give no right attention to itself. Now, when I had it, ah!—well, it were a picture, and no mistake."

"You shall see it now," said Miss Lavinia, who felt the caller's last words to contain something of a challenge. "You will see we have not neglected it while it has been here."

She led the way out to the stable-yard or to the sty, where the pampered pig was revelling in the best wheat straw and enjoying a leisurely breakfast—even Miss Lavinia had noticed that now that it was certain of its meals, and as many of them as it desired, it ate them with a lordly unconcern. It looked up—the man with the red hair looked down. And he suddenly started with surprise and breathed out a sharp whistle.

"Yes, mum!" he said with conviction. "That's my pig—I know it as well as I know my own wife."

"Then, of course, you must have it," said Miss Lavinia. There was a touch of regret in her voice—the pig had already become a feature of the stable-yard, and she believed that he knew his benefactress. "I suppose," she continued, "that you have many pigs?"

"A goodish few on 'em, mum," replied the man.

"Would you—I thought, perhaps, that as you have others, and this one seems to have settled down here, you might be inclined to—in fact, to sell him to me?" said Miss Lavinia hurriedly.

The red-haired person once more scratched his head.

"Well, of course, mum, pigs is for selling purposes," he said. "But that there pig, he's an uncommon fine breed. What would you be for giving for him, mum, just as he stands?"

At this moment the pig, full of food and entirely happy, gave several grunts of satisfaction and begun to rub its snout against the door of the sty. Miss Lavinia made up her mind.

"Would you consider ten pounds a suitable sum?" she asked timidly.

The red-haired man turned his head away as if to consider this proposal in private. When he faced round again his face was very solemn.

"Well, of course, mum," he said, "of course, as I said, he's a vallyble animal is that there, but as you've fed him since he were found and have a liking to him—well, we'll say ten pounds, mum, and there it is!"

"Then if you will come into the house I will give you the money," said Miss Lavinia. "And you may rest assured we shall treat the pig well."

"I'm sure of that, mum," said the seller. "And very pretty eating you'll find him when his time comes."

Then he got his money, and drank a jug of ale, and went away, rejoicing greatly, and on his way home he met Mitchell, who had been to the market-town in the light cart, and who pulled up by the road-side at sight of him.

The red-haired man winked knowingly at the gardener.

"Well?" said Mitchell.

"All right," answered the other. He winked again.

Mitchell began to look uneasy.

"Where's the pig?" he asked.

"Where I found it," answered the red-haired man. "In the sty."

"Why didn't you bring it away?" asked Mitchell. "You said you would."

The red-haired man again winked and smiled widely.

"I've sold it," he said. "Sold it to your missis. For ten pounds."

He slapped his pocket and Mitchell heard the sovereigns jingle. He almost fell out of his seat.

"Sold it!—to our missis!—for ten pounds!" he exclaimed. "You—why, it weren't yours to sell!"

"Weren't it?" said the red-haired man. "Well, there you're wrong, Mestur Mitchell, 'cause it were. I knew it as soon as I set eyes on it, 'cause it had a mark in its left ear that I gave it myself. And as your missis had taken a fancy to it and bid me ten pound for it, why, of course, I took her at her word. Howsumever," he concluded, putting his hand in his pocket, "as you put me on to the matter, I'll none be unneighbourly, and I'll do the handsome by you."

Therewith he laid half-a-crown on the splashboard of the light cart, winked

again, and with a cheery farewell strode away, leaving the disgusted gardener staring at the scant reward of his schemings.

CHAPTER III
THE MAN WHO WAS NOBODY

I

That was one of the finest of all the fine mornings of that wonderful spring, and Miriam Weere, when she saw the sunlight falling across the orchard in front of her cottage, and heard the swirl of the brown river mingling with the murmur of the bees in their hives under the apple-trees, determined to do her day's work out of doors. The day's work was the washing of the week's soiled linen, and no great task for a strapping young woman of five-and-twenty, whose arms were as muscular as her gipsy-coloured face was handsome. Miriam accordingly made no haste in beginning it—besides, there was the eighteen-months-old baby to wash and dress and feed. He woke out of a morning sleep as she finished her breakfast, and began to make loud demands upon her. She busied herself with him for the next hour, laughing to herself gleefully over his resemblance to his father, big blue-eyed, blonde-haired Michael; and then, carrying him out to the daisy-spangled grass of the orchard, she set him down beneath an apple-tree, and left him grasping at the white and gold and green about him while she set out her wash-tubs a few yards away.

Miriam Weere had never a care in the world. Her glossy hair, dark as the plumage on a rook's breast, her clear hazel eyes, her glowing cheeks, the round, full curves of her fine figure, combined with the quickness and activity of her movements to prove her in possession of rude and splendid health. There was only another human being in Ashdale who could compete with her in the appearance of health or in good looks—her husband, Michael, a giant of well over six feet, who, like herself, had never known what it was to have a day's illness. The life of these two in their cottage by the little Ash was one perpetual round of good humour, good appetite, and sound sleep. Nor was there any reason why they should take thought for the morrow—that is, unduly. Higher up the valley,

set on a green plateau by the bank of the river, stood Ashdale Mill, between the upper and nether stones of which most of the grain grown in the neighbourhood passed. And Ashdale Mill was the property of Tobias Weere, Michael's father, who was well known to be a rich man, and some day Michael would have——

That was the only question which occasionally made Miriam knit her brows. What would Michael have when old Tobias died? The mill, the mill-house, the garden and orchard around it, two or three acres of land beside, and the fishing rights of the river from Ashdale Bridge to Brinford Meadows belonged absolutely to Tobias, who had bought the freehold of this desirable property when he purchased the good-will of the business twenty years before. He had only two sons to succeed to whatever he left—Michael and Stephen. Michael was now general superintendent, manager, traveller, a hard indefatigable worker, who was as ready to give a hand with the grain and the flour as to write the letters and keep the books. Stephen, on the other hand, was a loafer. He was fonder of the village inn than of the mill, and of going off to race meetings or cricket matches than of attending to business. He was also somewhat given to conviviality, which often degenerated into intemperance, and he had lately married the publican's daughter, a showy, flaunting wench whom Miriam thoroughly detested. Considering the difference that existed between the two brothers, it seemed to Miriam that it would be grossly unfair to share things equally between them, and more than once she had said so to Michael. But Michael always shook his head.

"Share and share alike," he said. "I ask no fairer, my lass."

"Then," she answered, "if it's like that, you must try to buy Stephen out, for he'll never do any good."

"Ah, that's more like it!" said Michael.

Miriam was thinking of these things as she plunged her strong arms into the frothing soapsuds and listened to her baby cooing under the apple-trees. She had heard from a neighbour only the night before of some escapade in which Stephen had been mixed up, and her informant had added significantly that it was easy to see where Stephen's share of old Toby's money would go when he got the handling of it. Miriam resolved that when Michael, who was away on business in another part of the country, came home she would once more speak to him about coming to an understanding with his brother. She was not the sort of woman to see a flourishing business endangered, and she never forgot that she was the mother of Michael's first-born. Some day, perhaps, she might see him master of the mill.

Save for the murmur of the river flowing at the edge of the garden beneath overhanging alders and willows, and the perpetual humming of the insects in tree and bush, the morning was very still and languorous, and sounds of a louder sort travelled far. And Miriam was suddenly aware of the clap-clap-clap of hu-

man, stoutly-shod feet flying down the narrow lane which ran by the side of the orchard. Something in the sound betokened trouble—she was already drying her hands and arms on her rough apron when the wicket-gate was flung open and a girl, red-faced, panting, burst in beneath the pink and white of the fruit-trees.

"What is it, Eliza Kate?" demanded Miriam.

The girl pressed her hand to her side.

"It's—th'—owd—maister!" she panted. "Margaret Burton thinks he's bad—a stroke. An' will you please to go quick."

"Look to the child," said Miriam, without a glance at him herself. "And bring him back with you."

Then she set off at a swift pace up the steep, stony lane which led to Ashdale Mill. The atmosphere about it suggested nothing of death—the old place was gay with summer life, and the mill-wheel was throwing liquid diamonds into the sunlight with every revolution. Miriam saw none of these things; she hurried into the mill-house and onward into the living-room. For perhaps the first time in her life she was conscious of impending disaster—why or what she could not have told.

Old Tobias lay back in his easy-chair, looking very white and worn—his housekeeper, old Margaret Burton, stood at his side holding a cup. She sighed with relief as Miriam entered.

"Eh, I'm glad ye've comed, Mistress Michael!" she said. "I'm afeard th' maister has had a stroke—he turned queer all of a sudden."

"Have you sent for the doctor?" asked Miriam, going up to the old man and taking his hand.

"Aye, one o' th' mill lads has gone post haste on th' owd pony," answered the housekeeper. "But I'm afeard——"

Tobias opened his eyes, and, seeing Miriam, looked recognition. His grey lips moved.

"'Tisn' a stroke!" he whispered faintly. "It's th' end. Miriam, I want to say—summat to thee, my lass."

Miriam understood that he had something which he wished to say to her alone, and she motioned the housekeeper out of the living-room.

"There's a drop o' brandy in the cupboard there," said Tobias, when the door was closed upon himself and his daughter-in-law. "Gi' me a sup, lass—it'll keep me up till th' doctor comes—there's a matter I must do then. Miriam!"

"Yes, father?"

"Miriam, thou's a clever woman and a strong 'un," the old man went on, when he had sipped the brandy. "I must tell thee summat that nobody knows, and thou must tell it to Michael when I'm gone—I daren't tell him."

Miriam's heart leapt once and seemed to stand still; a sudden swelling

seized her throat.

"Tell Michael?" she said. "Yes, father."

"Miriam ... hearken. Michael—he weren't—he weren't born in wedlock!"

Michael's wife was a woman of quick perception. The full meaning of the old man's words fell on her with the force of a thunderstorm that breaks upon a peaceful countryside without warning. She said nothing, and the old man motioned her to give him more brandy.

"Weren't born in wedlock," he repeated, "and so is of course illegitimate and can't heir nowt o' mine. It was this way," he went on, gathering strength from the stimulant. "His mother and me weren't wed till after he were born—we were wed just before we came here. We came from a long way off—nobody knows about it in these parts. And, of course, Michael's real name is Michael Oldfield—his mother's name—and, by law, Stephen takes all."

"Stephen takes all!" she repeated in a dull voice.

Old Tobias Weere's eyes gleamed out of the ashen-grey of his face, and his lips curled with the old cunning which Miriam knew well.

"But I ha' put matters right," he said, with a horrible attempt at a smile, "I ha' put matters right! Didn't want to do it till th' end, 'cause folk will talk, and I can't abide talking. I ha' made a will leaving one-half o' my property to my son, Stephen Weere; t'other half to Michael Oldfield, otherwise known as Michael Weere, o' Millrace Cottage, Ashdale, i' th' county——"

The old man's face suddenly paled, and Miriam put more brandy to his lips. After a moment he pointed to a bunch of keys lying on the table beside him, and then to an ancient bureau which stood in a dark corner of the living-room. "It's i' th' top—drawer—th' will," he whispered. "Get it out, my lass, and lay the writing things o' th' table—doctor and James Bream'll witness it, an' then all will be in order. 'Cause, you see, somed'y might chance-along as knew the secret, an' would let out that Michael were born before we were wed, an' then——"

Sick and cold with the surprise and horror of this news, Miriam took the keys and went over to the old bureau. There, in the top drawer, lay a sheet of parchment—she knew little of law matters, but she saw that this had been written by a practised hand. She set it out on the table with pen and ink and blotting-paper—in silence.

"A lawyer chap in London town, as axed no questions, drew that there," murmured Tobias. "Wants naught but signing and witnessing and the date putting in. Why doesn't doctor come, and Jim Bream on the owd pony? Go to th' house door, lass, and see if ye can see 'em coming."

Miriam went out into the stone-paved porch, and, shading her aching eyes, looked across the garden. Eliza Kate had arrived with the baby, and sat nursing it beneath the lilac-trees. It caught sight of its mother, and stretched its arms and

lifted its voice to her. Miriam gave no heed to it—her heart was heavy as the grey stones she stood on.

She waited some minutes—then two mounted figures came in sight far down the lane, and she turned back to the living-room. And on the threshold she stopped, and her hand went up to her bosom before she moved across to the old man's chair. But the first glance had told her what the second confirmed. Tobias was dead.

Miriam hesitated one moment. Then she strode across the living-room, and, snatching up the unsigned will, folded it into a smaller compass, and thrust it within the folds of her gown.

II

It was a matter of wonder to everybody, and to no one more so than her husband, that Miriam appeared to be so much affected by her father-in-law's death. It was not that she made any demonstrations of grief, but that an unusual gloom seemed to settle over her. Never gay in the girlish sense, she had always been light-hearted and full of smiles and laughter; during the first days which followed the demise of old Tobias she went about her duties with a knitted brow, as if some sudden care had settled upon her. Michael saw it, and wondered; he had respected his father and entertained a filial affection for him, but his death did not trouble him to the extent of spoiling his appetite or disturbing his sleep. He soon saw that Miriam ate little: he soon guessed that she was sleeping badly. And on the fourth day after his hurried return home—the eve of the funeral—he laid his great hand on her shoulder as she was stooping over the child's cradle and turned her round to face him.

"What's the matter, my lass?" he said kindly. "Is there aught amiss? You are as quiet as the grave, and you don't eat, nor get sleep. The old father's death can't make that difference. He was old—very old—and he's a deal better off."

"There is such a lot to think of just now," she replied evasively.

Michael, man-like, mistook her meaning.

"Oh, aye, to be sure there is, lass," he agreed. "To-morrow'll be a busyish day, of course, for I expect there'll be half the countryside here at the burying, and, of course, they all expect refreshment. However, there'll be no stint of that, and, after all, they'll only want a glass of wine and a funeral biscuit. And as for the funeral dinner, why—there'll only be you and me, and Stephen and his wife, and your father and mother, and Stephen's wife's father and mother, and

the lawyer."

"The lawyer!" exclaimed Miriam. "What lawyer?"

"What lawyer? Why, Mr. Brooke, o' Sicaster, to be sure," answered Michael. "Who else?"

"What's he coming for?" asked Miriam.

"Coming for? Come, my lass, your wits are going a-woolgathering," said Michael. "What do lawyers come to funerals for? To read father's will, of course!"

"Is there a will?" she asked.

"Made five years ago, Mr. Brooke said this afternoon," he replied.

"Do you know what's in it?" she asked.

Michael laughed—laughed loudly.

"Nay, come, love!" he said. "Know what's in it! Why, nobody knows what's in a will until the lawyer unseals and reads it after the funeral dinner."

"I didn't know," she said listlessly.

"But, of course, that's neither here nor there," said Michael; "and I must away to make a few last arrangements. If there'll be too much work for you to-morrow, Miriam, you must get another woman in from the village."

"There'll not be too much work, Michael," she answered.

In her heart she wished there was more work—work that would keep her from thinking of the secret which the dead man had left with her. It had eaten deep into her soul and had become a perpetual torment, for she was a woman of great religious feeling and strict ideas of duty, and she did not know where her duty lay in this case. She knew Michael for a proud man, upon whom the news of his illegitimacy would fall as lightning falls on an oak come to the pride of its maturity; she knew, too, how he would curse his father for the wrong done to his mother, of whom he had been passionately fond. Again, if she told the truth, Michael would be bereft of everything. For Stephen was not fond of his brother, and Stephen's wife hated Miriam. If Stephen and his wife heard the truth, and proved it, Michael would be—nobody. For, after all, Tobias had not had time to make amends.

And now there was the news of this will held by Lawyer Brooke! What could there be in it, and how was it that Tobias had not spoken of it? Could it be that he had forgotten it? She knew that for some years he had been more or less eccentric, subject to moods and to gusts of passion, though there had never been any time when his behaviour would have warranted any one in suspecting his mind to be affected or even clouded. Well—she could do nothing but leave the matter until to-morrow when the dead man's will was read.

As wife of the elder son, Miriam was hostess next day, and everybody who saw her marvelled at two things—one, the extraordinary pallor on her usually brightly tinted cheeks; the other, the quiet way in which she went about her

duties. She was here, there, and everywhere, seeing to the comfort of the funeral guests; but she spoke little, and keenly observant eyes would have said that she moved as if in a dream. At the funeral dinner she ate little; it was an effort to get that little down. As the time drew near for the reading of the will, she could scarcely conceal her agitation, and when they were at last all assembled in the best parlour to hear Tobias's testament declared, she was glad that she sat at a table beneath which she could conceal her trembling fingers.

She wondered why Mr. Brooke was so long in cleaning his spectacles, so long in sipping his glass of port, so slow in breaking the seal of the big envelope which he took from his pocket, why he hum'd and ha'd so before he began reading. But at last he began....

It was a briefly worded will, and very plain in its meaning. Having cause, it set forth, to be highly displeased with the conduct of his younger son, Stephen, and to believe that he would only waste a fortune if it were left to him, Tobias left everything of which he died possessed to his elder son, Michael, on condition that Michael secured to Stephen from the time of his (Tobias's) demise, a sum of three pounds a week, to which a further sum of one pound a week might be added if Stephen's conduct was such as to satisfy Michael. If Stephen died before his father, Michael was to make a similar allowance to his widow.

The various emotions which had agitated Miriam were almost forgotten by her in the tumult which followed. Stephen's wife and her father and mother broke out into loud denunciation of the will; Stephen himself, after staring at the solicitor for a moment, as if he could not credit the evidence of his own eyes or ears smote the table heavily and jumped to his feet.

"It's a damned lie!" he shouted. And he made as if he would snatch the will and tear it to pieces. Mr. Brooke calmly replaced it in his pocket, and as calmly sipped his port.

"On the contrary, my friend," he said. "And—it is your father's will."

"Father!" sneered Stephen's wife's mother. "A nice father to——"

Michael rose with a gesture that brought silence.

"None of that!" he said. "Who's master here? I am! Say a word against my dead father, any of you, and by God! out you go, neck and crop, man or woman. Now, then, you'll listen to me. I'm bound to say, with every respect for him, that I don't agree with this will of my father's. My wife here'll bear me out when I say that my idea as regards Stephen and myself coming into his property was—share and share alike. It seems father had other notions. However, everything is now mine—I'm master. Now, a man can do what he chooses with his own. So listen, Stephen. Give up that drinking, and gambling, and such-like, and come to work again and be a man, and you shall have one-half of all that there is. But, mind you, I've the whip hand, and you'll have to prove yourself. Prove yourself, and

we'll soon set matters straight. I want no more than my half, and now that all's mine—well, law or no law, I'll share with you ... but you'll have to show that you can keep my conditions."

Everybody's eyes were fixed on Stephen Weere. He sat for a moment staring at the table—then, with a curse, he flung out of the room. The smell of the old flesh-pots was still in his nostrils; the odour of the wine-pots in his remembrance—a fact which probably sent him to the little room in which the refreshments of a liquid sort had been set out. He helped himself to a stiff glass of brandy and water, and had gulped half of it down when he felt certain fingers lay themselves appealingly on his left elbow. He turned with a curse, to encounter the witch-like countenance and burning eyes of the old housekeeper, Margaret Burton.

"What do you want, you old hag?" he said, with another curse. "Get out!"

But the old woman stood—her bony fingers still on his arm.

"Hester Stivven!" she said. "Mester Stivven! Has he—has he left me owt?"

Stephen burst into a harsh laugh and re-filled his glass.

"Left you owt?" he exclaimed jeeringly. "Left you owt? He's left nobody nowt but Michael—curse him! He's left him—all there is!"

Margaret Burton drew back for a second and stared at him. He drew himself away from her eyes. Suddenly she laid her hand on him again.

"Mester Stivven," she said, coaxingly, "come wi' me—I ha' summat to tell you. Come!"

Ten minutes later Stephen walked into the best parlour, followed by Margaret Burton. Michael was engaged in an earnest conversation with the rest, and especially with Stephen's wife, as to Stephen's future. Stephen lifted a commanding hand.

"Stop that!" he said. "We've had enough of you—we'll see who's master here. My turn," he went on, as Michael would have spoken. "Come forward, Margaret. This woman, Mr. Brooke, has been my father's housekeeper since my mother died, and was servant for years before that—weren't you, Margaret?"

"Twelve years before that, sir."

"Twelve years before that—and in my mother's confidence," Stephen continued.

"Now, then, Margaret, take Mr. Brooke into that corner. Tell him what you've told me about what my mother told you the week she died, and give him those papers she left with you to prove what she said. And then—then we'll see, we'll see!"

The rest of the people watched the whispered colloquy between the solicitor and the old woman with mingled feelings. It was a large, rambling room, with great embrasures to the windows, and nobody could hear a word that was

said. But Miriam knew that she was not the only possessor of the secret, and she unconsciously slid her hand into Michael's.

Lawyer Brooke, some folded papers in his hand, came back with knitted brow and troubled eyes. He was going to speak, but Stephen stopped him.

"I'm master here," he said. "Margaret, come this way." He pointed to Michael. "What's that man's real name?" he asked, with an evil sneer. "Is it—well, now, what is it? 'Cause, of course, his isn't what mine is. Mine is my father's—mine's Weere."

"No, sir—it's Oldfield. His mother's name—'cause, of course, he were born out of wedlock. Your father and mother wedded later on."

In the silence that followed Miriam heard the beating of Michael's heart. He rose slowly, staring about him from one to the other.

"It's not—true?" he said questioningly. "It's——"

Miriam rose at his side and laid both hands on his arm.

"It's true, Michael," she said. "It's true. Your father told me ten minutes before he died."

Michael looked down at her, and suddenly put his arm round her and kissed her.

"Come away, Miriam," he said, as if the others were shadows. "Come away. Let's go home—the child'll be wanting us."

CHAPTER IV
LITTLE MISS PARTRIDGE

Next to the church and the King George—with possibly the exception of the blacksmith's shop, where most of the idlers gathered to gossip of an afternoon, especially in winter—Miss Partridge's general store was the chief institution in Orchardcroft. To begin with, it was the only house of a mercantile character in the place, and it would have fared ill with any one rash enough to have set up an opposition business to it; to end with, its proprietor was so good-natured that she made no objection to the good wives of the village if they lingered over their purchases to chat with each other or with her. Life in Orchardcroft was leisurely, and an hour could easily be spent in fetching a stone of flour or a quarter of a pound of tea from Miss Partridge's emporium. And, as Miss Partridge often remarked, the women were better employed in exchanging views at her counter

than the men were in arguing at the tap of the King George.

It was a queer little place, this general store—a compendium of grocery, drapery, confectionery, and half-a-dozen other trades. There were all sorts of things in the window, from rolls of cheap dress goods to home-made toffee; inside the shop itself, which was neither more nor less than the front room of a thatched cottage, there was a display of articles which was somewhat confusing to eyes not accustomed to such sights. It was said of a celebrated London tradesman that he could supply anything from a white elephant to a pin—Miss Partridge could hardly boast so much, but it was certain that she kept everything which the four hundred-odd souls of Orchardcroft required for their bodies—butcher's meat excepted. What was more, she knew where everything was, and could lay her hands on it at a moment's notice; what was still more, she was as polite in selling a little boy a new ready-made suit as in serving a ploughman with his Saturday ounce of shag or nail-rod tobacco. For that reason everybody liked her and brought their joys and sorrows to her.

On a bright spring afternoon, when the blackbirds and thrushes were piping gaily in her holly-hedged garden, Miss Partridge sat behind her counter knitting. She was then a woman of close upon sixty—a rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed woman, small in stature, grey of hair, out of whose face something of a benediction seemed always to shine upon everybody. She wore a plain black dress—nobody in Orchardcroft could remember Miss Partridge in anything but black for more than thirty years—over which was draped a real silk white shawl, fastened at the neck with a massive brooch of Whitby jet, and on her head was a smart cap in which were displayed several varieties of artificial flowers. Shawl and cap denoted that Miss Partridge was dressed for the day; in the morning less showy insignia were displayed.

"We're very quiet this afternoon, Martha Mary," observed Miss Partridge to her general factotum, who, having finished the housework, was now dusting the upper shelves. "There's been nobody in since old Isaac came for his tobacco."

"No, m'm," said Martha Mary, "but there's Jane Pockett coming up the garden just now."

"Then we shall hear something or other," said Miss Partridge, who knew Mrs. Pockett's characteristics; "Jane has always some news."

Mrs. Pockett, a tall, flabby lady, who acted a great part in the village drama of life, seeing that she saw all its new-comers into the world and all its outgoers leave its stage for ever, came heavily into the shop and dropped still more heavily into a chair by the counter. And without ceremony she turned a boiled-gooseberry eye on the little shopkeeper.

"Hev' yer heerd the noos?" she said.

"What news, Jane?" asked Miss Partridge.

Mrs. Pockett selected a mint humbug from a bottle on the counter and began to suck it.

"Well, of course, yer remember Robert Dicki'son, t' miller, at Stapleby yonder?" she said. "Him as died last year, leavin' a widder and two childer, a boy an' a girl?"

Miss Partridge's head bent over her knitting.

"Yes," she said.

"Well," continued Mrs. Pockett, "it were thowt 'at he died middlin' weel off, but now it turns out 'at he didn't. In fact, he's left nowt, and t' mill were mortgaged, as they term it, and now they're barn to sell 'em up, lock, stock, and barril. It's a pity, 'cos t' lad's a nice young feller, and they say 'at if nobbut they could pay t' money he could work up a good trade. It's a thousand pounds 'at they want to settle matters. See yer, I hev' a bill o' t' sale i' my pocket—t' billposter gev' me it this mornin'. Ye'll notice 'at there's a nicish bit o' furniture to dispose on. But what will t' widder and t' two childer do, turned out i' that way?"

"It's very sad," said Miss Partridge; "very sad."

She laid the bill aside and began to talk of something else. But when Jane Pockett had purchased three yards of flannel and departed, she read the bill through and noted that the sale was to take place on the next day but one. And taking off her spectacles she laid them and the knitting down on the counter, and bidding Martha Mary mind the shop, she went up to her own room and, closing the door, began to walk up and down, thinking.

Forty years slipped away from Miss Partridge, and she was once more a girl of nineteen and engaged to Robert Dickinson. She remembered it all vividly—their walks, their talks, their embraces. She opened an old desk and took from it a faded photograph of a handsome lad, some equally faded ribbons, a tarnished locket—all that was left of the long-dead dream of youth. She put them back, and thought of how they had parted in anger because of a lover's quarrel. He had accused her of flirting, and she had been too proud to defend herself, and he had flung away and gone to a far-off colony, and she had remained behind—to be true to his memory all her life. And twenty years later he had come back, bringing a young wife with him, and had taken Stapleby Mill—but he and she had never met, never spoken. And now he was dead, and his widow and children were to be outcasts, beggars.

Customers who came to the little shop that evening remarked to each other on its mistress's unusually quiet mood, and hoped Miss Partridge was not going to be ill. But Miss Partridge was quite well when she came down to breakfast next morning, dressed in her best and wearing her bonnet, and she looked very determined about something.

"You'll have to mind the shop this morning, Martha Mary, for I'm going to

Cornchester," she said. "Get Eliza Grimes to come and do the housework."

Once in Cornchester Miss Partridge entered the local bank—an institution which she regarded with great awe—and had a whispered consultation with the cashier, which resulted in that gentleman handing over to her ten banknotes of a hundred pounds each—the savings of a lifetime.

"Going to invest it, Miss Partridge?" said the cashier, smiling.

"Y-yes," answered Miss Partridge. "Y-yes, sir—to invest it."

She put the thousand pounds in her old-fashioned reticule and went off to a legal gentleman whom she had once or twice had occasion to consult. To him she made a communication which caused him to stare.

"My dear madam," he exclaimed. "This is giving away all you possess."

"No," interrupted Miss Partridge. "I have the shop."

"Well, at any rate, take the place as security," began the solicitor; "and——"

"No," said Miss Partridge, firmly. "No, sir! No one is to know; no one is ever to know—except you—where the money came from. It's my money, and I've a right to do what I please with it."

"Oh, very well," said the solicitor. "Very well. I'll settle the matter at once. And you may be sure the poor things will be very grateful to their unknown benefactor."

Miss Partridge walked home by way of Stapleby churchyard. She turned into its quietude and sought out Robert Dickinson's grave. There were daisies growing on the green turf that covered it, and she gathered a little bunch of them and carried them home to put away with the ribbons and the locket. And that done she took off her best things and dropped once more into the old way of life.

CHAPTER V

THE MARRIAGE OF MR. JARVIS

When the lift-boy came down to the ground-floor again and threw open the door of the cage in which he spent so many mechanical hours every day, he became aware that the entrance hall was just then given up to a solitary female who was anxiously scanning the various names which appeared on the boards set up on either side. He gathered a general impression of rusticity, but, sharp as he was, would have found himself hard put to it to define it—the lady's bonnet was not appreciably different from the bonnets worn by respectable, middle-class, town

ladies; the lady's umbrella was not carried at an awkward angle. Nevertheless he was quite certain that if the lady was going aloft to anywhere between there and the sixth floor she was about to step into an elevator for the first time.

He stood waiting, knowing very well that the stranger would presently address him. It was gloomy in the entrance hall, and he saw that she could not see the names on the top-half of the board at which she was gazing. She turned, glanced hastily at the opposite board, then looked half-doubtfully at him.

"Young man," she said, "can you tell me if Mr. Watkin Vavasower's office is anywhere about here?"

"Mr. Vavasore, mum?—third floor, mum—just gone up, has Mr. Vavasore," replied the lift-boy.

He stood aside from the door of his cage with an implied invitation to enter. But the lady, whom in the clearer light of the inner hall he now perceived to be middle-aged and of stern countenance, looked doubtfully at the stairs.

"I suppose I shall see the name on the door if I go up-stairs, young man?" she said. "It's that dark in these London places——"

"Step inside, mum," said the lift-boy.

The lady started and looked inside the cage as she might have looked inside one of her own hen-coops if she had suspected the presence of a fox therein. She turned a suspicious eye on the boy.

"Is it safe?" she said.

Then, instinctively obeying the authoritative wave of the official hand, she stepped inside and heard the gate bang. She gave a little gasp as the world fell from under her feet; another when the elevator suddenly stopped and she found herself ejected on a higher plane.

"Well, I'm sure——" she began.

"Second door on the left, mum," said the boy, and sank from view.

The lady paused for a second or two, glanced down the shaft as if she expected to hear a shriek of agony from the bottom, and then slowly moved in the direction which the boy had indicated. A few steps along the corridor and she stood before a door on which was inscribed in heavy brass letters, highly polished, the name "Mr. Watkin Vavasour."

She hesitated a moment before knocking; when she did so, her knock was timid and gentle. But it was heard within, for a girl's voice, sharp and business-like, bade her enter. She turned the handle and walked into a comfortably furnished room wherein sat a very smart young lady who was busily engaged with a typewriter and who looked up from her work with questioning eyes.

"Is Mr. Watkin Vavasower in?" inquired the caller.

The smart young lady rose from her desk with an air of condescending patience.

"What name, madam?" she asked.

The caller hesitated.

"Well, if it's agreeable," she said, "I'd rather not give my name to anybody but the gentleman himself, though of course if——"

"Take a chair, please," said the smart young lady. She vanished through an inner door marked "Private," leaving the visitor to examine an imitation Turkey carpet, a roll-top American desk, two office chairs, and a reproduction of the late Lord Leighton's *Married*, which hung over the fire-place. She was speculating as to the nationality of the two persons concerned in this picture when the smart young lady returned with an invitation to enter Mr. Vavasour's presence. Mr. Vavasour, a somewhat more than middle-aged, stoutish gentleman, whose name would more fittingly have been Isaacs, Cohen, or Abraham, and who evidently set much store by fine linen and purple and the wearing of gold and diamonds, rose from behind an elegant rosewood writing-table and waved his visitor to the easiest of chairs with much grace. His highly polished bald head bowed itself benevolently towards her.

"And what can I have the pleasure of doing for you, my dear madam?" Mr. Vavasour inquired blandly.

The visitor, who had examined Mr. Vavasour with a sharp glance as she made a formal bow to him, gave a little prefatory cough, and gazed at Mr. Vavasour's cheery fire.

"Of course," she said, "I am addressing Mr. Watkin Vavasower, the matrimonial agent? The Mr. Vavasower as advertises in the newspapers?"

"Just so, madam, just so," replied Mr. Vavasour in soothing tones. "I am that individual. And whom have I the pleasure of receiving?"

"Well, Mr. Vavasower, my name is Mrs. Rebecca Pringle," said the visitor. "Of course, you'll not know the name, but you're familiar with the name of the place I come from—the Old Farm, Windleby?"

Mr. Vavasour swept a jewelled hand over his high forehead.

"The Old Farm, Windleby?" he said. "The name seems familiar. Ah, yes, of course—the address of a respected client, Mr.—yes, Mr. Stephen Jarvis. Dear me—yes, of course. A very worthy gentleman!"

"Well, Mr. Vavasower," said Mrs. Pringle, smoothing her gown, which the agent's sharp eyes noticed to be of good substantial silk, "there's many a worthy gentleman as can make a fool of himself! I've nothing to say against Stephen, especially as I've kept house for him for fifteen years, which is to say ever since Pringle died. But I'm not blind to his faults, Mr. Vavasower, and of course I can't see him rush to his destruction, as it were, without putting out a finger to stop his headlong flight."

Mr. Vavasour made a lugubrious face, shook his head, and looked further

inquiries.

"'It's come to my knowledge, Mr. Vavasower," continued Mrs. Pringle, "that Stephen Jarvis, as is my first cousin, has been having correspondence with you on the matter of finding a wife. A pretty thing for a man of his years to do—five-and-fifty he is, and no less—when he's kept off the ladies all this time! And I must tell you, Mr. Vavasower, that his family does not approve of it, and that's why I have come to see you."

Mr. Vavasour spread out fat hands.

"My dear madam!" he said, deprecatingly. "My dear Mrs. Pringle! It is a strict rule of mine never to discuss a client's affairs, or to——"

Mrs. Pringle favoured him with a knowing look.

"Of course, it would be made worth Mr. Vavasower's while," she said, tapping a small reticule which she carried. "The family doesn't expect Mr. Vavasower to assist it for nothing."

Mr. Vavasour hesitated. He called up the Jarvis case in his mind, and remembered that Mr. Stephen Jarvis did not want a moneyed wife, and that, therefore, there would be no commission in that particular connection.

"Who are the members of the family, ma'am?" he inquired.

Mrs. Pringle looked him squarely in the face.

"The members of the family, Mr. Vavasower," she replied, "is me and my only son, John William, as has always been led to look upon himself as Stephen Jarvis's heir. And, of course, if so be as Stephen Jarvis was to marry a young woman, well, there'd no doubt be children, and then——"

"To be sure, ma'am, to be sure!" said Mr. Vavasour comprehendingly. "Of course, you and your son have means that would justify——"

"My son, John William, Mr. Vavasower, is in a very nice way of business in the grocery line," answered Mrs. Pringle. "But of course I don't intend to see him ousted out of his proper place because Stephen Jarvis takes it into his head to marry at his time of life! Stephen must be put off it, and there's an end of the matter."

"But, my dear madam!" exclaimed Mr. Vavasour. "How can I prevent it? My client has asked me for introductions; he is somewhat particular, or I could have suited him some weeks ago. He desires a young and pretty wife, and——"

"Old fool!" exclaimed Mrs. Pringle. "Well, he's not to have one, Mr. Vavasower—as I say, it's not agreeable to me and John William that he should. And as to how you can prevent it, well, Mr. Vavasower, I've a plan in which you must join—me and John William will make it worth your while to do so—that will put Stephen Jarvis out of conceit with matrimony. The fact of the case is, Mr. Vavasower, Stephen is a very close-fisted man. He's the sort that looks twice at a sixpence before he spends it—and then, like as not, he puts it back in

his pocket."

Mr. Vavasour inclined his head. He was interested.

"Now, Mr. Vavasower," continued Mrs. Pringle, "Stephen is as innocent of the ways of young women as what a pagan negro is. He's never had aught to do with them; he doesn't know how expensive they are. If he knew how the young woman of now-a-days flings money about, he'd faint with terror at the prospect of wedding one. Now, you must know a deal of clever young women, Mr. Vavasower, your profession being what it is—actresses and such-like, no doubt, as could play a part for a slight consideration. If you could get such a one as would come down to the Old Farm as my guest for a fortnight or so, and would obey orders as to showing Stephen Jarvis what modern young women really is—well, we should hear no more of this ridiculous marrying idea. Of course, I could pass the young woman off as a distant relation of my poor husband's, just come from America or somewhere foreign. I would like her to show expensive tastes and to let Stephen see what a deal it would cost to keep a young wife. And of course she'd have to be a bit what they call fascinating—-but you'll understand my meaning, Mr. Vavasower. And I can assure you that although Stephen Jarvis is such a well-to-do man, he's that near and mean that you'll do better to deal with me and John William than with him."

Mr. Vavasour, who had been thinking hard, rubbed his hands.

"And the terms, my clear madam?" he said. "Let us consider the terms on which we shall conduct this little matter. Now——"

Then Mrs. Pringle and Mr. Vavasour talked very confidentially, and eventually certain crisp bank-notes passed from the lady to the agent, and a document was signed by the former, and at last they parted with a very good understanding of each other.

"For you'll understand, Mr. Vavasower," said Mrs. Pringle, as she shook hands at the door of the private room, "that I'm not going to be particular about spending a hundred or so when it's a question of making sure of a good many thousands and a nice bit of property. And Stephen Jarvis is a hearty eater, and disposed to apoplexy, and he might be took sudden."

Then Mrs. Pringle went away and returned to the Old Farm, and for the next fortnight kept a particularly observant eye on Mr. Jarvis and on the correspondence which reached him from and through Mr. Vavasour. She noticed that he became grumpy and dissatisfied almost to moroseness—-the fact was that the agent, in order to keep his contract with Mrs. Pringle, was sending the would-be Benedick a choice of unlikely candidates, and Mr. Jarvis was getting sick of looking at photographs of ladies none of whom came up to his expectations. As for Mrs. Pringle, she conducted her correspondence with Mr. Vavasour through John William, whose grocery establishment was in a neighbouring market-town,

and it was not until the end of the second week after her return home that she received a communication from him which warranted her in taking the field.

"Well, upon my honour!" she exclaimed, as she sat at breakfast with Mr. Jarvis one morning and laid down a letter which she had been reading. "Wonders never will cease, and there's an end of it. Who do you think I've heard from, Stephen?"

"Nay, I don't know," growled Mr. Jarvis, who had just received the photograph of a very homely-looking young woman from Mr. Vavasour, and was much incensed by what he considered the agent's stupidity. "Who?"

"Why, from my niece—leastways a sort of niece, seeing as she was poor George's sister Martha Margaret's daughter—Poppy Atteridge, as has just returned to England from foreign parts," answered Mrs. Pringle. "Her father was an engineer and took her over to Canada when he went to settle there after his wife died. He's dead now, it seems, and so the poor girl's come home. Dear me!—I did once see her when she was little. She writes quite affectionate and says she feels lonely. Ah, if I'd a house of my own, I'd ask her to come and see me!"

"Ask her to come and see you here, then!" said the farmer. "I'm sure there's room enough, unless she wants to sleep in six bed-chambers all at once."

"Well, I'm sure it's very kind of you," said Mrs. Pringle, "and if you really don't mind, I will ask her. I don't think you'll find her in the way very much—they were always a quiet, well-behaved sort, the Atteridges."

Mr. Jarvis remarked that a few lasses, more or less, in the house were not likely to trouble him, and having finished his breakfast, lighted a cigar, and locked up the homely-looking lady's photograph in his desk with a hearty anathematization of Mr. Vavasour for sending it, went out to look at his sheep and cattle and forgot the breakfast-table conversation. Indeed, he thought no more of it until two days later, when, on his going home from market to the Saturday evening high tea, Mrs. Pringle met him in the hall with the news that her niece had arrived, and was in the parlour.

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Jarvis, who was in a very benevolent mood, consequent upon his having got an uncommonly good price for his wheat and spent a convivial hour with the purchaser. "Poor thing—I doubt she'll have had a rare cold journey."

Then he walked into the parlour to offer the poor young thing a welcome to his roof and hearth, and found himself encountered by a smiling and handsome young lady who had very sparkling eyes and a vivacious manner, and whom he immediately set down as the likeliest lass he had seen for many a long day. He thought of the gallery of dowdies whom Mr. Vavasour had recently sent him by counterfeit presentment, and his spirits rose rapidly.

"Well, deary me to-day!" he said, as he began to carve the home-fed ham

in delicate slices. "Deary me to-day! I'd no idea that we were to be honoured with so much youth and beauty, as the saying is. I was looking forward to seeing a little gel, Mrs. Pringle. Your aunt there didn't prepare me for such a pleasant surprise, Miss—nay, I've forgotten what the name is!"

"Atteridge," said Mrs. Pringle's supposed niece. "But call me Poppy, Mr. Jarvis—I shall feel more at home."

"Poppy!" chuckled Mr. Jarvis. "Ecod, and a rare pretty poppy an' all! Deary me—deary me!"

"The Atteridges was always a good-looking family," said Mrs. Pringle.

"I should think they must ha' been," said Mr. Jarvis, handing his guest some cold fowl and ham with an admiring look. "I should think they must ha' been, ma'am, judging by the sample present. So for what we're about to receive——"

Mr. Jarvis, Mrs. Pringle, and Miss Atteridge spent a very pleasant evening. The guest, in addition to great vivacity, talked well and interestingly, and it began to dawn upon the housekeeper that she really must have been in Canada, as she knew so much about life there. In addition to Miss Atteridge's conversational powers it turned out that she played the piano, and in response to Mr. Jarvis's request for a tune or two, she sat down to an ancient instrument which had not been opened within the recollection of Mrs. Pringle, and extracted what music she could from it. Mr. Jarvis was highly delighted, and said so.

"But if you're so fond of music, Mr. Jarvis, you should buy a new piano," said Miss Atteridge airily. "I've no doubt this has been a good one, but I'm afraid it's quite done for now."

"Happen I might if I'd anybody to play on it," said Mr. Jarvis, with a sly look.

"Oh, you could find lots of people to play on it," said Miss Atteridge.

When the guest had retired Mr. Jarvis mixed his toddy, and in accordance with custom, handed a glass to Mrs. Pringle.

"She's a rare fine lass, that niece o' yours, missis," he said. "You're welcome to ask her to stop as long as she likes. It'll do her good."

Next morning Mr. Jarvis, saying that he had business in the market-town, ordered out his smart dog-cart and the bay mare, and asked Miss Atteridge to go a-driving with him. They made a good-looking pair as they drove off, for the farmer, in spite of his five-and-fifty years, was a handsome and well-set-up man, with never a grey hair in his head, and he had a spice of vanity in him which made him very particular about his personal appearance.

Mr. Jarvis and Miss Atteridge were away all the morning—when they returned to dinner at half-past one both seemed to be in very good spirits. They and Mrs. Pringle were sitting in the parlour after dinner when the housekeeper perceived a cart approaching the house, and remarked upon the fact that it con-

tained a queer-looking packing-case and was attended by two men who wore green baize aprons.

"Aye," said Mr. Jarvis, carelessly, "it'll be the new piano that I bought this morning for the young lady here to perform upon. You'd better go out, missis, and tell 'em to set it down at the porch door. If they want help there's John and Thomas in the yard—call for 'em. And we'll have the old instrument taken out and the new one put in its place."

Mrs. Pringle went forth to obey these orders, feeling somewhat puzzled. The young lady from Mr. Vavasour's was certainly playing her part well, and had begun early. But why this extraordinary complaisance on Mr. Jarvis's part—Mr. Jarvis, who could, when he liked, say some very nasty things about the household accounts? She began to feel a little doubtful about—she was not sure what.

That night the parlour was the scene of what Mr. Jarvis called a regular slap-up concert. For it turned out that Miss Atteridge could not only play but sing, and sing well; and Mr. Jarvis was so carried away with revived musical enthusiasm, that after telling the ladies how he used to sing tenor in the church choir at one time, he volunteered to sing such pleasing ditties as "The Farmer's Boy," "The Yeoman's Wedding," and "John Peel," and growing bolder joined with Miss Atteridge in duets such as "Huntingtower," and "Oh, that we two were maying." He went to bed somewhat later than usual, declaring to himself that he had not spent such a pleasant evening since the last dinner at the Farmers' Club, and next morning he made up a parcel of all the photographs and documents which Mr. Vavasour had sent him, and returned them to that gentleman with a short intimation that he had no wish for further dealings with him, and that if he owed him anything he would be glad to know what it was.

On the following Sunday Mr. John William Pringle, a pale-eyed young gentleman who wore a frock-coat and a silk hat, and had a habit of pulling up his trousers at the knees whenever he sat down, came, according to custom, to visit his mother, and was introduced to his newly-found relative. John William, after a little observation, became somewhat sad and reflective, and in the afternoon, when Mr. Jarvis and Miss Attendee had walked out into the land to see if there was the exact number of sheep that there ought to be in a certain distant field, turned upon his parent with a stern and reproachful look.

"And a nice mess you've made of it with your contrivings and plannings!" he said witheringly. "You've done the very thing we wanted to avoid. Can't you see the old fool's head over heels in love with that girl? Yah!"

"Nothing of the sort, John William!" retorted Mrs. Pringle. "Of course, the gal's leading him on, as is her part to do, and well paid for it she is. You wait till Stephen Jarvis reckernizes what he's been spending on her—there's the piano, and a new hat, and a riding-habit so as she can go a-riding with him, and a gipsy

ring as she took a fancy to that day he took her to Stowminster, all in a week and less—and you'll see what the effect will be. You're wrong, John William!"

"I'm dee'd if I am!" said John William, angrily. "It's you that's wrong, and so you'll find. Something's got to be done. And the only thing I can think of," he continued, stroking a badly sprouted growth on his upper lip, "is that I should cut the old ass out myself. Of course, I could throw the girl over afterwards."

With this end in view Mr. Pringle made himself extraordinarily fascinating at tea-time and during the evening, but with such poor effect that at supper he was gloomier than ever. He went home with a parting remark to his mother that if she didn't get the girl out of the house pretty quick he and she might as well go hang themselves.

As Mrs. Pringle had considerable belief in John William's acumen she was conscience-stricken as to her part in this affair, and took occasion to speak to Miss Atteridge when they retired for the night. But Miss Atteridge not only received Mrs. Pringle's remarks with chilling hauteur, but engineered her out of her room in unmistakable fashion. So Mrs. Pringle wrote to Mr. Vavasour, saying that she thought the purpose she desired had been served, and she wished Miss Atteridge to be removed. Mr. Vavasour replied that her instructions should be carried out. But Miss Atteridge stayed on. And more than once she and the housekeeper, Mr. Jarvis being out, had words.

"As if you ever was in Canada!" said Mrs. Pringle, sniffing.

Miss Atteridge looked at her calmly and coldly.

"I lived in Canada for three years," she answered.

"A gal as goes to a agent to find a husband!" said Mrs. Pringle.

"No—I went to get employment as a lady detective," said Miss Atteridge. "Mr. Vavasour, you know, is a private inquiry agent as well as a matrimonial agent."

"And what did you come here for?" demanded Mrs. Pringle.

Miss Atteridge looked at her interlocutor with a still colder glance.

"Fun!" she said.

Then she sat down at the new piano and began to play the "Moonlight Sonata," and Mrs. Pringle went into the kitchen and slammed the parlour door—after which she wondered what John William would say next Sunday. On the previous Sunday he had been nastier than ever, and had expressed his determination to be dee'd at least six times.

But when the next Sunday came Miss Atteridge had departed. All Friday she had been very quiet and thoughtful—late in the afternoon she and Mr. Jarvis had gone out for a walk, and when they returned both were much subdued and very grave. They talked little during tea, and that evening Miss Atteridge played nothing but Beethoven and Chopin and did not sing at all. And when Mrs.

Pringle went to bed, after consuming her toddy in the kitchen—Mr. Jarvis being unusually solemn and greatly preoccupied—she found the guest packing her portmanteau.

"I am going away to-morrow, after breakfast," said Miss Atteridge. "As I shall not be here on Sunday please say good-bye for me to Mr. John William."

John William, coming on Sunday in time for dinner, found things as they usually were at the Old Farm in the days previous to the advent of Miss Atteridge. Mr. Jarvis was in the parlour, amusing himself with a cigar, the sherry decanter, and the *Mark Lane Express*; Mrs. Pringle was in the front kitchen superintending the cooking of a couple of stuffed ducks. To her John William approached with questioning eyes.

"She's gone!" whispered Mrs. Pringle. "Went off yesterday. He's been grumpyish ever since—a-thinkin' over what it's cost him. Go in and make up to him, John William. Talk to him about pigs."

John William re-entered the parlour. Mr. Jarvis, who was of the sort that would show hospitality to an enemy, gave him a glass of sherry and offered him a cigar, but showed no particular desire to hear a grocer's views on swine fever. There was no conversation when Mrs. Pringle entered to lay the cloth for dinner.

"We've had no music this day or two," said Mrs. Pringle with fane cheerfulness. "Play the master a piece, John William—play the 'Battle of Prague' with variations."

John William approached the new piano.

"It's locked," he said, examining the lid of the keyboard. "Where's the key?"

Mr. Jarvis looked over the top of the *Mark Lane Express*.

"The key," he said, "is in my pocket. And'll remain there until Miss Atteridge—which her right name is Carter—returns. But not as Carter, nor yet Atteridge, but as Mrs. Stephen Jarvis. That'll be three weeks to-day. If John William there wants to perform on t' piano he can come then and play t' 'Wedding March'!"

Then John William sat down, and his mother laid the table in silence.

CHAPTER VI

BREAD CAST UPON THE WATERS

It was close upon sunset when the derelict walked into the first village which

he had encountered for several miles, and he was as tired as he was hungry. On the outskirts he stopped, looked about him, and sat down on a heap of stones. The village lay beneath him; a typical English village, good to look upon in the summer eventide. There in the centre, embowered amongst tall elm-trees and fringed about with yew, rose the tower and roof of the old church, grey as the memories of the far-off age in which pious hands had built it. Farther away, also tree-embowered, rose the turrets and gables of the great house, manor and hall. Here and there, rising from thick orchards, stood the farmhouses, with their red roofs and drab walls; between them were tiny cottages, nests of comfort. There were pale blue wisps of smoke curling up from the chimneys of the houses and cottages—they made the weary man think of a home and a hearthstone. And from the green in the centre of the village came the sound of the voices of boys at play—they, too, made him think of times when the world was something more than a desert.

He rose at last and went forward, walking after the fashion of a tired man. He was not such a very bad-looking derelict, after all; he had evidently made an attempt to keep his poor clothes patched, and had not forgotten to wash himself whenever he had an opportunity. But his eyes had the look of the not-wanted; there was a hopelessness in them which would have spoken volumes to an acute observer. And as he went clown the hill into the village he looked about him from one side to the other as if he scarcely dared to expect anything from men or their habitations.

He came to a large, prosperous-looking farmstead; a rosy-cheeked, well-fed, contented-faced man, massive of build, was leaning over the low wall of the garden smoking a cigar. He eyed the derelict with obvious dislike and distrust. His eyes grew slightly angry and he frowned. Human wreckage was not to his taste.

But the man on the road was hungry and tired; he was like a drowning thing that will clutch at any straw. He stepped up on the neatly-trimmed turf which lay beneath the garden wall, touching his cap.

"Have you a job of work that you could give a man, sir?" he asked.

The rosy-faced farmer scowled.

"No," he said.

The man in the road hesitated.

"I'm hard pressed, sir," he said. "I'd do a hard day's work to-morrow in return for a night's lodging and a bit of something to eat."

"Aye, I dare say you would," said the farmer, scornfully. "I've heard that tale before. Be off—the road's your place."

The derelict sighed, turned away, half-turned again. He looked at the well-fed countenance above him with a species of appealing sorrow.

"I haven't had a bite to eat since yesterday morning," he said, and turned again.

As he turned he heard a child's piping voice, and, looking round, saw the upper half of a small head, sunny and curly, pop up over the garden wall.

"Daddy, shall I give the poor man my money-box? 'Cause it isn't nice to be hungry. Shall I, daddy?"

But the farmer's face did not relax, and the derelict sighed again and turned away. He had got into the road, and was going off when the big, masterful voice arrested him.

"Here, you!"

The derelict looked round, with new hope springing in his heart. The man was beckoning him; the child, on tiptoe, was staring at him out of blue, inquisitive eyes.

"Come here," said the farmer.

The derelict went back, hoping. The man at the wall, however, looked sterner than ever. His keen eyes seemed to bore holes in the other's starved body.

"If I give you your supper, and a night's lodging in the barn, will you promise not to smoke?" he said. "I want no fire."

The derelict smiled in spite of his hunger and weariness.

"I've neither pipe nor tobacco, sir," he said. "I wish I had. But if I had I'd keep my word to you."

The farmer stared at him fixedly for a moment; then he pointed to the gate.

"Come through that," he said. He strode off across the garden when the derelict entered, and led the way round the house to the kitchen, where a stout maid was sewing at the open door. She looked up at the sound of their feet and stared.

"Give this man as much as he can eat, Rachel," said the farmer, "and draw him a pint of ale. Sit you down," he added, turning to the derelict. "And make a good supper."

Then he picked up the child, who had clung to his coat, and lifting her on to his shoulder, went back to the garden.

The derelict ate and drank and thanked God. A new sense of manhood came into him with the good meat and drink; he began to see possibilities. When at last he stood up he felt like a new man, and some of the weary stoop had gone out of his shoulders.

The farmer came in with a clay pipe filled with tobacco.

"Here," he said, "you can sit in the yard and smoke that. And then I'll show you where you can sleep."

So that night the derelict went to rest full of food and contented, and slept

a dreamless sleep amongst the hay. Next morning the farmer, according to his custom, was up early, but his guest had been up a good two hours when he came down to the big kitchen.

"He's no idler, yon man, master," said Rachel. "He's chopped enough firewood to last me for a week, and drawn all the water, and he's fetched the cows up, and now he's sweeping up the yard."

"Give him a good breakfast, then," said the farmer.

When his own breakfast was over he went to look for the derelict, and found him chopping wood again. He saluted his host respectfully, but with a certain anxiety.

"Now if you want a job for a day or so," said the farmer, with the curtness which was characteristic of him, "I'll give you one. Get a bucket out of the outhouse there, and come with me."

He led the way to a small field at the rear of the farmstead, the surface of which appeared to be very liberally ornamented with stones.

"I want this field clearing," said the farmer. "Make the stones into piles about twenty yards apart. When you hear the church clock strike twelve, stop work, and go to the house for your dinner. Start again at one, and knock off again at six."

Whatever might have been his occupation before the derelict worked that day like a nigger. It was back-aching work, that gathering and piling of stones, and the July sun was hot and burning, but he kept manfully at his task, strengthened by the hearty meal set before him at noon. And just before six o'clock the farmer, with the child on his shoulder, came into the field and looked around him and stared.

"You're no idler!" he said, repeating the maid's words. "I'll give you a better job than that to-morrow."

And that night he gave the derelict some clothes and boots, and next morning set him to a pleasanter job, and promised him work for the harvest, and the derelict felt that however curt and gruff the farmer might seem his bark was much worse than his bite. And he never forgot that he had saved him from starvation. But the derelict's times were not all good. Country folk have an inborn dislike of strangers, and the regular workers on the farm resented the intrusion of this man, who came from nowhere in particular and had certainly been a tramp. They kept themselves apart from him in the harvest fields, and made open allusion to his antecedents. And the derelict, now promoted to a small room in the house, and earning wages as well as board, heard and said nothing.

Nor did the farmer go free of gibe and jest.

"So ye've taken to hiring tramp-labour, I hear," said his great rival in the village. "Get it dirt cheap, I expect?"

"You can expect what you like," said the derelict's employer. "The man you mean is as good a worker as any you've got, or I've got, either. Do you think I care for you and your opinion?"

In fact, the farmer cared little for anything except his child. He had lost his wife when the child was born, and the child was all he had except his land. Wherever he went the child was with him; they were inseparable. He had never left it once during the six years of its life, and it was with great misgivings that in the autumn following the arrival of the derelict he was obliged to leave it for a day and a night. Before he went he called the derelict to him.

"I've come to trust you fully," he said. "Look after the child till to-morrow."

If the farmer had wanted a proof of the derelict's gratitude he would have found it in the sudden flush of pride which flamed into the man's face. But he was in a hurry to be gone, and was troubled because of leaving the child; nevertheless, he felt sure that he was leaving the child in good hands.

"It's queer how I've taken to that fellow," he said to himself as he drove off to the station six miles away. "I wouldn't have trusted the child to anybody but him."

The man left in charge did nothing that day but look after the child. He developed amazing powers, which astonished Rachel as much as they interested the young mind and eyes. He could sing songs, he could tell tales, he could do tricks, he could play at bears and lions, and imitate every animal and bird under the sun.

"Lawk-a-massy!" said Rachel. "Why, you must ha' had bairns of your own!"

"A long time ago," answered the man. "A very long time ago."

He never left his charge until the charge was fast asleep—sung to sleep by himself. Then he went off to his little room in the far-away wing of the house. And in an hour or two he wished devoutly that he had stretched himself at the charge's door. For the farmstead was on fire, and when he woke to realize it there was a raging sea of flame between him and the child, and folk in the yard and garden were shrieking and moaning—in their helplessness.

But the man got there in time—in time for the child, but not for himself. They talk in all that countryside to this day of how he fought his way through the flames, how he dropped the child into outstretched arms beneath, safe, and then fell back to death.

Upon what they found left of him the farmer gazed with eyes which were wet for the first time since he had last shed tears for his dead wife. And he said something to the poor body which doubtless the soul heard far off.

"You were a Man!" he said. "You were a real Man!"

And then he suddenly remembered that he had never known the Man's

name.

CHAPTER VII
WILLIAM HENRY AND THE DAIRYMAID

The trouble at Five Oaks Farm really began when Matthew Dennison built and started a model dairy, and found it necessary to engage the services of a qualified dairymaid. A good many people in the neighbourhood wondered what possessed Matthew to embark on such an enterprise, and said so. Matthew cared nothing for comment; he had in his pocket, he said (as he was very fond of saying), something that made him independent of whatever anybody might think or say. It was his whim to build the model dairy, just as it is the whim of some men to grow roses or to breed prize sheep at great cost, and he built it. It was all very spick and span when it was finished, and the countryside admired its many beauties and modern appliances without understanding much about them. And then came the question of finding a thoroughly expert dairymaid.

Somebody—probably the vicar—advised Matthew to advertise in one of the farming papers, and he and his wife and their only son, William Henry, accordingly spent an entire evening in drafting a suitable announcement of their wishes, which they forwarded next day to several journals of a likely nature. During the next fortnight answers began to come in, and the family sat in committee every evening after high tea considering them gravely. It was not until somewhere about fifty or sixty of these applications had been received, however, that one of a really promising nature turned up. This was from one Rosina Durrant, who wrote from somewhere in Dorsetshire. She described herself as being twenty-five years of age, thoroughly qualified to take entire charge of a model dairy, and anxious to have some experience in the North of England. She gave particulars of her past experience, set forth particulars of the terms she expected, and enclosed a splendid testimonial from her present employer, who turned out to be a well-known countess.

Matthew rubbed his hands.

"Now this is the very young woman we want!" he said. "I've always said from the very beginning that I'd have naught but what was first-class. I shall send this here young person my references, agree to her terms, and tell her to start out as soon as she can."

"I'm afraid she's rather expensive, love," murmured Mrs. Dennison.

"I'm not to a few pounds one way or another," answered Matthew. "I'm one of them that believe in doing a thing right when you do do it. Last two years with a countess—what? What'd suit a countess 'll suit me. William Henry, you can get out the writing-desk, and we'll draw up a letter to this young woman at once."

William Henry, who had little or no interest in the model dairy, and regarded it as no more and no less than a harmless fad of his father's, complied with this request, and spent half-an-hour in writing an elegant epistle after the fashion of those which he had been taught to compose at the boarding-school where he had received his education. After that he gave no more thought to the dairymaid, being much more concerned in managing the farm, and in an occasional day's hunting and shooting, than in matters outside his sphere. But about a week later his father opened a letter at the breakfast-table, and uttered a gratified exclamation.

"Now, the young woman's coming to-day," he announced. "She'll be at Marltree station at precisely four-thirty. Of course somebody'll have to drive over and meet her, and that somebody can't be me, because I've a meeting of the Guardians at Cornborough at that very hour. William Henry, you must drive the dog-cart over."

William Henry was not too pleased with the idea, for he had meant to go fishing. But he remembered that he could go fishing every afternoon if it pleased him, and he acquiesced.

"I've been wondering, Matthew," said Mrs. Dennison, who was perusing the letter through her spectacles; "I've been wondering where to put this young person. You can see from her writing that she's of a better sort—there's no common persons as writes and expresses themselves in that style. I'm sure she'll not want to have her meals with the men and the gels in the kitchen, and of course we can't bring her among ourselves, as it were."

Matthew scratched his head.

"Deng my buttons!" he said. "I never thought o' that there! Of course she'll be what they call a sort of upper servant, such as the quality have. Aye, for sure! Well, let's see now—I'll tell ye what to do, missis. Let her have the little parlour—we scarce ever use it—for her own sitting-room, and she can eat there. That's the sensiblest arrangement that I can think on. Then we shall all preserve our various ranks. What do ye say, William Henry?"

William Henry said that he was agreeable to anything, and proceeded to make his usual hearty breakfast. He thought no more of his afternoon expedition until the time for setting out came, and then he had the brown mare harnessed to a smart dog-cart, and set off along the roads for Marltree, five miles away. It

was a pleasant afternoon in early April, and the land had the springtide's new warmth on it. And William Henry thought how happy he would have been with his fishing-rod.

Marltree is a junction where several lines converge, and when the train from the south came in several passengers alighted from it to change on to other routes. Amongst this crowd William Henry could not detect anything that looked like the new dairymaid. He scrutinized everybody as he sat on a seat opposite the train, and summed them up. There was a clergyman and his wife; there was a sailor; there were three or four commercial travellers; there were some nondescripts. Then his attention became riveted on a handsome young lady who left a carriage with an armful of books and papers and hurried off to the luggage-van—she was so handsome, so well dressed, and had such a good figure that William Henry's eyes followed her with admiration. Then he remembered what he had come there for, and looked again for the dairymaid. But he saw nothing that suggested her.

The people drifted away, the platform cleared, and presently nobody but the handsome young lady and William Henry remained. She stood by a trunk looking expectantly about her; he rose, intending to go. A porter appeared; she spoke to him—the porter turned to William Henry.

"Here's a lady inquiring for you, sir," he said.

The lady came forward with a smile and held out her hand.

"Are you Mr. Dennison?" she said. "I am Miss Durrant."

William Henry's first instinct was to open his mouth cavernously—his second to remove his hat.

"How do you do?" he said, falteringly. "I—I was looking about for you."

"But of course you wouldn't know me," she said. "I was looking for you."

"I've got a dog-cart outside," said William Henry. "Here, Jenkinson, bring this lady's things to my trap."

He escorted Miss Durrant, who had already sized him up as a simple-natured but very good-looking young man, to the dog-cart, saw her luggage safely stowed away at the back, helped her in, tucked her up in a thick rug, got in himself, and drove away.

"I'm quite looking forward to seeing your dairy, Mr. Dennison," said Miss Durrant. "It must be quite a model from your description."

William Henry turned and stared at her. She was a very handsome young woman, he decided, a brunette, with rich colouring, dark eyes, a ripe mouth, and a flashing smile, and her voice was as pleasing as her face.

"Lord bless you!" he said. "It isn't my dairy—I know nothing about dairying. It's father's."

Miss Durrant laughed merrily.

"Oh, I see!" she said. "You are Mr. Dennison's son. What shall I call you, then?"

"My name is William Henry Dennison," he replied.

"And what do you do, Mr. William?" she asked.

"Look after the farm," replied William Henry. "Father doesn't do much that way now—he's sort of retired. Do you know anything about farming?"

"I love anything about a farm," she answered.

"Do you care for pigs?" he asked, eagerly. "I've been going in a lot for pig-breeding this last year or two, and I've got some of the finest pigs in England. I got a first prize at the Smithfield Show last year; I'll show it you when we get home. There's some interest, now, in breeding prize pigs."

With such pleasant conversation they whiled the time away until they came in sight of Five Oaks Farm, on beholding which Miss Durrant was immediately lost in admiration, saying that it was the finest old house she had ever seen, and that it would be a delight to live in it.

"Some of it's over five hundred years old," said William Henry. "And our family built it. We don't rent our land, you know—it's our own. Six hundred acres there are, and uncommon good land too."

With that he handed over Miss Durrant to his mother, who was obviously as surprised at her appearance as he had been, and then drove round to the stables, still wondering how a lady came to be a dairymaid.

"And I'm sure I don't know, Matthew," said Mrs. Dennison to her husband that night in the privacy of their own chamber, "I really don't know how Miss Durrant ought to be treated. You can see for yourself what her manners are—quite the lady. Of course we all know now-a-days that shop-girls and such-like give themselves the airs of duchesses and ape their manners, but Miss Durrant's the real thing, or I'm no judge. Very like her people's come down in the world, and she has to earn her own living, poor thing!"

"Well, never you mind, Jane Ann," said Matthew. "Lady or no lady, she's my dairy-maid, and all that I ask of her is that she does her work to my satisfaction. If she's a lady, you'll see that she'll always bear in mind that her present position is that of a dairymaid, and she'll behave according. We'll see what the morrow brings forth."

What the morrow brought forth was the spectacle of the dairymaid, duly attired in professional garments of spotless hue, busily engaged in the performance of her duties. Matthew spent all the morning with her in the dairy, and came in to dinner beaming with satisfaction.

"She's a regular clinker, is that lass!" he exclaimed to his wife and son. "I've found a perfect treasure."

The perfect treasure settled down into her new life with remarkable readi-

ness. She accepted the arrangements which Mrs. Dennison had made without demur. Mrs. Dennison, with a woman's keen observation, noted that she was never idle. She was in and about the dairy all day long; at night she worked or read in her own room. She had brought a quantity of books with her; magazines and newspapers were constantly arriving for her. As days went on, Mrs. Dennison decided that Miss Durrant's people had most certainly come down in the world, and that she had had to go out into it to earn her own living.

"Just look how well she's dressed when she goes to church on a Sunday!" she said to Matthew. "None of your gaudy, flaunting dressings-up, but all of the best and quietest, just like the Squire's lady. Eh, dear, there's nobody knows what that poor young woman mayn't have known. Very likely they kept their horses and carriages in better days."

"Doesn't seem to be very much cast down," said Matthew. "The lass is light-hearted enough. But ye women always are fanciful."

While Mrs. Dennison indulged herself in speculations as to what the dairymaid had been, in the course of which she formed various theories, inclining most to one that her father had been a member of Parliament who had lost all his money on the Stock Exchange, and while Matthew contented himself by regarding Miss Durrant solely in her professional capacity, William Henry was journeying along quite another path. He was, in fact, falling head over heels in love. He received a first impression when he saw Miss Durrant at Marltree station; he received a second, and much stronger one, next morning when he saw her in the spotless linen of the professional dairymaid. He began haunting the dairy until the fact was noticed by his mother.

"Why, I thought you cared naught about dairying, William Henry," she said, one day at dinner. "I'm sure you never went near it when your father was laying it out."

"What's the use of seeing anything till it's finished and in full working order?" said William Henry. "Now that it is in go, one might as well learn all about it."

"Well, ye couldn't have a better instructress," said Matthew. "She can show you something you never saw before, can Miss Durrant."

Miss Durrant was certainly showing William Henry Dennison something he had never seen before. He had always been apathetic towards young women, and it was with the greatest difficulty that he could be got to attend tea-parties, or dances, or social gatherings, at all of which he invariably behaved like a bear who has got into a cage full of animals whom it does not like and cannot exterminate. But it became plain that he was beginning to cultivate the society of Miss Durrant. He haunted the dairy of an afternoon, when Matthew invariably went to sleep; he made excuses to bring Miss Durrant into the family circle of an evening; he

waylaid her on her daily constitutional, and at last one Sunday he deliberately asked her to walk to church with him at a neighbouring village. And at that his mother's eyes were opened.

"Matthew," she said, when William Henry and Miss Durrant had departed, "that boy's smitten with Miss Durrant. He's making up to her."

Matthew, who was disposed to a peaceful nap, snorted incredulity.

"Ye women take such fancies into your heads," he said. "I've seen naught."

"You men are so blind," retorted Mrs. Dennison. "He's always going into the dairy—he's been walks with her—he's always getting me to ask her in here to play the piano——"

"And uncommon well she plays it, too!" grunted Matthew.

"—and now he's taken her off to church!" concluded Mrs. Dennison. "He's smitten, Matthew, he's smitten!"

Matthew stirred uneasily in his chair.

"Well, well, my lass!" he said. "Ye know what young folks are—they like each other's company. What d'ye think I sought your company for? Not to sit and stare at you, as if you were a strange image, I know!"

"Well, it all went on and ended in the proper way," said his wife, sharply. "But how do you know where this'll end?"

"I didn't know that aught had begun," said Matthew.

Mrs. Dennison, who was reading what she called a Sunday book, took off her spectacles and closed the book with a snap.

"Matthew!" she said. "You know that it's always been a settled thing since they were children that William Henry should marry his cousin Polly, your only brother John's one child, so that the property of the two families should be united when the time comes for us old ones to go. And it's got to be carried out, has that arrangement, Matthew, and we can't let no dairymaids, ladies as has come down or not, interfere with it!"

Matthew, who was half asleep, bethought himself vaguely of something that had been said long ago, when Polly was born, or at her christening—when the right time came, she and William Henry, then six years old, were to wed. John, Matthew's younger brother, had gone in for trade, and was now a very well-to-do merchant in Clothford, of which city he had been mayor. Matthew woke up a little, made a rapid calculation, and realized that Polly must now be nineteen years of age.

"Aye, aye, my lass," he said, "but you've got to remember that whatever fathers and mothers says, children don't always agree to. William Henry and Polly mightn't hit it off. Polly'll be a fine young lady now, what with all them French governesses and boarding-schools in London and Paris, and such-like."

"Our William Henry," said Mrs. Dennison, with heat and emphasis, "is good

enough for any young woman of his own class. And a man as owns six hundred acres of land is as good as any Clothford worsted merchant, even if he has been mayor! And now you listen to me, Matthew Dennison. I had a letter yesterday from Mrs. John saying that she believed it would do Polly good to go into the country, as she'd been looking a bit poorlyish since she came back from Paris, and asking if we could do with her for a few weeks. So to-morrow morning I shall go over to Clothford and bring her back with me—I've already written to say I should. We haven't seen her for five years—she was a pretty gel then, and must be a beauty by now, and we'll hope that her and William Henry'll come together. And if you take my advice, Matthew, you'll get rid of the dairymaid."

Matthew slowly rose from his chair.

"Then I'm denged if I do aught of the sort!" he said. "Ye can fetch Polly and welcome, missis, and naught'll please me better than if her and William Henry does hit it off, though I don't approve of the marriage of cousins as a rule. But I'm not going to get rid of my dairymaid for no Pollies, nor yet no William Henrys, nor for naught, so there!"

Then Mrs. Dennison put on her spectacles again and re-opened her Sunday book, and Mr. Dennison mixed himself a drink at the sideboard and lighted a cigar, and for a long time no sound was heard but the purring of the cat on the hearth and the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner.

Miss Mary Dennison duly arrived the next evening, under convoy of her aunt, and received a cordial and boisterous welcome at the hands and lips of her uncle and cousin. She was an extremely pretty and vivacious girl of nineteen, golden-haired and violet-eyed, who would have been about as much in place in managing a farmstead as in presiding over a court of law. But Mrs. Dennison decided that she was just the wife for William Henry, and she did all that she could to throw them together. In that, however, no effort was needed. William Henry and his cousin seemed to become fast friends at once. On the day following Polly's arrival he took her out for a long walk in the fields; when they returned, late for tea, there seemed to be a very excellent understanding between them. After that they were almost inseparable—there was little doing on the farm just then, and there was a capable foreman to see after what was being done, so William Henry, much to his mother's delight, began taking Polly for long drives into the surrounding country. They used to go off early in the morning and return late in the afternoon, each in high spirits. And Mrs. Dennison's hopes rose high, and her spirits were as high as theirs.

But there were two things Mrs. Dennison could not understand. The first was that Miss Durrant was as light-hearted as ever, and as arduous in her labours, in spite of the fact that William Henry no longer went walks with her nor took her to church. The second was that when he and Polly were not driving they

spent a considerable amount of time in the model dairy of an afternoon with Miss Durrant, and that unmistakable sounds of great hilarity issued therefrom. But she regarded this with indulgence under the circumstances.

"When they're together," she said, "young folks is inclined to make merry. Of course I must have been mistaken about William Henry being smitten with the dairymaid, considering how he's now devoted to his cousin. He was no doubt lonelyish—young men does get like that, though I must say that William Henry never did show himself partial to young ladies."

However partial William Henry may or may not have been to young ladies in the past, it was quite certain that he was making up for it at that stage of his existence. The long drives with Polly continued, and Polly came back from each in higher spirits than ever. Mrs. Dennison expected every day to hear that her dearest hopes were to be fulfilled.

And then came the climax. One evening, following one of the day-long drives, William Henry announced to the family circle that he was going to Clothford next morning, and should require breakfast somewhat earlier than usual. By nine o'clock next day he was gone, and Mrs. Dennison, not without a smirking satisfaction, noticed that Polly was uneasy and thoughtful, and developed a restlessness which got worse and worse. She tried to interest the girl in one way or another, but Polly slipped off to the dairy, and spent the entire day, except for meal-times, with Miss Durrant. When evening and high tea came she could scarcely eat or drink, and her eyes perpetually turned to the grandfather clock.

"If William Henry has missed the five-thirty, my dear," said Mrs. Dennison, "he's certain to catch the six-forty-five. He were never a one for gallivanting about at Clothford of an evening, and——"

And at that moment the parlour door opened and William Henry walked in.

The girl stood up, and Matthew and his wife, watching keenly, saw her turn white to the lips. And William Henry saw it, too, and he made one stride and caught her by the hands.

"It's all right, Polly," he said. "It's all right! See!"

He drew a letter from his pocket, tore the envelope open, and handed his cousin the enclosure. She glanced its contents over as if she were dazed, and then, with a wild cry of joy, threw her arms round William Henry and fairly hugged him. And then she threw herself into the nearest chair and began to cry obviously from pure happiness.

"Mercy upon us, William Henry Dennison, what's the meaning of this?" exclaimed William Henry's mother. "What does it mean?"

William Henry picked up the letter.

"It means this, mother," he said. "That's a letter from Uncle John to Polly,

giving his full consent to her marriage with a young gentleman who loves her and whom she loves—I've been taking her to meet him for the past month (that's why we went for those long drives), and a real good 'un he is, and so says Uncle John, now that at last he's met him. You see, Polly told me all about it the first day she was here—and, why, of course——"

With that William Henry went out of the room in a meaning silence.

"Of course," said Matthew; "of course, if my brother John approves of the young man, it's as good as putting the hall-mark on gold or silver."

Polly jumped up and kissed him. Then she kissed Mrs. Dennison.

"But, oh, Polly, Polly!" said Mrs. Dennison. "I meant you to marry William Henry!"

"But I don't love William Henry—in that way, aunt," replied Polly. "And besides, William Henry loves——"

And just then William Henry made a second dramatic appearance, holding himself very stiffly and straight, and leading in Miss Durrant.

"Father and mother," he said, "this lady's going to be your daughter."

So the trouble at Five Oaks Farm came to a good ending. For everybody was satisfied that the best had happened, and therefore was happy.

CHAPTER VIII
THE SPOILS TO THE VICTOR

The man of law, bland, courtly, old-world mannered, tilted back his chair, put the tips of his fingers together and smiled at the grey-haired, hard-featured man who sat, grim and silent, on the other side of his desk.

"My dear Mr. Nelthorp!" he said, in the tone of one pronouncing a final judgment. "It doesn't matter a yard of that tape what either Sutton or his solicitors say. We know—know, mind!—that it is utterly impossible for him to take up the mortgages. He is at your mercy."

Martin Nelthorp stared hard at Mr. Postlethwaite's smiling face—somewhere far back in his mental consciousness he was wondering why Postlethwaite always smiled in that bland, suave manner when he dispensed advice from his elbow-chair. It was a smile that seemed to be always on hand when wanted,

and it was never so sweet as when disagreeable things were to be dealt with. It seemed to Martin Nelthorp that there was nothing to smile at in the matter they were discussing—certainly there was no humour or pleasure in the situation for the immediate subject of discussion, Richard Sutton. But Mr. Postlethwaite continued to smile and to hold his head a little on one side, watching his client from between half-closed eyelids.

"At your mercy," he repeated softly. "Ab-so-lute-ly at your mercy."

Martin Nelthorp shook his great frame a little—as a mastiff might if suddenly stirred into activity. He was a big man, and his burly figure seemed to fill the office; his voice, when he spoke, was very deep and strong.

"What you mean," he said, fixing his keen grey eyes on the solicitor, "what you mean is that if I like I can ruin him?"

Mr. Postlethwaite smiled and bowed.

"You apprehend my meaning exactly, my dear sir," he said blandly. "Ruin is the word."

"It's not a very nice word to hear or to use in connection with any man," said Martin Nelthorp.

Mr. Postlethwaite coughed. But the smile remained round his clean-shaven lips.

"The ruin of most men, my dear friend," he said oracularly, "is brought about by themselves."

"Just so," said Martin Nelthorp. "All the same, the finishing touch is generally put to things by somebody else. You're sure Sutton's as badly off as what you make out?"

Mr. Postlethwaite fingered his papers and turned to some memoranda. He scribbled certain figures on a scrap of paper and faced his client.

"The position, my dear Mr. Nelthorp," he said, "is exactly this. You hold a first and second mortgage on Sutton's flour mill and on his house and land—in fact, on his entire property, and the sum you have advanced represents every penny of the full value. You are now wanting, principal and interest, exactly nine thousand, seven hundred and fifty-three pounds, ten shillings, and fourpence. He cannot pay this money—indeed, I question if he could by any chance find one-fourth of it, and you are in a position to foreclose at once."

"You mean that I can sell him up?" said Martin Nelthorp bluntly.

"Lock, stock, and barrel!" replied Mr. Postlethwaite.

Martin Nelthorp rubbed his chin.

"It's no very nice thing to ruin a man—and his family with him," he remarked.

Mr. Postlethwaite again coughed. He took off his gold-rimmed glasses and affected to exercise great care in polishing them.

"Is there any particular reason why you should consider Sutton before considering yourself?" he said softly.

Martin Nelthorp's face darkened, and a hard, almost vindictive look came into his eyes. The hand which held his ash-plant stick tightened about it.

"No!" he said. "That there isn't! On the contrary——"

"Aye, just so, just so!" said the solicitor. "Of course, that's an old tale now, but old wounds will rankle, my dear sir, old wounds will rankle!"

Martin Nelthorp stared hard at Mr. Postlethwaite from beneath his bushy grey eyebrows. He got up slowly, and buttoned his great driving-coat and put on his broad-brimmed, low-crowned hat, still staring at the man of law.

"Well, I'll bid you good day," he said "It's time I was getting home, and I've still to meet a man at the George and Dragon. Do no more in that matter till you see me again—of course, Sutton doesn't know that I bought up the two mortgages?"

"He hasn't an idea of it, my dear sir," answered the solicitor.

Martin Nelthorp hesitated a moment, then nodded as if to emphasize what he had just said, and again exchanging farewells with Mr. Postlethwaite, went out into the market-place of the little country town, now relapsing into somnolence at the end of an October day. He stood at the foot of Mr. Postlethwaite's steps for a moment, apparently lost in thought, and then moved slowly off in the direction of the George and Dragon. The man whom he expected to meet there had not yet arrived; he sat down in the parlour, empty of any presence but his own, and gave himself up to reflection. At his mercy—at last!—after nearly thirty years of waiting, at his mercy! The only enemy he had ever known, the only man he had ever had cause to hate with a bitter, undying hatred, was now by the decrees of destiny, by the whirling of fortune's wheel, brought within his power. If he pleased, he, Martin Nelthorp, could ruin Richard Sutton, could turn him out of the old place in which the Suttons had lived for generations, could sell every yard of land, every stick of furniture that he possessed, could leave him and his—beggars.

And as he sat there in the gloomy parlour, staring with brooding eyes into the fire, he said to himself—Why not? After all, it had been said in a long distant age—*An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*! Again he said to himself—Why not, now that the hour and the opportunity had come?

Nelthorp let his mind go back. He was now nearly sixty, a hale, hearty man, the biggest and cleverest farmer in those parts, rich, respected, made much of by the great folk, looked up to by the little; a man of influence and power. He was going down into the valley of life under a fine sunset and soft evening airs, and there were few who did not envy him a prosperous career and the prospect of a green old age. But Martin Nelthorp had always carried a trouble, a rankling sorrow in his breast, and he was thinking of it as he sat staring with sombre eyes

at the dull red glare of the sullen cinders in the grate. It was the worst sort of sorrow that could befall a man of his type of character, for he was both sensitive and proud, quick to feel an injury or a slight, slow to let the memory of either pass from him. It is said of a Yorkshireman that he will carry a stone in his pocket for ten years in expectation of meeting an enemy, and turn it at the end of that time if the enemy has not chanced along. Martin Nelthorp might have turned his stone twice, but he would have done so with no feeling of vindictiveness. There was nothing vindictive about him, but he had a stern, Israelitish belief in justice and in retribution.

The incidents—mean, ignoble—of his wrong came up before him as he sat there waiting, and their colours were as fresh as ever. Five-and-twenty years before he had been on the verge of marriage with Lavinia Deane, celebrated all the countryside over for her beauty and her vivacity. Everything was arranged; the wedding-day was fixed; the guests invited; the bride's finery sent home. Suddenly came news that made women weep and men smile. Almost on the eve of the wedding Lavinia ran away with Richard Sutton, and was married to him in a distant town. It was a bad business, said everybody, for Richard Sutton had been Martin Nelthorp's bosom friend from childhood, and was to have been his best man at the wedding. Nobody could conceive how the thing had come about; the girl had always seemed to be in love with Martin, and had never been seen in company with Sutton. But there the facts were—they were married, and Martin Nelthorp was a bitterly disappointed and wronged man. The man who broke the ill news to him would never speak of how he received that news, of what passed between them, or of what he said on hearing of the falseness of his sweetheart and the treachery of his friend, but it was commonly rumoured that he swore some dreadful oath of vengeance on the man and woman who had wrecked his life. And the neighbours and the people of the district watched eagerly to see what would happen.

But years went on and nothing happened. Richard Sutton and his wife stayed away from the village for some time; there was no necessity for their immediate return, for Sutton had a fine business as a corn-miller and could afford to appoint a capable manager in his absence. But they came back at last, and as Martin Nelthorp's farm was within a mile of the mill, the busybodies wondered how things would go when the two men met. Somehow they never did meet—at least, no one ever heard of their meeting. Nelthorp kept himself to his farm; Sutton to his mill. Years went by, and things resolved themselves into a state of quiescence or indifferentism: the men passed each other in the market-place or on the highroad and took no heed. But keen-eyed observers used to note that when they passed in this way Sutton used to go by with averted head and downcast eye, while Nelthorp strode or rode on with his head in the air and his

eye fixed straight before him.

Whether there had been a curse put upon them or not, Sutton and his wife did not thrive. Almost from the time of their marriage the business went down. In his grandfather's and father's days there had been little competition; the opening up of the countryside by railways made a great difference to Sutton's trade. His machinery became out of date, and he neglected to replace it with new until much of his business had slipped away from him. One way and another things went from bad to worse; he had to borrow, and to borrow again, always hoping for a turn in the tide which never came. And eventually, through the instrumentality of Mr. Postlethwaite, everything that he had was mortgaged to Martin Nelthorp.

Martin, during these years, had prospered exceedingly. He had been fortunate in everything in his life, except his love affair. He had money to begin with—plenty and to spare of it—and he knew how to lay it out to the best advantage. He was one of the first to see the importance of labour-saving machinery and to introduce it on his land in good time. Again, there was nothing to distract his attention from his land. He put all thought of marriage out of his head when Lavinia proved false to him; indeed, he was never afterwards known to speak to a woman except on business. For some years he lived alone in the old farmhouse in which he had been born. Then his only sister lost her husband, and came to live with Martin, bringing with her her one child, a boy, who had been named after his uncle. Very soon she, too, died, and the boy henceforward formed Martin's one human interest. He devoted himself to him; educated him; taught him all that he himself knew of farming, and let it be known that when his time came his nephew would step into his shoes. The two were inseparable; now, when the boy had come to man's age and the man had grown grey, they were known for many a mile round as Old Martin and Young Martin.

Old Martin knew, as he sat by the parlour fire, that the old feeling of hatred against Richard Sutton was by no means dead within him. He had robbed him of the woman he loved, the only woman he ever could love, and, as the solicitor had said, the old wound still rankled. Well, it was in his power now to take his revenge—his enemy was at his feet. But—the woman? She, too, would be ruined, she would be a beggar, an outcast. It would be turning her out on the road. Well—his face grew stern and his eyes hard as he thought of it—had she not once turned him out on a road, longer, harder to tread than that? *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth....*

It never occurred to him to ask himself if there were any children who might be affected.

The man who presently came in to keep his appointment with Martin remarked afterwards that he had never known Mr. Nelthorp so hard and determined in bargaining as he was that evening.

When the bargaining was done Martin Nelthorp got on his horse and rode home to his comfortable fireside. It was always a pleasure to him to get under his own roof-tree after a long day on the land or an afternoon at market or auction. There was the evening meal in company with his nephew; the easy-chair and the newspaper afterwards; the pipe of tobacco and the glass of toddy before going to bed. And Old Martin and Young Martin, as most folk thereabouts were well aware, were more like companions than uncle and nephew; they had many tastes in common—hunting, shooting, sport in general, and the younger man was as keen a farmer as the elder. There was therefore no lack of company nor of conversation round the parlour fire at the Manor Farm.

But on this particular night, for the first time since either of them could remember, there was an unusual silence and restraint round the supper-table. Both men as a rule were good trenchermen—a life in the open air helped them to hearty and never-failing appetite. This night neither ate much, and neither seemed disposed to talk much. Old Martin knew why he himself was silent, and why he was not inclined to food—he was too full of the Sutton affair. But he wondered what made his nephew so quiet, and why he did not replenish his plate after his usual fashion. As for Young Martin he had his own thoughts to occupy him, but he, too, wondered what made the elder so obviously thoughtful.

Old Martin remained quiet and meditative all the evening. He held the newspaper in his hands, but he was not always reading it. He had his favourite pipe between his lips, but he let it go out more than once. Young Martin was similarly preoccupied. He affected to read the *Mark Lane Express*, but he was more often staring at the ceiling than at the printed page. It was not until after nine o'clock, at which hour they generally began to think of bed, that any conversation arose between them. Young Martin started it, and with obvious confusion and diffidence.

"There's a matter I wanted to mention to you to-night, Uncle Martin," he said. "Of course, I won't speak of it if you've aught serious to be thinking of, but you know I never keep aught back from you, and——"

"What is it, my lad?" asked the elder man. "Speak out—I was only just studying about a business matter—it's naught."

Young Martin's diffidence increased. He shuffled his feet, became very red, and opened and shut his mouth several times before he could speak.

"It's like this," he said at last. "If you've no objection I should like to get married."

Old Martin started as if he had been shot. He stared at his nephew as though he had said that he was going to fly.

"Married!" he exclaimed. "Why, my lad—goodness be on us, you're naught but a youngster yet!"

"I'm twenty-six, uncle," said Young Martin.

"Twenty-six! Nay, nay—God bless my soul, well, I suppose you are. Time goes on so fast. Twenty-six! Aye, of course," said Old Martin. "Aye, you must be, my lad. Well, but who's the girl?"

Young Martin became more diffident than ever. It seemed an age to him before he could find his tongue. But at last he blurted the name out, all in a jerk.

"Lavinia Sutton!"

Martin Nelthorp dropped his pipe and his paper. He clutched the back of his elbow-chair and stared at his nephew as he might have stared at a ghost. When he spoke his own voice seemed to him to be a long, long way off.

"Lavinia Sutton?" he said hoarsely. "What—Sutton of the mill?"

"Yes," answered Young Martin. Then he added in a firm voice: "She's a good girl, Uncle Martin, and we love each other true."

Old Martin made no immediate answer. He was more taken aback, more acutely distressed, than his nephew knew. To cover his confusion he got up from his chair and busied himself in mixing a glass of toddy. A minute or two passed before he spoke; when he did speak his voice was not as steady as usual.

"He's a poor man, is Sutton, my lad," he said.

"I know that," said Young Martin stoutly. "But it's Lavinia I want—not aught from him."

"He's in a very bad way indeed," remarked the elder man. "Very bad."

Young Martin made no reply. Old Martin took a long pull at the contents of his glass and sat down.

"I didn't know Sutton had children," he said absently.

"There's only Lavinia," said his nephew.

Lavinia! The reiteration of the name cut him like a knife: the sound of it sent him back nearly thirty years. Lavinia! And no doubt the girl would be like her mother.

"You're no doubt aware, my lad," he said, after another period of silence, during which his nephew sat watching him, "you're no doubt aware that me and the Suttons is anything but friends. They—the man and his wife—wronged me. Never mind how. They wronged me—cruel!"

Young Martin knew all about it, but he was not going to say that he did.

"That was not Lavinia's fault, uncle," he said softly. "Lavinia—she wouldn't wrong anybody."

Old Martin thought of the time when he had—faith in women. He sighed, and drinking off his toddy, rose heavily, as if some weight had been put on him.

"Well, my lad," he said, "this is one of those things in which a man has to choose for himself. I shouldn't like to have it on my conscience that I ever came between a man and a woman that cared for each other. But we'll talk about it

to-morrow. I'm tired, and I've got to look round yet."

Then he went out to fulfil his nightly task, never neglected, never devolved to any one else, of looking round the farmstead before retiring to rest. His nephew noticed that he walked wearily.

Outside, in the fold around which horses and cattle were resting or asleep in stall or byre, Martin Nelthorp stood and stared at the stars glittering high above him in a sky made clear by October frost. He was wondering what it was that had brought this thing upon him—that the one thing he cared for in the world should seek alliance with the enemies of his life who now, by the ordinance of God, lay in his power. He had given Young Martin all the love that had been crushed down and crushed out; he was as proud of him as if the lad had been his own son by the woman he cared for; he meant to leave him all that he had; he was ambitious for him, and knowing that he would be a rich man he had some dreams of his nephew's figuring in the doings of the county, as councillor or magistrate—honours which he himself had persistently refused. And it had never once come within his scheme of things that the boy should fix his affections on the daughter of the enemy—it had been a surprise to him to find out that he even knew her.

Martin Nelthorp walked up and down his fold and his stackyard for some time, staring persistently at the stars. Though he did not say so to himself, he knew that that astute old attorney, Postlethwaite, was right when he said that old wounds rankle. He knew, too, that however much a man may strive to put away the thought from himself, there is still enough of the primitive savage left in all of us to make revenge sweet. And he had suffered through these people—suffered as he had never thought to suffer. He looked back and remembered what life had been to him up to the day when the news of a man's treachery and a woman's weakness had been brought to him, and he clenched his fists and set his teeth, and all the old black hatred came welling up in his heart.

"He shan't have her!" he said. "He shan't have her! A good girl!—what good could come of stock like that?"

Then he went indoors and up to his chamber, and Young Martin heard him walking up and down half the night. When he himself got down next morning his uncle had gone out: the housekeeper, greatly upset by the fact, seeing that such a thing had never happened within her fifteen years' experience of him, said that the master had had no more breakfast than a glass of milk and a crust of bread, and she hoped he was not sickening for an illness.

At that moment Martin Nelthorp was riding along the russet lanes towards the market-town. There had been a strong frost in the night, and the sky above him was clear as only an autumn sky can be. All about him were patches of red and yellow and purple, for the foliage was changing fast, and in the hedgerows there were delicate webs of gossamer. Usually, as a great lover of Nature, he

would have seen these things—on this morning he rode straight on, grim and determined.

He was so early at Mr. Postlethwaite's office that he had to wait nearly half-an-hour for the arrival of that gentleman. But when Mr. Postlethwaite came his client lost no time in going straight to his point.

"I want all papers of mine relating to that Sutton affair," he said. "Before I settle what I shall do I must read through 'em myself. Give me the lot."

Mr. Postlethwaite made some would-be facetious remark as to legal phraseology, but Martin Nelthorp paid no attention to it. He carried the papers away with him in a big envelope, and riding straight home at a smart pace, took them into the little room which he used as an office, and went carefully through them merely to see that they were all there. That done, he tore certain of them in half, and enclosing everything in another cover, he addressed it to Richard Sutton.

Then Old Martin went into the parlour and found Young Martin there, cleaning a gun. He clapped him on the shoulder, and the young man, looking up, saw that something had gone out of his elder's eyes and face.

"Now, my lad!" said Old Martin cheerily. "You can marry the girl—and you can go and make the arrangements this morning. And while you're there you can give this packet to Richard Sutton—he'll understand what it is."

Then, before his nephew could find his tongue, Martin Nelthorp strode over to the kitchen door and called lustily for his breakfast.

CHAPTER IX
AN ARCADIAN COURTSHIP

Sweetbriar Farm, when I went to visit my cousin there, seemed to me a crystallization of all the storied sweets of Arcadia as one reads of them in the poets and the dreamers. The house itself was some five hundred years old; it had diamond-paned windows framed in ivy; on one side, where there was no ivy, the grey walls were covered with clematis and honeysuckle and jessamine. There was a walled garden, gay with blossom; there was an orchard, where the blossom fell on lush grass in which golden daffodils sprang up. At the end of the orchard ran a stream, brown and mysterious, in whose deeper pools lurked speckled trout. All about the house and the garden and the orchard the birds sang, for the nesting and breeding season was scarce over, and at night, in a coppice close by, a

nightingale sang its heart out to the rising moon.

Within the old farmstead everything was as Arcadian as without. The sitting-room—otherwise the best parlour—was a dream of old oak, old china, old pewter, and old pictures. It smelt always of roses and lavender—you could smoke the strongest tobacco there without offence, for the flower-scent was more powerful. A dream, too, was my sleeping-chamber, with lavender-kept linen, its quaint chintz hangings, and its deep window-seat, in which one could sit of a night to see the moonlight play upon garden and orchard, or of an early morning to watch the dew-starred lawn sparkle in the fresh sunlight. And, once free of the house, there was the great kitchen to admire, with its mighty hearth, its old brass and pewter, its ancient grandfather clock, its flitches and hams hanging, side by side with bundles of dried herbs, from the oaken rafters; and beyond it the dairy, a cool and shadowy place where golden butter was made out of snow-white cream; and beyond that, again, the deep, dungeon-like cellar where stood the giant casks of home-brewed ale—nectar fit for the gods.

Nor were the folk who inhabited this Arcadia less interesting than the Arcadia itself. My cousin Samuel is a fine specimen of an Englishman, with a face like the rising sun and an eye as blue as the cornflowers which grow in his hedgerows. There was his wife, a gay and bustling lady of sixty youthful years, who was never without a smile and a cheery word, and who, like her good man, had but one regret, which each bore with admirable resignation—that the Lord had never blessed them with children. There were the people who came and went about the farm—ruddy-faced and brown-faced men, young maidens and old crones, children in all stages of youthfulness. And there was also John William and there was Susan Kate.

John William Marriner—who was usually spoken of as John Willie—was the elder of the two labourers who lived in the house. He was a youth of apparently one-and-twenty years of age, and as straight and strong as a promising ash-sapling. Whether in his Sunday suit of blue serge, or in his workaday garments of corduroy, John Willie was a picture of rustic health—his red cheeks always glowed, his blue eyes were always bright; he had a Gargantuan appetite, and when he was not smiling he was whistling or singing. Up with the lark and at work all day, he spent his evenings in the company of Susan Kate.

Susan Kate was the maid-of-all-work at Sweetbriar Farm—a handsome, full-blown English rose of nineteen, with cherry cheeks and a pair of large, liquid, sloe-black eyes which made her white teeth all the whiter. It was an idyll in itself to see Susan Kate—whose surname was Sutton—milking the cows, or feeding the calves out of a tin bucket; it was still more of an idyll to watch her and John William hanging over the orchard gate of an evening, the day's work behind them and the nightingale singing in the neighbouring coppice.

It seemed to me that Mr. Marriner and Miss Sutton were certainly lovers, and that matrimony was in their view. Now and then they went to church together, Susan Kate carrying a clean handkerchief and a Prayer Book, John Willie carrying Susan Kate's umbrella. Sometimes they went for walks on a Sunday afternoon; I more than once encountered them on these occasions, and curiously observed the manner of their love-making. We invariably met in shady lanes or woodland paths—Mr. Marriner in his Sunday suit, with some hedgerow flower in his buttonhole, invariably came first, bearing Miss Sutton's umbrella, with which he would occasionally switch the grass; Miss Sutton, very rosy-cheeked, followed at a distance of two yards. They never seemed to hold any discourse one with the other, but if they looked sheepishly conscious, they were undeniably happy.

Into this apparent Paradise suddenly entered a serpent.

There came into the sitting-room one morning, when I happened to be alone there, a Susan Kate whom I had certainly not seen before. This Susan Kate had evidently spent a considerable part of the night in affliction—her eyes were red and heavy, and there was even then a suspicious quiver at the corners of her red and pouting lips. She laid the tablecloth, set the plates and the knives and forks upon the table as if it was in her mind to do an injury to them.

"Why, Susan Kate!" said I. "What is the matter?"

Susan Kate's only immediate answer was to sniff loudly, and to retire to the kitchen, whence she presently returned with a cold ham, uncarven as yet, and a crisp lettuce, either of which were sights sufficient to cheer up the saddest heart. But Susan Kate was apparently indifferent to any creature comforts. She sniffed again and disappeared again, and came back with the eggs and the toast and the tea.

"I'm afraid, Susan Kate," said I, with all the dignified gravity of middle age, "I'm afraid you are in trouble."

Susan Kate applied a corner of her apron to her left eye as she transferred a bowl of roses from the sideboard to the middle of the breakfast-table. Then she found her tongue, and I noticed that her hands trembled as she rearranged my cup and saucer.

"It's all that there Lydia Lightowler!" she burst out, with the suddenness of an April shower. "A nasty, spiteful Thing!"

I drew my chair to the table.

"And who is Lydia Lightowler, Susan Kate?" I inquired.

Susan Kate snorted instead of sniffing.

"She's the new girl at the Spinney Farm," she answered.

"Oh!" I said. "I didn't know they had a new girl at the Spinney Farm. Where's Rebecca got to?"

"'Becca's mother," replied Susan Kate, "was took ill very sudden, and 'Becca

had to leave. So this here Lydia Lightowler come in her place. And I wish she'd stopped where she came from, wherever that may be!"

"Ah!" I said. "And what has Lydia Lightowler done, Susan Kate?"

Susan Kate, whose stormy eyes were fixed on something in vacancy, and who was twisting and untwisting her apron, looked as if she would like to deliver her mind to somebody.

"Well, it isn't right if a young man's been making up to a young woman for quite six months that he should start carrying on with another!" she burst out at last. "It's more than what flesh and blood can stand."

"Quite so, quite so, Susan Kate," I said. "I quite appreciate your meaning. So John Willie——"

"I had to go on an errand to the Spinney Farm last night," said Susan Kate; "to fetch a dozen of ducks' eggs it was, for the missis, and lo and behold, who should I come across walking in Low Field Lane but John William and Lydia Lightowler—a nasty cat! So when I saw them I turned and went another way, and when John William came home him and me had words, and this morning he wouldn't speak."

Here Susan Kate's tears began to flow afresh, and hearing the approach of her mistress she suddenly threw her apron over her head and rushed from the parlour, no doubt to have a good cry in some of the many recesses of the ancient farmstead. It was plain that Susan Kate's heart was fashioned of the genuine feminine stuff.

In the course of my walk that morning I crossed the field in which Mr. John William Marriner was performing his daily task. Usually he sang or whistled all day long, and you could locate him by his melody at least a quarter of a mile away. But on this particular morning—a very beautiful one—John William was silent. He neither whistled nor sang, and when I got up to him I saw that his good-natured face was clouded over. In fact, John William looked glum, not to say sulky. He was usually inclined to chat, but upon this occasion his answers were short and mainly monosyllabic, and I did not tarry by him. It was plain that John William was unhappy.

So there was a cloud over Arcadia. It appeared to increase in density. It was on a Tuesday when it first arose; after Wednesday Susan Kate wept no more, but went about with dry eyes and her nose in the air, wearing an injured expression, while John William conducted his daily avocations in a moody and sombre fashion. There were no more idylls of the orchard gate, and the farmhouse kitchen heard no merry laughter.

But on the next Monday morning I found Susan Kate laying the breakfast-table and showing undoubted signs of grief—in fact, she looked as if she had cried her eyes out. And this time there was no need to invite her confidence, for she

was only too anxious to pour out her woes.

"He walked her to church and home again last night!" exclaimed Susan Kate, nearly sobbing. "And they sat in the same pew and sang out of the same book, same as what him and me used to do. And Bob Johnson, he saw them going down Low Field Lane, and he said they were hanging arms!"

"Dear, dear, dear!" said I. "This, Susan Kate, is getting serious."

"And it's the Flower Show at Cornborough this week," continued Susan Kate, "and he'd promised faithful to take me to it, but now I expect he'll take her—a nasty, mean, spiteful cat!"

"John William's conduct is most extraordinary," I said. "It is—yes, Susan Kate, it is reprehensible. Reprehensible!"

Susan Kate looked at me half suspiciously.

"I don't want to say nothing against John Willie," she said. "I know what's the matter with him. It's 'cause she dresses so fine—I saw her the first Sunday she came to church. And John Willie has such an eye for finery. But fine feathers makes fine birds. I could be just as fine as what she is if I hadn't had to send my wages home to my mother when father broke his leg the other week. There's a hat in Miss Duxberry's window at Cornborough that would just suit me if I could only buy it. I'd like to see what John Willie would say then. 'Cause I'm as good-looking as what she is, any day, for all she's got yellow hair!"

Then Susan Kate retired, presumably to weep some more tears. But next morning she was all pride again.

"He's going to take her to the Flower Show," she said, as she set the breakfast-table. "He told Bob Johnson so last night, and Bob told me this morning."

"That's very bad, Susan Kate," I said. "A man should never break his promise. I'm surprised at John William. Hasn't he said anything to you about it?"

"We haven't spoken a word to each other since I gave him a piece of my mind about meeting him and her in Low Field Lane," said Susan Kate. "Nay, if he prefers her to me he can have her, and welcome. I shall have naught no more to do with young men—they're that fickle!"

"Shall you go to the Flower Show, Susan Kate?" I inquired.

"No, I shan't!" snapped out Susan Kate. "They can have it to themselves, and then they'll happen to be suited."

I walked into Cornborough during the day and discovered the whereabouts of Miss Duxberry's shop. It was not difficult to pick out the hat to which Susan Kate had referred, nor to realize that the girl had uncommonly good taste, and that it would look very well indeed on her wealth of raven hair. A label attached to its stand announced that it came from Paris, and that its price was a guinea—

well, Susan Kate was well worthy of twenty-one shillings'-worth of the latest Parisian fashion. Besides, there was John William's future to consider. So I dispatched the Paris hat to Sweetbriar Farm by a specially commissioned boy, who solemnly promised to remember with what duty he was charged.

That evening, after my return to the farm, and following upon my supper and a short conference with Susan Kate, I made my way to the courtyard, where Bob Johnson, the second "liver-in," was invariably to be found in his leisure moments, seated on the granary steps, and engaged either in plaiting whip-lashes or making whistles out of ash-twigs. Mr. Johnson was a stolid, heavy-faced, heavily-fashioned young gentleman of twenty, with just sufficient intelligence to know a plough from a harrow, and a firm conviction that the first duty of all well-regulated citizens was to eat and drink as much as possible. I gave him a cigar, at which he immediately began to suck as if it had been his own pipe, and passed the time of day with him.

"I suppose you'll be going to the Flower Show to-morrow?" I said.

Mr. Johnson shook his head over his whiplash.

"I'm sure I don't know," he answered. "The master's given us a half-day off, but I'm none so great on them occasions. I doubt I shan't be present."

"Look here," I said, "would you like to earn half-a-sovereign?"

In order to emphasize this magnificent offer I drew the coin alluded to from my waistcoat pocket and let the evening sun shine on it. Mr. Johnson's eyes twinkled and he opened his mouth cavernously.

"How?" he said, and scratched his right ear.

"Now listen to me," I said; "to-morrow afternoon you're to put your best things on, and you're to take Susan Kate to the Flower Show. I'll give you two shillings to pay you in, and five shillings to take with you, and you shall have five shillings more when you come back."

Mr. Johnson scratched his ear again.

"Happen Susan Kate won't go," he said, dubiously. "I've never walked her out anywheres."

"Susan Kate will go with you," I said, decisively. "You be ready at three o'clock. And remember, you're not to say a word about this to anybody—not one word to John William. If you do, there'll be no ten shillings."

Mr. Johnson nodded his head.

"John Willie's going to the Flower Show," he remarked. "He's going with the new servant-lass at the Spinney Farm. Him and Susan Kate's fallen out. I say, mister!"

"Well?" I replied.

"I'm not a great one for lasses," said Mr. Johnson. "I don't want Susan Kate to think that I'm courting her. 'Cause I'm not going to."

"Susan Kate will quite understand matters," I said.

"Well, of course ten shilling is ten shilling," murmured Mr. Johnson. "Otherwise I should have stopped at home."

At half-past two next day I took up a position in the garden from which I could see the setting out to the Flower Show. Presently issued forth John William, clad in his best and sporting a yellow tea-rose—he marched valiantly away, but his face was gloomy and overcast. A quarter of an hour later Miss Sutton and Mr. Johnson appeared round the corner of the house. The lady looked really handsome in her best gown and the new hat, and it was very evident to my jaded eyes that she knew her own worth and was armed for conquest. There was a flush on her cheek and a light in her eye which meant a good deal. As for Mr. Johnson, who was attired in a black cut-away coat and slate-blue trousers, and wore a high collar and a billycock hat two sizes too small for him, he looked about as happy as if he were going to instant execution, and gazed miserably about him as though seeking some deliverance. He walked a yard in the rear of Susan Kate—and Susan Kate seemed to regard him as one regards a dog at heel.

It might have been about an hour and a half afterwards that Mr. Johnson came shambling down the meadow towards the farm—alone. He looked thoughtful, but infinitely relieved, as if some great weight had been lifted from his mind. I went out into the courtyard, and found him sitting on the wall of the well.

"You are soon home again," I remarked.

"Yes," he answered, "yes. I didn't see no call to stop there—Flower Shows is naught in my line. Of course I did what you said, mister—I took Susan Kate there, and went in with her, and walked her round."

"And where is Susan Kate?" I inquired.

Mr. Johnson took off the too-small billycock and scratched his head.

"Why," he said, "she's with John Willie. Ye see, when her and me got there I walked her round the big tent, and we met John Willie and that there Lydia Lightowler from the Spinney. Susan Kate took no notice of 'em, but passed 'em as if they were so much dirt, and John Willie he looked at us as black as thunder. Well, we went on, and we'd gotten to a quietish part when up comes John Willie by himself and gets hold of me by the arm. 'What does thou mean,' he says, fierce-like, 'by walking my lass out? Thee hook it, else I'll break every bone in thy body!' 'I didn't know Susan Kate were thy lass now,' I said. 'I thought ye'd quarrelled.' 'Hook it!' he says. 'Oh, very well,' I says. 'Ye can settle it among yourselves.' So I left Susan Kate with him and came home. Ye might give me that other five shilling now, if ye please, mister."

Then Mr. Johnson retired to assume more comfortable attire, and I went for a walk to meditate. And coming back in the soft twilight I came across John William and Susan Kate. They were lingering at the wicket gate, and his arm was

round her waist, and just as I caught sight of them he stooped and kissed her.

That, of course, accounted for the extraordinary happiness in Susan Kate's face when she laid the cloth for supper.

CHAPTER X
THE WAY OF THE COMET

If he should happen to be alive (and if he is he must now be a very old man, and have had ample time for reflection about more things than one), Bartholomew Flitcroft will have heard of the comet which is now in our neighbourhood with what are usually described as mingled feelings. It is not quite within my recollection as to when it exactly was that the last comet of any note visited us; if Bartholomew exists, and has preserved his memory, he has better cause to know than most men. At least, that may be so or may not be so, because no one can ever tell how anything is going to turn out. When that particular comet had come and gone Bartholomew was a sorely disappointed man; whether he really had reason to be, no one will ever know.

As regards Bartholomew's status in the world, he was a smallish farmer at Orchardcroft—a middle-aged, raw-boned, hatchet-faced man, whose greatest difficulty in life was to make up his mind about anything. If an idea about sowing spring wheat or planting potatoes came into his head as he walked about his land, he would stand stock still wherever he was and scratch his ear and think and consider until his mind was in a state of chaos. He had always been like that, and, being a bachelor, he got worse as he got older. He would never do anything unless he had what he called studied it from every side, and once when one of his stacks got on fire he was so long in deciding as to which of the two neighbouring towns he would send to for the fire-engines that the stack was burned, and three others with it.

So far as was known to any one acquainted with him, Bartholomew never turned his attention to the subject of marriage until he was well over forty years of age. Whether it then occurred to him because his housekeeper married the butler at the Hall nobody ever could say with any certainty, but it is certain that he then began to look about for a wife. Naturally he exercised his characteristic caution in doing so, and he also hit upon a somewhat original plan. He kept his eyes open whenever he went to church or market, and, it being a fine spring

and summer when the idea of matrimony came to him, he began to ride of a Sunday evening to the churches and chapels in neighbouring villages with a view to looking over the likely ladies. That was how he at last decided to marry Widow Collinson, of Ulceby.

Now, Widow Collinson was a pleasant-faced, well-preserved woman of some forty summers, whose first husband, Jabez Collinson, had had a very nice business as corn miller at Ulceby, and had consequently left her comfortably provided for. When he died she kept the business on, and it was said that she was already improving it and doing better than Jabez had done. Such a woman, of course, was soon run after, and all the more so because she had no encumbrances, as they call children in that part of the country; there were at least half-a-dozen men making sheep's eyes at her before Bartholomew came upon the scene. Whatever it was that made her take some sort of liking to Bartholomew nobody could understand, but the fact is that she did—at any rate, Bartholomew began riding over to Ulceby at least three times a week, and it was well known that the widow always gave him a hot supper, because the neighbours smelt the cooking. One night she cooked him a couple of ducks, with stuffing of sage and onions, and, of course, everybody knew then that they were contemplating matrimonial prospects. And those who were acquainted with Bartholomew's prevalent characteristic were somewhat surprised that he had made up his mind so quickly.

It was always considered in Orchardcroft that if it had not been for Mr. Pond, the schoolmaster, the marriage of Mrs. Collinson and Mr. Flitcroft would have been duly solemnized that very year. Bartholomew might have caused some delay at the post, but it was plain that he meant business if he once got off. And it was certainly the school-master who made him do what he did. He and Mr. Pond were near neighbours, and they had been in the habit of smoking their pipes in one or the other's house for many years. They would have a drop of something comforting, and sit over the fire, and Mr. Pond used to tell Bartholomew the news, because Bartholomew never read anything except the market reports and Old Moore's Almanack. And one night when they were thus keeping each other company and Bartholomew was thinking of Mrs. Collinson and her mill, Mr. Pond remarked, with a shake of the head—

"This is very serious news about this comet, Mr. Flitcroft."

"What news?" asked Bartholomew.

"Why about this comet that's hastening towards us," replied Mr. Pond.

"What's a comet?" inquired Bartholomew.

"A comet," said Mr. Pond, in the tones he used when he was teaching the children, "a comet is a heavenly body of fire which rushes round space at a prodigious rate of speed. It's rushing towards us now, sir, at millions and millions of miles a day!"

"How big is it?" asked Bartholomew.

"Much bigger than what our earth is, Mr. Flitcroft," answered the school-master. "Its tail is twenty millions of miles long."

"And you say it's coming here?" continued Bartholomew.

"So the scientific gentlemen are agreed, sir," said Mr. Pond. "Yes, this vast body of fire is rushing upon us as wild beasts rush on their prey. It may be mercifully turned aside and only brush us with its tail; it may crash right upon us, and then——"

Mr. Pond finished with an expressive "Ah!" and Bartholomew gaped at him.

"Is it all true?" he asked. "Is it in the newspapers?"

"The newspapers, sir, are just now full of it," replied the school-master. "It's the topic of the hour. Sir Gregory Gribbin, the great astronomer, says that we shall most certainly be crushed by the tail. And if the tail is composed of certain gases—as he thinks it will be—well!"

"What'll happen?" asked Bartholomew.

"We shall all be asphyxiated—smothered!" answered Mr. Pond, solemnly. "We shall be withered up like chaff by fierce fire."

When Mr. Pond had departed Bartholomew took up the *Yorkshire Post*, and for the first time ignored the market reports, over which he generally pored for an hour every evening. He read a lot of learned matter about the rapidly approaching comet, and he went to bed with his brain in a whirl. Next morning he ignored the market reports again, and let his coffee get cold while he read more about the comet.

It so chanced that Bartholomew was unable to visit Ulceby for several days after that, owing to sickness breaking out amongst his cattle, and when he next went the widow noticed that he looked much worried and was preoccupied. As the cattle were all right again, she wondered what was the matter, but at first got no satisfactory explanation. Bartholomew seemed unusually thoughtful, and twiddled his thumbs a great deal.

"I say," he said, "I—I think we'd better put off the idea of being wed until we see what this comet does—eh?"

"What comet?" asked the amazed widow.

"Why, this comet that's approaching," answered Bartholomew. "It's coming like a bullet. I was going to put the banns up both here and at Orchardcroft this week, but I don't see what use it is getting married if we're all going to be burned to ashes in the twinkling of an eye. I'll read you all the latest news about it."

With that Bartholomew, whom Mrs. Collinson was by that time regarding with mingled feelings of apprehension and something closely bordering on contempt, pulled out a quantity of newspaper cuttings which he had carefully snipped out of various journals—his taste for science having suddenly developed.

He read out the astronomical terms with sonorous voice.

"It's a very serious thing," he said. "I think we must put matters off. The comet 'll be here soon."

"I suppose you're going to look out for it?" said Mrs. Collinson in a constrained voice.

"Why, me and Mr. Pond, our school-master, has bought a telescope," replied Bartholomew, grandly. "Yes, we propose to make what they call observations."

"I'm sure you couldn't be better employed," remarked Mrs. Collinson.

The next night, and the next, and the next again, and for several nights Mr. Pond and Mr. Flitcroft engaged in astronomical pursuits. Then, Sunday coming, Mr. Flitcroft heard strange news which sent him post-haste to his widow. She met him at her door—coldly. Mr. Flitcroft gasped out a question.

"Yes," she said, "it is true. Me and Mr. Samuel Green have been cried in church this morning, and I'm going to marry him. So now you know."

"But what shall I do?" cried Bartholomew, scratching his ear.

"Do?" said Mrs. Collinson. "You can do what your precious comet 'll do. Go back where you came from!"

CHAPTER XI
BROTHERS IN AFFLICTION

It used to be said all over the countryside that you might go for a long day's march and search all the towns and villages you came across and then return home without finding such an example of David-and-Jonathan-like affection and devotedness as was seen in the lives of Thomas and Matthew Pogmore. To begin with, they were twins who had lost both parents before they themselves attained to manhood; this sad occurrence seemed to draw them closely together, and at the age of fifty they were still living, bachelors, in the ancient farmhouse wherein they had first seen the light of day. They had never ran after women, young or otherwise, and everybody who knew them—as everybody did—said that they would live and die single. Some uncharitable people said they were much too mean to marry, for they had a great reputation for economy and were well known to look at both sides of a sixpence a long time before they parted with it. And yet there were other people who wondered that they never had married, for they were both well-set-up, good-looking, rosy-cheeked, well-preserved men, who

had been handsome in early manhood and were still good to look upon. In all respects they were very much alike in appearance—they were alike, too, in the fact that each possessed a pair of small, sly eyes which always seemed to be on the outlook.

The domestic life of Thomas and Matthew in their old farmhouse was one of quiet and peaceful days. They were well-to-do, and the land they farmed was good. They had a housekeeper, some ten years their senior, who knew all their ways. They lived the most regular of lives. At eight o'clock they breakfasted. From nine until one they were out and about their fields or their folds. At one they dined, glanced at the newspaper, smoked a pipe, drank one glass, and took a forty seconds nap, each in his own easy-chair. When they were thus refreshed they went out into the land again until half-past five, when high tea was set in the parlour. After its consumption—and they were hearty eaters—the spirit-case was set out with the cigars, and the peaceful duties of the evening began. Sometimes they read more of the newspapers; sometimes they talked of pigs or turnips or the different qualities of artificial manure. And at precisely ten o'clock, having consumed exactly so much grog and smoked exactly so many pipes or cigars, they retired to bed and slept the sleep of the innocent. It was a harmless life and very soothing.

This life, of course, had its occasional variations. There was, for instance, the weekly market-day, when they attended the little town four miles off, did business, dined at the ordinary and took their market allowance. They were generous about the latter, as they were in all matters of food and drink, but nobody ever saw them market-merry—they were much too cautious and wise for that. Then there were occasional fair-days to attend, and sometimes they journeyed into distant parts of the country to buy sheep or cattle—these occurrences made a break in life for them, but it was seldom that their well-fed forms were not found one on each side of the hearthrug when the shades of evening fell.

And then, greatly to the astonishment of Matthew, Thomas suddenly began a new departure. As a rule the brothers rode home together from market; there came a period when he was missing when going home time arrived, and Matthew had to go home without him. On three occasions he got back late, and made excuses. He began to make more excuses about riding into the market-town of an evening, and his twin-brother was often left alone. Matthew grew alarmed, then frightened. And when at last he realized that Thomas, when he went off in this mysterious way, invariably dressed himself up, Matthew broke into a cold sweat and dared to voice a horrible suspicion.

"He's after a woman!"

He glanced round the comfortable parlour and thought what it might mean if Thomas introduced a wife into it. She would, of course, want to alter

everything—women always did. She would say that cigars made the curtains smell, and forbid the decanters to be brought out until bed-time. And she would expect, no doubt, to have his easy-chair. The prospects were terrible.

"Who can she be?" he wondered, and his consternation was so great that he let his cigar go out and his grog turn cold.

Thomas came home that night with very bright eyes and a distinguished air. He mixed himself a drink and enthroned himself in his easy-chair.

"Matthew, my lad!" he said in his grandest manner. "Matthew, I've no doubt that people have oft wondered how it was that we never entered into the matrimonial condition of life."

Matthew shook his head sadly. Something was coming.

"Matrimony, Thomas," he answered feebly, "matrimony, now, is a thing that never occurred to me."

Thomas waved his hand comprehendingly.

"Just so, just so, Matthew," said he. "Of course, we were too young to think about such things until—until recently. A man shouldn't think of them things until he's come to an age of discretion."

Matthew took a moody sip of the contents of his glass.

"Was you thinking of that state of life yourself, Thomas?" he inquired.

Thomas grew in grandeur and importance until he looked like a large frog.

"I was about to make the announcement, Matthew," he said, "the important announcement that I am about to lead to the altar Mrs. Walkinshaw——"

"What, her of the Dusty Miller!" exclaimed Matthew, naming a well-known hostelry in the market-town.

"Mrs. Walkinshaw—Mrs. Thomas Pogmore as will be—certainly is proprietor of that house, Matthew," replied Thomas. "Yes, she is!"

"Well—well!" said Matthew. "Ah, just so." He glanced at his brother with the sly Pogmore expression. "I should think she's got a pretty warmly-lined purse, eh, Thomas?—he was a well-to-do man, was her first husband."

"I have no doubt Mrs. Thomas Pogmore as will be can bring a nice little fortune with her, Matthew," said the prospective bridegroom, with great complacency, "a ve-ry nice little fortune. There'll be what the late Mr. Walkinshaw left, and what she's saved, and there'll be the goodwill of the business, which should make a pretty penny."

"And there's no encumbrances, I think," remarked Matthew.

"There is no encumbrances," said Thomas. "No, it's a comfortable thing to reflect upon is that. I—I couldn't abear to have a pack of—of children about the place."

Matthew glanced about him once more and once more sighed.

"Well, of course, it'll make a difference," he began.

Thomas raised a deprecatory hand.

"Not to you, Matthew!" he said. "Not in the least, brother. Mrs. Thomas Pogmore as will be knows that one-half of everything here is yours. It'll only mean buying another armchair, which can be placed in the middle of the hearth there."

"Well, of course, with having been in the public line she'll know what men is," said Matthew, somewhat reassured. "I couldn't like to see anything altered in the old place nor my habits interfered with."

Mr. Thomas Pogmore intimated that everything would continue on the old lines, and presently marched off to bed, humming a gay tune. He was evidently in high good humour with himself, and he continued to be so for some weeks, during which period Mrs. Walkinshaw, who was a handsome, black-eyed widow of presumably forty-five, occasionally drove over and took tea with the twins, possibly with the view of getting acquainted with her future home. She was a sprightly and vivacious dame, and Matthew thought that Thomas had shown good taste.

And then came a night when Thomas, arriving home earlier than usual, entered the parlour looking much distressed, threw himself into a chair and groaned. That he felt in a very bad way Matthew immediately deduced from the fact that he neglected to supply himself with spirituous refreshment.

"What's the matter, Thomas?" inquired the younger twin.

Thomas groaned still more loudly.

"Matter!" he exclaimed at last, making a mighty effort and resorting to the decanters and cigars. "Matter a deal, Matthew. I dare say," he continued, after he had drunk his potion with a suggestion of its being bitter as aloes, "I dare say I should have been warned, for there's a many proverbs about the frailty and deceit of women. But, of course, never having had aught to do with them I was unarmed for the contest, so to speak."

"Then she's been a-deceiving of you, Thomas?" asked Matthew.

"Deceived me cruel," sighed Thomas. "I shall never believe in that sex again."

Matthew blew out a few spirals of blue smoke before he asked a further question.

"I could hope," he said at last, "I could hope, Thomas, that it were not on the money question?"

Thomas shook his head dolefully, afterwards replenishing his glass.

"It were on the money question, Matthew," he said. "I understood that she'd come to me with a considerable fortune; a very considerable fortune!"

"Well?" asked Matthew, breathlessly.

Thomas spread out his hands with a despairing gesture.

"All passes from her if she marries again!" he said tersely.

"Is it true?" inquired Matthew.

"Told me so herself—this very evening," answered Thomas.

A dead silence came over the farmhouse parlour. Thomas lighted a cigar and smoked pensively; Matthew refilled his churchwarden pipe and puffed blue rings at the ceiling, whereat he gazed as if in search of inspiration. It was he who spoke first.

"It's a bad job, this, Thomas," he said; "a very bad job. Of course, you'll not be for carrying out your part of the arrangement?"

"I have been cruel deceived," said Thomas.

"At the same time," said Matthew, "when this here engagement was made between you, you didn't make it a condition that the fortune should come with her?"

"No-o!" answered Thomas.

"Then, of course, if you throw her over she can sue you for breach of promise, and as you're a well-to-do man the damages would be heavy," remarked Matthew.

Thomas groaned.

"What must be done, Thomas, must be done by management," said the younger twin. "We must use diplomacy, as they term it. You must go away for a while. It's a slack time with us now, and you've naught particular to do—go and have a fortnight at Scarborough Spaw, and when that's over go and see Cousin Happleston at his farm in Durham; he'll be glad to see you. And while you're away I'll get the matter settled—leave it to me."

Thomas considered that very good advice and said he would act on it, and he went off to his room earlier than usual in order to pack a portmanteau, so that he could set off from the immediate scene of his late woes early next morning. When he had departed Matthew mixed himself his usual nightcap, and, having taken a taste of it to see that it was according to recipe, proceeded to warm his back at the fire, to rub his hands, and to smile.

"It were a good conception on my part to speak to Lawyer Sharpe on that matter," he thought to himself. "I wonder Thomas never considered of it."

He drew a letter from his breast-pocket, and read it slowly through. This is what he read—

"PRIVATE
10, *Market Place, Cornborough*,
May 11, 18—.

"MR. MATTHEW POGMORE.

"DEAR SIR,—In accordance with your instructions I have caused the will of the late Mr. Samuel Walkinshaw, of the Dusty Miller Hotel in this town, to be perused at Somerset House. With the exception of a few trifling legacies to servants and old friends, the whole of the deceased's fortune was left unconditionally to the widow, there being no restriction of any kind as to her possible second marriage. The gross personalty was £15,237 odd; the net, £14,956 odd. In addition to this the freehold, good-will, stock and furniture of the Dusty Miller was also left to the widow.

"**I am, dear sir, yours faithfully,** "SAMUEL SHARPE."

Matthew folded this epistle carefully in its original folds and restored it to his pocket, still smiling.

"Ah!" he murmured. "What a thing it is to have a little knowledge and to know how to take advantage of it!"

Then he, too, retired to bed and slept well, and rose next morning to see his twin-brother off, bidding him be of good cheer and prophesying that he should return a free man. Left alone, he chuckled.

Matthew allowed some days to elapse before he went into Cornborough. Mrs. Walkinshaw looked somewhat surprised to see him, though of late he had taken to visiting the house occasionally. As a privileged visitor he passed into her private parlour.

"And pray what's become of Thomas these days?" she inquired, when Matthew was comfortably placed in the cosiest chair.

Matthew shook his head. His manner was mysterious.

"Don't ask me, ma'am," he said, sorrowfully. "It's a painful subject. Of course, however, between you and me and the post, as the saying is, Thomas has gone to Scarborough Spaw, ma'am."

"To Scarborough!" exclaimed Mrs. Walkinshaw. "What for?"

Matthew sighed and then gave her an expressive look.

"He's very fond of a bit of gay doings, is Thomas, ma'am," he said. "Likes to shake a loose leg, now and then, you understand. It gets a bit dull at our place in time. But I'm all for home, myself."

Mrs. Walkinshaw, who had listened to this with eyes which grew wider and wider, flung down her fancy sewing in a pet.

"Well, upon my word!" she exclaimed. "Gone gallivanting to Scarborough without even telling me. Then I'll take good care he never comes back here again.

A deceitful old rip!—I don't believe he was ever after anything but my money, for I tried a trick on him about it the other night, and he went off with a face as long as a fiddle and never said good-night. Old sinner!"

"We're all imperfect, ma'am," remarked Matthew. "Only some of us is less so."

Then he proceeded to make himself agreeable, and eventually went home well satisfied. And about five weeks later Thomas, whose holiday had been prolonged on Matthew's advice, received a letter from his twin-brother which made him think harder than he had ever thought in his life.

"DEAR BROTHER" (it ran),—"This is to tell you that you can return home safely now, as I was married to Mrs. Walkinshaw myself this morning. I have decided to retire from farming, and she will retire from the public way of business, as we find that with our united fortunes we can live private at Harrogate and enter a more fashionable sphere of life, as is more agreeable to our feelings. Business details between you and me can be settled when you return. So no more at present, from your affectionate brother,

"MATTHEW POGMORE.

"P.S.—You was misinformed in your meaning of what Mrs. Matthew Pogmore meant when she spoke of her fortune passing at her second marriage. She meant, of course, that it would pass to her second husband.

"P.S. again.—Which, naturally, it has done."

After this Mr. Thomas Pogmore concluded to go home and lead the life of a hermit amongst his sheep and cattle.

CHAPTER XII

A MAN OR A MOUSE

PROLOGUE

The cleverest man I ever knew was at the same time the wisest and kindest-hearted of men. Not that the possession of wisdom, nor the grace of kindness to his fellow-creatures, made him clever in a high degree, but that when I was in the journeyman stage of learning, feeling my feet, as it were, he gave me what I have ever since known—not considered, mind you, but known—to be the best and most invaluable advice that one creature could give to another. It was this—put into short words (and, mind you, this man was a big man, and a very successful business man, inasmuch as he raised one of the biggest concerns in his own town out of sheer nothing, and died a rich man, having used his wealth kindly and wisely at a time when things were not what they are now)—

"Poskitt—tha'rt nowt but a young 'un! Tha's goin' inta t' world, and tha'll find 'at theer'll be plenty o' men to gi' thee what they call advice. Now, I seen all t' world o' Human Nature, and *I'll* gi' thee better advice nor onnybody 'at tha'll ever find—'cause I know! Listen to me—

"(i.) I'steead o' trustin' nobody, trust ivverybody—till thou finds 'em out. When thou finds 'em out (if thou ivver does), trust 'em agen! Noä man's a bad 'un, soä long as ye get on t' reight side on him. An' it's yer own fault, mind yer, if ye doän't.

"(ii.) Doän't think ower much about makkin' Brass. It's a good thing to mak' Brass, and a good thing to be in possession on it, but Brass is neyther here nor theer unless ye ware it on yer friends. Save yer Brass as much as ye can. Keep it for t' rainy Day—ye never know when that rainy Day's comin'—but don't skrike at a sixpence when ye know that a half-crown wodn't mak' a diff'rence. Doän't tak' yer sweetheart to market, and let her come home wi' a penny ribbon when ye know in yer own heart 'at ye might ha' bowt her a golden ring.

"(iii.) To end up wi'—trust ivvery man ye meet—not like a fool, but like a wiseacre. Love your neighbours—but tak' good care that they love you. If ye find that they don't, have nowt to do with 'em—but go on loving 'em all the same. If theer's Retribution, it weern't fall on you, but on them. But at th' same time, ye must remember that ivvery one on us mak's the other. An', to sum up all the lot, ivvery man 'at were ivver born on this earth mak's himself."

I

In one of those old Latin books which I sometimes buy in the old book-shops in the market-towns that I visit, out of which I can pick out a word or two, a sentence or two (especially if they are interleaved with schoolboys' attempts at cribs), there

is a line which I, at any rate, can translate with ease into understandable English—a line that always puts me in mind of my old, wise friend's blunt sayings—

"*Every man is the maker of his own fortune.*"

And that's why I am going to tell you this story of a man who did Three Things. First: Made Himself a Millionaire. Second: Lived in a Dream while he was in the Process. Third: Came out of the Dream—when it was all too late.

Now we will begin with him.

II

Samuel Edward Wilkinson, when I first knew him, was a small boy of twelve who, in the privacy of the back garden of a small provincial grammar-school, ate tarts and apples which he never shared with his school-fellows. He was the last of a large family—I think his mother succumbed to the strain of bearing him, the tenth or eleventh—and he had the look of a starved fox which is not quite certain where the nearest hen-roost is. The costume of small boys in those days—the early forties—did not suit him; the tassel of his peaked cap was too much dependent upon his right eyebrow, and the left leg of his nankeen trousers was at least an inch and a half higher than its corresponding member.

"Poskitt," he said to me, the first time that I ever indulged in any real private conversation with him, "what shall you do when you leave Doctor Scott's?"

"Go home," said I.

He was eating one of his usual jam-tarts at the time, and he looked at me sideways over a sticky edge of it.

"Poskitt—what's your father?" he asked.

"My father's a farmer—but it's our own land," said I.

He finished his tart—thoughtfully. Then he took out a quite clean handkerchief and wiped the tips of his fingers on it. He looked round, more thoughtfully than before, at the blank walls of Doctor Scott's back garden. I was sensible enough even at that age to see that he was regarding far-away things.

"My father," he said, after an obvious cogitation, "is a butcher. He makes a lot of money, Poskitt. But there are eleven of us. I am the eleventh. When I leave school——"

He stopped short there, and from his trousers pocket drew out two apples. You may think that he was going to give me one—instead of that he looked them

over, selected what he evidently considered the best, bit into it, and put the other back in his pocket.

"When I leave school," he resumed, "I mean to go into business. Now, what do you think of business, Poskitt?"

I was so astonished, boy as I was, to hear this miserable mannikin talking as he did, that I dare say I only gaped at him. Between his bites at his apple he continued his evidences of a shrewd character.

"You see, Poskitt," he said, "I've thought a great deal while I've been here at Doctor Scott's. I don't think much of Doctor Scott—he's very kind, but he doesn't tell any of us how to make money. Your father's got a lot of money, hasn't he?"

"How do you know?" I said, rather angrily.

"Because," said he, quite calmly, "I see him give you money when he comes to see you. Nobody gives money away who hasn't got it. And you see, Poskitt, although my father makes a lot of money, too, he doesn't give me much—sixpence a week."

"How do you get your tarts and your apples, then?" I asked.

He gave me one more of those queer glances

"My mother and my sisters send me a basket," he answered. "Of course, Poskitt, we've got to get all we can out of this world, haven't we? And I want to get on and to make money. What do you consider the best way to make money, Poskitt?"

I was so young and irresponsible at that time, so full of knowledge of having the old farmstead and the old folks and everything behind me, that I scarcely understood what this boy was talking about. I dare say I gave him a surly nod, and he went on again—very likely, for aught I remember, eating the other apple.

"You see, Poskitt," he said, "there's one thing that's certain. A man must be either a man or a mouse. I won't be a mouse."

I was watching his face—I was at that time a big, ruddy-faced lad, with limbs that would have done credit to an offspring of Mars and Venus, and he looked the sort that would eventually end in a shop, with white cheeks above and a black tie under a sixpenny collar—and a strange revulsion came to me, farmer and landsman though I was. And I let him go on.

"I won't be a mouse, Poskitt!" he said, with a certain amount of determination. "I'll be a man! I'll make money. Now, what do you think the best way to make money, Poskitt?"

I don't think I made any answer then.

"I've thought it all out, Poskitt," he resumed. "You see, there are all sorts of professions and trades. Well, if you go into a profession, you've got to spend a great deal of money before you can make any. And in some trades you have to lay out a good deal before you can receive any profit. But there are trades,

Poskitt, in which you get your money back very quickly—with profit. Now, do you know, Poskitt, the only trades are those which are dependent on what people *want*. You can't live without food, or clothes, or boots. Food, Poskitt, is the most important thing, isn't it? And why I talked to you is because I think you're the wisest boy in the school—which trade would you recommend me to enter upon?"

"Go and be a butcher!" I answered. "Like your father."

He shook his head in mild and deprecating fashion.

"I don't like the smell of meat," he said. "No—I shall take up some other line."

Then, as the smell of dinner came from the dining-room, he added the further remark that as our parents paid Doctor Scott regularly once a quarter, we ought to have our money's worth, and so walked away to receive his daily share of it.

III

Samuel Edward Wilkinson duly left school, and became, of his own express will, an apprentice to a highly respectable grocer who enlarged upon his respectability by styling himself a tea merchant and an Italian warehouseman. The people who visited the shop (which was situate in a principal street in an important seaport town) were invariably impressed by the powder-blueness of the sign and by the red-goldness of the letters which stood out so plainly from the powder-blue. It had a cachet of its own, and the proprietor had two daughters. But Samuel Edward was then scarcely over fourteen years of age, and as his parents and the proprietor were of a distinctly Dissenting nature, his time was passed much more in stealing sugar-candy out of newly-opened boxes, and in attending prayer-meetings at the nearest chapel, than in following the good example of London 'prentices of the other centuries. In fact, by the time Samuel Edward Wilkinson was nineteen years of age, he was not merely a money-grubber, but that worst of all things—a tradesman who looks upon God Almighty and the Bible as useful weights to put under an illegal scale. And as Samuel Edward gained more of his experience in the knowledge of his fellow make-weighters, the more he began to believe less in his fellow-men—with the natural result that certain women who were not his fellows suffered.

As he grew up, Samuel Edward, naturally, had to live somewhere else. His master had no room in his house for apprentices who had approached to maturity. But, like all masters of that early-Victorian age, he knew where accommodation

in a highly Christian family was to be had, and Samuel Edward found himself *en famille* with a middle-aged dressmaker and a pretty child whose sweet sixteenity was much more appealing than the maturer charms of his master's daughters. Samuel Edward was not without good looks, and the child fell in love with him, and remained so for longer years than she had counted upon. But Samuel Edward was as philandering in love as he was pertinacious in business, and the idea of marriage was not within his immediate purview.

"At what age do you think, a man ought to marry, Poskitt?" he said to me during one of his periodical visits to the old village, he being then about two-and-twenty.

"When he feels inclined, and means it," said I.

"Of course, Poskitt, a man should never marry unless he marries money," he continued. "For a young man in my position, now, what would you say the young woman ought to be able to bring?"

I had sufficient common sense even at that age to make no reply to this question. I let him go on, silent under his sublime selfishness.

"Don't you think, Poskitt, that it's only right that when a man marries a woman he should expect her to make a certain amount of compensation?" he said. "It's a very serious thing, is marriage, you know, Poskitt. Anybody with my ambition—which is to be a man and not a mouse, or, in other words, to pay twenty shillings in the pound, and keep myself out of the workhouse—has to look forward a good deal. Now there's a young lady that I know of—where I lodge, in fact—that's very sweet on me, but I don't think her mother could give her more than a couple of hundred, and, of course, that's next to nothing. You see, Poskitt, I want to have a business of my own, and you can't get a business without capital. And money's very hard to make, Poskitt. I think—I really think—I shall put off the idea of getting married."

"That's the very wisest thing you can do," I said. "But you'd better tell the young lady so."

"Well, you see, Poskitt," he answered, stroking his chin, "the fact is—there are two young ladies. The other one is—my cousin Keziah. Now, of course, I know Keziah will have money when her father dies, but then I don't know when he will die. If I could tell exactly when he'll die, and how much Keziah will have, I should make up my mind—as it is, I think I shall have to wait. After all, it really doesn't make such a great deal of difference—one woman is about as good as another so far as marriage is concerned, Poskitt, isn't she? The money's the main thing."

"Why don't you go and find a rich heiress, then?" I asked.

"Ah!" he replied. "I only wish I could, Poskitt! But you must remember that I've no advantages. My father's only a butcher, and trade is trade, after all. You've

great advantages over me—your people own their land—you're nobs compared to what I am. But I shall make myself a man, Poskitt. There's only one thing in the world that's worth anything, and that's money. I'm going to make money."

IV

I never saw Samuel Edward Wilkinson again for a great many years—in fact, not until he came back to the village to marry his cousin Keziah. It was then publicly announced that Samuel and Keziah had been engaged since early youth—but anybody who knew anything was very well aware of the truth that the marriage was now hastened because Keziah's father was dead and had left her a thousand pounds. During those intervening years Samuel Edward had been steadily pursuing his way towards his conception of manhood. He had spent several years in London, and never wore anything in the way of head-covering but a silk hat.

"Yes, Poskitt," he said, "it's taken me a long time, but I've saved enough money at last—with Keziah's little fortune thrown in, of course—to buy my first master's business. It's a very serious thing, is business, you know, Poskitt, and so is marriage. But Keziah's a capable girl, you know, Poskitt—very capable."

As Keziah was then quite forty years of age, her capability was undoubted, but it seemed to me that Samuel Edward had been a long time making up his mind.

"And where's the young lady of the early days?" I asked him.

He stroked his whiskers and shook his head.

"Well, you know, Poskitt," he replied, "it's a very unfortunate thing that she, of course, resides in the very town where I've bought my business."

"Is she married?" I asked.

"No," he answered, "no—she's not married, Poskitt. Of course I couldn't think of marrying her when Keziah was able to put her hands on a thousand pounds. After all, everybody's got to look after Number One. It's a very anxious time with me just now, Poskitt, I do assure you. What with getting married and setting up a business, I feel a great deal of responsibility. If you're ever our way (and I expect you'll be coming to the cattle markets), call in, and I'll show you the improvements I've made. It's a very fine position, Poskitt, but it's a difficult thing in these days for a man to get his own."

V

Samuel Edward's name duly appeared in blazing gilt on the powder-blue of the old sign, and he and Keziah settled down in a suburban street in company with a handmaiden and a black-and-tan terrier. Their lives were discreet and orderly, and they went to the particular Dissenting community which they affected at least once every Sabbath Day. At eight o'clock every morning Samuel Edward repaired to business; at seven in the evening he returned home to pour out his woes to Keziah. One of his apprentices had done this; an assistant had done that; a customer had fled, leaving a bill unpaid. Keziah, who was as keen on money-making as her husband, was invariably sympathetic in these matters, which were about the only things she understood, apart from her knowledge that her thousand pounds was in the business. She and Samuel Edward were both resolved on making money.

And suddenly came a thunderstorm over their sky. The little dressmaking lady, having been formally engaged to Samuel Edward for long years, finding herself jilted, suddenly awoke to the knowledge that she had a spirit, and caused the faithless one to be served with a writ for breach of promise. And Samuel Edward's men of law, going into the matter, told him that he had no defence, and would have to pay.

Samuel Edward took to his bed, and refused to be comforted. Keziah wept, entreated, cajoled, threatened—nothing was of use. All was over, in Samuel Edward's opinion. The other side wanted the exact amount represented by Keziah's dowry—one thousand pounds. Samuel Edward lay staring at the stencilled wall-paper, and decided that life was a distinct disappointment. He would die.

Then Keziah took matters in hand. She, with the help of an astute man, paid the thousand pounds—whereupon the little dressmaker, who was still well under forty, promptly married another. And then Keziah literally tore Samuel Edward out of bed, shook him into life, and gave him to understand that from that day forward he would have to work harder, earlier, and later than he had ever done before. And Samuel Edward fell to—under a ceaseless and never-varying supervision.

VI

"I'm a warm man, you know, Poskitt," he said to me many a long year after that.

"A warm man, sir! There's nobody knows except myself, Poskitt, how much I have. No, sir! Made it all, you know. Look at my business, Poskitt!—one of the biggest and best businesses in the country. Twenty different establishments. Four hundred employees. Bring my own tea from Ceylon and China in my own ships. All the result of energy, Poskitt—no sitting still with me, as you rustics do—no, sir!"

Now let us analyze what this man really was. Because Keziah literally drilled him into the pulling of himself together after his first great slap in the face, he began to amass money, and very soon so deepened his boyish instincts that money became his fetish. Money—money—money—nothing but money! He estimated the value of a man by the depth of that man's purse; he thoroughly believed, with the Northern Farmer, that the poor in a lump are bad. And at last he was a very rich man indeed—and then found, as all such men do, that he had no power to enjoy his wealth. He could travel—and see nothing, for he did not understand what he saw. He could buy anything he liked—and have no taste for it. The little dressmaker had children—he had none. And as his wealth increased, his temper grew sour. He had never read anything beyond his trade journal and his newspaper, and therefore he had nothing to think about but his money.

And so I come back to what my old friend said in his bluff Yorkshire fashion—

"Doän't think ower much about makkin' Brass! It's a good thing to mak' Brass, and a good thing to be in possession on it, but Brass is neyther here nor theer unless ye ware it on yer friends."

And whether Samuel Edward Wilkinson considered in the end of his days that he had made a man of himself, or whether he had, after all, a sneaking idea that he was little more than a mouse, I can't say. But his great idea (that he could buy so many people up ten times over and feel none the worse) had a certain pathos in that fact, that even to his dull brain there came at times the conviction that when the end came he would be as poor as any mouse that ever crept into its hole.

CHAPTER XIII
A DEAL IN ODD VOLUMES

It was baking-day at Low Meadow Farm, and the kitchen being rendered unusu-

ally hot by the fact that it was also a blazing afternoon in July, Mrs. Maidment, in the intervals of going to the oven, sat in a stout elbow-chair at the kitchen door and fanned herself with her apron. She was a comfortably built lady of at least fifty, and heat told upon her, as she had remarked several times since breakfast. Her placid, moon-like countenance, always rosy, was now as fiery as a winter afternoon's sun, and when she was not fanning herself she mopped her brow with one of her late husband's handkerchiefs, which she had taken from a drawer in the press as being larger than her own, and therefore more suitable for the purpose.

While she sat at the door Mrs. Maidment glanced at the prospect before her—at the garden, the orchard, the fields beyond where the crops were already whitening to harvest. Her thoughts were of a practical nature.

"I'm sure if Maidment can look down from Above," she murmured, "he'll say it's all in very good order. He never could abide naught that were not in proper order, couldn't Maidment. And if we only get a good harvest——"

At that moment the widow's thoughts were interrupted by the sudden clicking of the side gate. She turned and saw a strange man leading an equipage into the yard. The equipage consisted of a very small pony, which looked as if a generous feed of corn would do it good, and of a peculiarly constructed cart, very shallow in body, and closed in at the top by two folding doors—it resembled nothing so much, in fact, as a cupboard laid flat-wise and provided with wheels. As for the person who led in this strange turn-out, and at whom Mrs. Maidment was staring very hard, he was a somewhat seedy-looking gentleman in a frock-coat which was too large and trousers which were too short; there was a slight cast in his right eye, but there was no mistaking the would-be friendliness of his smile. He bowed low as he drew the pony towards Mrs. Maidment, and he removed a straw-hat and revealed a high forehead and a bald head. Mrs. Maidment stared still harder.

"Good-afternoon, ma'am," said the stranger, bowing again. "Allow me to introduce myself, ma'am, as a travelling bookseller—it's a new departure in the book trade, and one that I hope to do well in. Permit me to show you my stock, ma'am—all the newest volumes of the day by the most famous authors."

He threw back the folding-doors of his cart with a flourish and stepped aside. The July sun flashed its fierce beams on row upon row of flashily-bound, high-coloured volumes in green and scarlet and much fine gold.

"The very latest, I assure you, ma'am," said their vendor.

Mrs. Maidment fanned herself and gazed at the glory before her.

"Well, I don't know, master," she said. "I'm not one for reading myself, except the newspaper and a chapter in the Bible of a Sunday. But my daughter's fond of her book—she might feel inclined. Here, Mary Ellen!—here's a man at the

door selling books."

Miss Mary Ellen Maidment, a comely damsel of nineteen with bright eyes and peach-like cheeks, emerged expectant from the kitchen. The itinerant bookseller greeted her with more bows and smiles.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Mary Ellen, lifting up her hands. "What a lot of beautiful books!"

"Your ma said you were fond of your book, miss," said the owner of this intellectual treasure mine. "Yes, miss, this is an especially fine line. What's your taste, now, miss? Poetry?"

"I like a good piece," answered Mary Ellen.

The itinerant selected two gorgeously bound volumes, and deftly balancing them on the palm of one hand, pointed to their glories with the outstretched forefinger of the other.

"'The Complete Poetical Works of Mrs. H*ee*mans,'" he said. "A very sweet thing that, miss—one of the best articles in the poetry line." He pointed to the other. "'The Works of the late Eliza Cook.' A very superior production that, miss. It was that talented lady who wrote 'The Old Arm-Chair,' of which you have no doubt heard."

"I learnt it once at school," said Mary Ellen. "Have you got any tales?"

"Tales, miss—yes, miss," replied the vendor, setting Mrs. Hemans and Miss Cook aside, and selecting a few more volumes. "Here's a beautiful tale by the talented Emma Jane Worboise, the most famous authoress of her day."

"Is there any love in it?" asked Mary Ellen.

"My daughter," broke in Mrs. Maidment, "likes books with love matters and lords and ladies in 'em—she reads pieces of 'em to me at nights."

"That, ma'am, is the only sort I carry," said the book-proprietor. "Now, miss, just let me show you——"

In the end Mary Ellen purchased one tale which dealt with much love and many lords and ladies, and another which the seller described as a pious work with a strong love interest, and recommended highly for Sunday reading. She also bought Mrs. Hemans, because on turning over her pages she saw several lines which she thought were pretty. And while she went up-stairs to fetch her purse Mrs. Maidment asked the stranger inside to drink a jug of ale. One can imagine his sharp glance round that old farmhouse kitchen, with its lovely old oak furniture, its shining brass and pewter, its old delf-ware....

"You don't happen to have any old books that you want to clear out of the way, do you, ma'am?" he said, when he had been paid, and was drinking his ale. "I buy anything like that—there's lots of people glad to get rid of them. I've a sack full of 'em now under the cart there. Of course, they're worth nothing but waste paper price. That's what I have to sell them at, ma'am."

"Why, there's some old books in that chest there," said Mrs. Maidment, pointing to an old chest in the deep window-seat. "I'm sure I've oft said we'd burn 'em, for they're that old and printed so queer that nobody can read 'em. Let him look at 'em, Mary Ellen."

What treasures were they that the wandering merchant's knowing eyes gazed upon? He gazed upon them for some time, according to the eye-witnesses, before he spoke, examining each book with great care.

"Aye, well, ma'am," he said at last. "Of course, as you say, nobody could read them now-a-days. I'll tell you what—I'll give miss here three new books out of the cart for them, and you can pick for yourself, miss!"

Mary Ellen exclaimed joyfully—and the old books went into a sack.

It was not until the next year that a Summer Boarder from London took up temporary quarters at Low Meadow Farm. According to the account which Mrs. Maidment gave to her gossips of him he was a very quiet gentleman who, when he wasn't rambling about the fields and by the streams, was reading in the garden, and when he wasn't reading in the garden was writing in the parlour. And the books he had brought with him, she said, were more than the parson had.

One day, the Summer Boarder, rummaging in a cupboard in his bedroom, saw, on a top-shelf, an old, dust-covered book, and took it down and knocked the dust off and opened it. And then he sank in a chair, gasping. There, in his hand, lay a perfect copy of a fifteenth-century book, so rare that there is no copy of it in either the British Museum or in the Bodleian Library—no, nor at the Vatican!

He stared at it for a long time, and then, carrying it as some men would carry a rare diamond, he went down to the kitchen, where Mrs. Maidment was making plum-pies.

"This is a queer old book which I found in my cupboard, Mrs. Maidment," he said. "May I look at it?"

"Aye, and welcome, sir!" said Mrs. Maidment. "And keep it, too, sir, if you'll accept of it. Eh, we'd a lot of old stuff like that in that box there in the window-place, but last year——" And then the Summer Boarder heard the story of the travelling bookseller.

"And I'm sure, sir, it were very kind of the man," concluded Mrs. Maidment, "and I've always said so, to give Mary Ellen three new books, and bound so beautiful, for naught but a lot of old rubbish that nobody could read!"

Then the Summer Boarder went out into the garden and faced a big Moral

Problem.

CHAPTER XIV
THE CHIEF MAGISTRATE

I

I suppose there never was a man in the world who was as full of pride as Abraham Kellet was on the morning of the day which was to see him made Mayor of Sicaster. That particular 9th of November, as I remember very well, was more than usually dismal and foggy—there were thick mists lying all over the lowlands and curling up the hill-sides as I drove into the town to take part in the proceeding of the day (for I was an old school-fellow of Abraham's, and he had graciously invited me to witness his election), but I warrant that to his worship-to-be no July day ever seemed so glorious nor no May-day sun ever so welcome as the November greyness. All men have their ambitions—Abraham's one ambition since boyhood had been to wear the mayoral chain, the mayoral robes, to sit in the mayoral seat, to be the chief magistrate of his adopted town, to know himself its foremost burgess, to have everybody's cap raised to him, to have himself addressed by high and low as Mr. Mayor. It was a worthy ambition, and he had worked hard for it—now that at last he was within an ace of fulfilling it his pride became apparent to everybody. It was not a vaunting pride, nor the pride which is puffed up, but the pride of a man who knows that he has succeeded. He was a big-framed, broad-countenanced man, Abraham Kellet, who put down a firm foot and showed a portly front, and after it was settled that he was to be the next Mayor of Sicaster his tread was firmer than ever and his front more portly as he trod the cobble-paved streets of the little town. I can see him now—a big, fine figure of a man of not much over fifty, his six feet of height invariably habited in the best broadcloth; his linen as scrupulously white and glossy as he himself was scrupulously shaven; his boots as shining as the expensive diamond ring which he wore on the little finger of his left hand. Decidedly a man to fill a mayoral chair with dignity and fulness, was Abraham Kellet.

I thought as I rode into Sicaster that eventful morning of the story of its new mayor's life. Like myself, Abraham was the son of a farmer, but whereas

my father was a man of considerable substance, his was a poor man who had to work hard, early and late, to make a living out of a farm the land of which was poor. I have always had an idea that it was my father who paid for Abraham's schooling at Sicaster Grammar School, though it is but an idea, because he was the last man in the world to let his left hand know what his right hand did. Anyway, Benjamin Kellet was a poor man, as things go, and had a growing family to keep, Abraham being the eldest, and none of his other children got more education than the village school afforded for the customary fee of two-pence a-week. Why Abraham went from the village school to Sicaster Grammar School was because he was regarded as a very promising youth, whose education ought to be improved. The village school-master, in fact, when Abraham was twelve years old, said that he could not teach him any more—no very great thing in those days when nothing was taught but reading, writing and arithmetic, with perhaps a smattering of English history and a little grammar and geography—and that it was no use his staying any longer at the red-tiled school-house, which lay under the shadow of the church. Possibly the parson and my father (who was vicar's churchwarden for many a long year before his death) put their heads together about Abraham. However the case may have been, Abraham was sent to Sicaster Grammar School with the understanding that he was to remain there two years, when it would be time for him to be apprenticed to some trade. He made his entrance there the same day that I did—that was where I got to know him better. I had known him, of course, all along, but not intimately, because my mother had insisted on having a governess for my two sisters—both dead now, many a long year ago!—and so I had never gone to the village school, nor had I mixed much with the village boys. But when I was nine years old, my father said I had had quite enough of apron-strings, and I must go to Sicaster Grammar School, as soon as the next half began.

"To Sicaster Grammar School!" said my mother, speaking as if my father had said I was to go to the Cannibal Islands. "Why, Sicaster's six miles off! The child can't walk twelve miles a day and learn his lessons as well."

"Who wants him to?" asked my father. "He can have the little pony and phaeton and drive himself in and out. I'll buy another for you and the girls. And there's that eldest lad of Keller's—he's going, too, and he can drive with him."

"And his dinner?" said my mother.

"Give him it in a basket every day," replied my father. "And—put plenty in for two. He can share with young Kellet."

That was how I came to go to school with Abraham Kellet. I used to set off with the little pony-phaeton at a quarter to eight every morning and pick Abraham up at the end of the lane which led to his father's farm. At first he used to bring his dinner with him, but it soon became an understood thing that his

dinner was in my basket—we made no pretence, and had no false ideas about it on either side. We used to jog into Sicaster with great content, put the pony and trap up at the King George and go to school. In winter we used to eat our meat pasties and our fruit pies and drink our milk in one of the class-rooms; in summer we spread our cloth under the trees on a certain knoll in the play-ground. And afternoon, school over we jogged home again as easily as we had come.

I have no great recollection of what I did at school, except that I had the usual healthy boy's dislike of mere book-learning, and was always unfeignedly glad when half-past four struck. Horses and dogs and the open air, cricket and fishing, and running after the fox-hounds when they came our way, appealed much more to me than anything else. I believe Abraham did most of my home exercises as we drove to and from school. As for himself he learned all he could—within certain limits. He would have nothing of Latin or Greek, but he slaved like a nigger at French, and during play-hours was always scheming to get into the company of the French teacher. He cared little about history, but a good deal about geography—French, arithmetic, and, above all, book-keeping were Abraham's great loves. His handwriting brought tears of joy and pride into the eyes of the writing-master; his figures might have been printed; his specimens of book-keeping would have done credit to a chartered accountant.

The reason of Abraham's devotion to these particular subjects was this—he had set his mind on being a—Draper. Not a small, pettifogging draper, to deal in cheap lines of goods, but a draper of the big sort who would call himself Silk Mercer. There stood in the centre of the market-place at Sicaster such an establishment—it was the daily sight of it which inspired Abraham's dreams. A solid, highly respectable establishment it was—though it would be thought old-fashioned now, it was considered to be something very grand then, and in its windows were set out the latest London and Paris fashions. There was a severely plain sign in black and gold over the windows under the Royal Arms, with an equally plain inscription—Paulsford and Tatham, Silk Mercers and Drapers to H.M. the Queen.

"That's where I mean to be apprenticed, Poskitt," said Abraham, as we set out one afternoon across the market-place. "That's the trade I fancy. No farming for me. Farming! Slaving all day after a plough and coming home up to your eyes in clay and as tired as a dog—and then nothing to show at the year-end! No, thank you!"

"That's not my father's life," I said.

He shook his head knowingly.

"Your father's a rich man," he said. "I know. I keep my eyes open. No—I'm going into that business."

I looked at him, trying to imagine him behind a counter, selling laces and

ribbons. He was a big, heavy boy, whose clothes were always too small for him, and it seemed to me even then that it would look queer to see such big hands handling delicate things.

"That's why I give so much attention to figures and to French, you see, Poskitt," he said presently. "You can't get on in business unless you're good at figures and book-keeping, and if you can speak French you're at a great advantage over fellows who can't, because you stand a chance of being sent over to Paris to see and buy the latest fashions."

"Give me farming and a good horse and a good dog and gun!" said I.

"Yes," he said, "but you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth. I've got my way to make. I shall make it. I'll be Mayor of Sicaster some day."

The first step towards Abraham's attainment of that wish came when he left the Grammar School and was duly apprenticed to Messrs. Paulsford and Tatham. He was then fourteen, and because of his big frame, heavy countenance, and solemn expression, looked older. I used to see him in the shop sometimes when I went there with my mother or sisters—he assumed a tailed coat at a very early age and put on the true manner with it. His term of apprenticeship, as was usual in those days, was seven years—whether his indentures were cancelled or not I do not know, but he was buyer to the firm at eighteen and manager when he was twenty-one. He became known in Sicaster. His conduct was estimable, and everybody spoke well of him. Six days of the week found him at his post from eight to eight, and on Saturdays till ten; the seventh found him diligent in attendance on the services of the Church, and in teaching in the Sunday-school. He lodged with a highly-respectable widow lady, the relict of a deceased tradesman, and he was never known to pay anything but the most decorous attention to young women.

In this way ten years of Abraham's life passed—to all outward appearance with absolute smoothness. The wiseacres of Sicaster, especially those who congregated in snug bar-parlours and smoked their pipes and drank their grog of a winter's evening, wagged their heads and said that young Kellet must be saving a pretty penny, and that he well knew what he was about. And I believe that few people, either in Sicaster itself, or in the neighbourhood, were at all surprised when it was suddenly announced in the *Sicaster Sentinel* that the old-established business of Messrs. Paulsford and Tatham had, because of the great age and failing health of the sole remaining partner, Mr. Jonas Tatham, been sold to their manager, Mr. Abraham Kellet, who would in future carry it on in his own name.

So now the old sign came down and a new one went up, and Abraham was no longer the watchful, ubiquitous manager, but the lynx-eyed omnipresent master. The look of power came into his eyes and manner; he trod the streets and crossed the market-place with the tread of a man who had a stake in the

town. Men who knew him as an apprentice boy were quick to "sir" him; some, to cap him; he had shown that he could make money. Everybody knew now that he was going to write his name in large letters on the rolls of Sicaster, whereon there were already a good many names that were not of inconsiderable note.

And then, just as Abraham seemed to have settled down to the opening stages of a brilliant commercial career of his own building, a great calamity happened. It happened just when it might have been least expected to happen—for all things seemed auspicious for Abraham's greatness. He had bought a handsome house and was furnishing it handsomely. He had just become engaged to the daughter and only child of Alderman John Chepstow, who was a heiress in her own right and might be expected to inherit her father's considerable fortune in due time. Fortune seemed to be smiling upon him in her widest and friendliest fashion. Suddenly she frowned.

One night the quiet, sleeping streets of Sicaster were suddenly roused to hitherto unknown noise and activity. The rushing of feet on the pavement, the rattle of horses' hoofs on the cobble-stones, the throwing up of casements, the inarticulate cries of frightened people—all these things culminated in one great cry—*Fire*! And men and women rushing into the market-place saw that the stately old shop, Paulsford and Tatham's for sixty years, and Abraham Kellet's for two, was on fire from top to bottom, and that high above the holocaust of flame a thick cloud of black smoke rose slowly towards the moon-lit sky.

Kellet's, late Paulsford and Tatham's, was burnt to the ground ere the daylight came. There was one small fire-engine in the basement of the Town Hall, which spat at the fire as a month-old kitten spits at a mastiff, and when the brigades arrived from Clothford, twelve miles away in one direction, and Wovefield, eight in another, there was little but a few walls. They who saw it, told me that Abraham Kellet, arriving early on the scene and seeing the hopelessness of the situation, took up his stand on the steps of the market-cross, opposite, and watched his property burn until the roof fell in. He never uttered a word all that time, though several spoke to him, and when all was over, he turned away home. Then a reporter tugged at his elbow, and asked him if he was insured. He stared at the man for a moment as if he was mad; then he nodded his head.

"Yes—yes!" he answered. "Oh, yes!"

Everybody was very sorry for Abraham Kellet—although he was insured against fire it seemed to the Sicaster folk that a disaster like this must cripple his business. But they did not know Abraham. He seemed to be the only person who was really unconcerned, and he immediately developed a condition of extraordinary activity. There was a large building in the town which had been built as a circus—before ten o'clock of the morning after the fire Abraham had taken this and had sent circulars round announcing that his business would be carried on

there until his new premises were built. He added that the temporary premises would be ready for the reception of customers in four days. Then he completely disappeared. People laughed, and said that he must have lost his reason. How could he have temporary premises open in four days when every rag of his stock had perished? How could he make that old circus, damp and musty, into a place where people could go shopping?

But Abraham was one of those men who refuse to believe in impossibilities. How he managed to do it, no one ever knew who was not actively concerned. But when the temporary premises were opened the old circus had been transformed into a sort of bazaar, and there was such a stock as had never been seen in the old shop. The whole town crowded there, and the county families came, and everybody wanted to congratulate Abraham. But having seen the temporary premises fairly going, Abraham was off on another track—he was busy with architects about the plans of the new shop. He laid the foundation stone of that himself, well within a month of the big fire.

The new shop was finished and opened just twelve months later—competent critics said it was as fine as a London or Paris shop, excepting, of course, for size. The day after the opening Abraham married Miss Chepstow, and indulged himself with a week's holiday. Then Mr. and Mrs. Kellet settled down in their fine house to a life of money-making and social advancement. And Abraham in time had leisure to devote to municipal affairs and became a councillor, and then an alderman, and at last reached the height of his ambition and saw the mayoral chair and chain and robes before him—close at hand.

"*I've got my way to make. I shall make it. I'll be Mayor of Sicaster some day!*"

II

I thought of all those things, as one will, half-unconsciously, think of memories when something recalls them, as I rode into Sicaster that chilly and foggy November morning to take part in the grand doings which always mark the election of a new mayor in that historic town. There would be ample opportunity for Abraham to display his greatness. First the election in the Council Chamber in the Town Hall; then the procession through the market-place to the parish church; finally, the mayoral banquet in the evening—Abraham, I said to myself, thinking of the time when I used to drive him to school and he shared my dinner, would (as we say in these parts) be in full pomp all day.

I was chilled with my ride, and when I had seen my mare stabled at the

King George I turned into the bar-parlour to take a glass of whisky. There were several townsmen hob-a-nobbing there, as they always do when there is a general holiday in the town (and not seldom when there isn't!), and, of course, all the talk was of the mayor-elect. And one man, a tradesman, who as I knew (from sad experience on market-days) was uncommonly fond of hearing himself talk, was holding forth on the grandeur of those careers which begin at the bottom of the ladder and finish at the top.

"The self-made man, gentlemen," he was saying when I entered, "the self-made man is the king of men! What is a Peer of the Realm, gentlemen—yes, I will even go further, and with all respect say, what is the Sovereign in comparison with the man who has made himself out of nothing? Our worthy mayor-elect——"

"Why," said another man, interrupting the wordy one and espying me, "I believe Mr. Poskitt there used to drive Abraham into school in Sicaster here when they were lads together. Wasn't that so, Mr. Poskitt, sir?"

"You are quite right, sir," I replied, "and Mr. Kellet used to say in those days that he would be Mayor of Sicaster."

"Aye, look there now, gentlemen!" exclaimed the loquacious one. "That just proves the argument which——"

But I gave no heed to him—as I have said, I got enough of him on market-days, and my attention had been attracted to a man, a stranger (you know how quickly we country-folk always spot a man who does not belong to us), who sat in a corner of the bar-parlour, which, as I should say, you are all very well aware, is a dimly-lighted room. He sat there, apart from everybody, a glass on the table before him, a cigar in his hand—and the cigar had been lighted, and had gone out, and while the other men talked he made no attempt to relight it, but sat quietly listening. He was an oldish man, well dressed in clothes which were, I considered, of foreign cut and material; his hair was grey and rather long and tangled about his eyes, and he wore a wide-brimmed hat well pulled down over his brows. "An artist gentleman," I thought, and then thought no more about him and finished my whisky and went out into the market-place.

My invitation was to Abraham's private house, from which, in accordance with custom, he was to be escorted by a few private friends to the Town Hall at eleven o'clock. It was a fine, indeed a noble house, standing in the market-place exactly in front of his shop, and the interior was as grand as the exterior—paintings and gildings and soft carpets and luxuries on all sides. Abraham kept a man-servant by that time, and I was conducted in state up a fine staircase to the drawing-room, where I found a goodly company already assembled—the Vicar, and the Town Clerk, and some of the aldermen and big-wigs of the place, and Abraham in his usual—but new—attire of broadcloth and white linen, and his wife

and two daughters in silks and satins, and everything very stately. There were rare wines set out on the tables, but I took a drop more whisky. And presently Abraham grasped my arm and led me across to one of the windows overlooking the market-place.

"Poskitt!" he said, in a low voice, "do you remember when you used to drive me into school and share your dinner with me?"

"I do," said I.

He waved his hand—a big white hand, with a fine diamond ring sparkling on it—towards the shop and then around him.

"Didn't I say I would be Mayor of Sicaster?" he said.

"You did," said I.

He put his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat—a favourite trick of his when he stood in the middle of his shop, looking about him—and spread himself out like a turkey-cock.

"And before noon I shall be, Poskitt!" he said. "The poor lad has become the great——"

He suddenly broke off there, and I saw his broad countenance, which was usually ruddy, turn as white as paste. He leaned forward, staring through the window with eyes that looked like to start out of his head. And following his glance I saw, standing on the opposite side of the market-place, and staring curiously at Kellet's house, the stranger whom I had seen a quarter of an hour before in the bar-parlour of the King George. He looked from window to window, up, down, and sauntered carelessly away.

Abraham Kellet pulled himself together and glanced suspiciously at me. There was a queer look on his face and he tried to smile—and at the same time he put his hand to his heart.

"Don't say anything, Poskitt," he said, looking round. "A slight spasm—it's nothing. The excitement, eh, Poskitt? And—it's time we were making a move."

He went back to the middle of the room and asked his company to join him in a final glass before setting out for the Town Hall, at the same time bidding his wife and daughters to be off to their places in the gallery set apart for ladies. And I noticed when he helped himself to a drink that he filled a champagne glass with brandy, and drank it off at a gulp, and that his hand trembled as he lifted the glass to his lips. Others, no doubt, noticed that too, and set it down to a very natural nervousness. He laughed, somewhat too boisterously, at an old-fashioned joke which the Vicar (who was as fond of his fun as he was of old port) made—that, too, might have been put down to nervousness. But I attributed neither the shaking hand nor the forced laughter to nervousness—it seemed to me that Abraham Kellet was frightened.

I told you that it was the custom in those days for the mayor-elect to be

accompanied from his private residence to the Town Hall by a company of his friends—it was a further custom that each man walking in this little informal procession should carry what we then called a nosegay, and is now-a-days called a bouquet, of flowers. And so as we filed down the wide staircase of Abraham Kellet's house, each of us received at the hands of the man-servant a fine posy of such autumn blooms as were procurable. Thus decorated we went out into the market-place, passing between two groups of people who had gathered on either side the entrance to see the mayor-elect leave his house. They set up a hearty cheer as Abraham's burly figure came in sight, and that cheering continued all the way to the Town Hall, with an occasional blessing thrown in from old women who hoped, later in the day, to be sharers in the new mayor's bounty. Abraham walked through the market-place with erect head and smiling face, nodding and bowing right and left, but I, walking just behind and a little on one side of him, saw that he kept looking about him as if he were searching for a face.

The Town Hall was full when Abraham's party arrived—full, except for the seats which they had reserved for the favoured. Those for our party were in the front row of the right-hand gallery—when I had got into mine I took a leisurely survey of the scene. The Town Hall at Sicaster is a chamber of some size and pretensions—at one end is a wide and deep platform, behind which is a sculpture representing the surrender of Sicaster Castle at the time of the Civil War, and upon this platform, arranged in their due order of precedence, were already assembled the aldermen and councillors of the borough. They sat in semicircles round the platform—in the middle space stood a velvet-covered table on which were set out the ancient insignia of Sicaster, the mace, the cap of maintenance, the seal, the Bible. Behind this table were set three chairs, the one in the middle being placed on a sort of dais, a much more imposing one than those which flanked it. In front of the platform were seats for the grandees of the town, extending half-way down the hall, the remainder of which was open to the public, who had already packed it to its full extent. The right-hand gallery, in which I sat, was reserved for friends of members of the corporation; the opposite gallery for ladies, and in the front row there, immediately overlooking the platform, were Mrs. Kellet and her daughters, proud and beaming. The gallery at the rear of the hall was, like the lower half below, thrown open to the public. And glancing its packed rows over I saw, sitting immediately over the clock in the centre of the balustrade, the man whom I had seen in the King George and afterwards staring at Abraham Kellet's house.

He was sitting with his elbows fixed on the balustrade in front of him, and his chin propped in his hands, staring intently at the scene and the people. It seemed to me (and even twenty years ago, when I was only a matter of fifty odd years old, I flattered myself a bit on reading people's faces!) that he was

recognizing, calling to mind, noting the differences which time makes. Without moving body or head, he let his eyes slowly search the galleries on either side of him just as they were searching the platform when I first saw him. And I began to wonder with a vague uneasiness who this man was and what he did there. Was he a mere stranger, actuated by curiosity to see an old English ceremony, or was he there of set purpose? And why had Abraham Kellet been moved at sight of him? For I was sure he had.

There was a bustle and a stir, and the outgoing Mayor, accompanied by his deputy, the Town Clerk, and the other officials came on to the platform, accompanied by Abraham Kellet and two or three other aldermen, who passed to their usual seats. I saw Abraham, as he sat down, glance around the crowded hall with that glance which I had noticed in the marketplace. And I saw, too, that he did not see the man who sat over the clock. But now that Abraham was there, on the platform, in his aldermanic robes, the man had no eyes for anything but him. He watched him as I have seen a cat watch the hole out of which it knows a mouse is going to emerge.

The proceedings began. As Abraham's proposer and seconder moved his election, Abraham seemed to swell out more and more and his wife's beam assumed a new dignity. All the civic virtues were his, according to Alderman Gillworthy; it was he who, as Chairman of the Watch Committee, had instituted a new system of clothing for the police; it was he who, as Chairman of the Waterworks Committee, had provided Sicaster with pure drinking water. Mr. Councillor Sparcroft dealt more with his moral virtues, remarking that Alderman Gillworthy had exhausted the list of their friend's municipal triumphs. He reminded the Council that Abraham was a shining example of rectitude, and drew the eyes of the whole assemblage on Mrs. Kellet and her daughters when he spoke of him feelingly as a model husband and father. He referred to him as a Sunday-school teacher of well over thirty years' standing; as vicar's churchwarden for over twenty; he was connected with all the benevolent societies, and the poor knew him. Then the councillor, who was celebrated for his oratory, turned to the business side of Abraham's history and sketched his career in trenchant sentences and glowing colours. His humble origin—his early ambitions—his perseverance—his strenuous endeavours—his misfortune at a time when all seemed fair—his mounting, Phoenix-like, from the ashes—his steady climb up the mountain of success—his attainment of its topmost height—all these things were touched on by the councillor, who wound up a flowery speech with a quotation from Holy Scripture—"Seest thou a man diligent in business?—he shall stand before kings!"

There was no opposition to Abraham Kellet—the Council was unanimous. He was duly elected Mayor of Sicaster—the three hundred and seventy-fifth since

the old town received its charter.

I suppose there had never been such a moment of emotion in Abraham Kellet's life as when, duly installed in the mayoral chair, wearing the mayoral robes, invested with the mayoral chain, he rose to make his first speech as chief magistrate of Sicaster. For once the pomposity of manner which had grown upon him slipped away; he seemed to revert to a simple, a more natural self. He looked round him; he glanced at his wife and daughters; he caught my eye—it was a full moment before the applause which had greeted the Mayor's rising had died away that he could command himself to speak. When he spoke his first sentences were nervous and hesitating, but he gained confidence when he began to refer to Sparcroft's references to his career as a tradesman.

"You see before you one," he said, "who never knew what it was to fear a difficulty, who refused to believe in obstacles, who always meant to march on with the times, and who——"

He paused there for a second, for he was troubled with a slight cough that morning, and in that second a voice, penetrating, cold and sharp as steel and as merciless as the implacable avenger's hand when it drives steel home, rang out across the hall—

"*And who burned his shop in order to get the insurance money!*"

I have never had a clear recollection—no, I never had a clear realization—of what followed. I remember a sea of white, frightened faces, a murmur of voices, of seeing the man behind the clock stretching an accusing finger across the space between the gallery and the platform. And I remember Abraham Kellet, palsy-stricken, gripping the table before him and staring, staring at the accusing finger and the man behind it as one might stare at the Evil Thing. It seemed hours before that second passed and a cry, more like the cry of a lost soul than of a man, burst, dryly, hoarsely, from his lips—

"*Aynesley! Come back!*"

Then in all his mayoral finery he fell heavily across the table, and the mayoral chain rattled against the mace which had been carried before many an honest predecessor for twice two hundred years.

There was no procession to church that day and no mayoral banquet that night, but Sicaster had plenty to talk of, and it is a gossip-loving town. And the shameful story was all true. The fire of many a long year before was a clever piece of incendiarism on Abraham Kellet's part, and his manager Aynesley had detected his guilt and had been squared by Abraham, who had subsequently endeavoured, to put a nice phrase on it, to have him removed. And Aynesley had sworn revenge, and had worked and schemed until he, too, was a rich man—and he had

bided his time, waiting to pull Abraham from the pinnacle of his glory just as he reached it.

Vanity of vanities—all is vanity! It is time for our nightcaps.

GOOD-NIGHT.

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