

The Salamanca Corpus

VNIVERSITAS
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SALAMANTINI


Mark Guy Pearse's *Cornish Stories* (1884)

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CHRISTMAS EVE IN THE 'VIVID.'

[See page 133.

CORNISH STORIES.

BY

MARK GUY PEARSE,

AUTHOR OF 'DANIEL QUORM AND HIS RELIGIOUS NOTIONS,' 'SIMON JASPER,'
&c., &c.

Illustrated by Charles Tresidder.

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TO
George Smith, Esq.,
OF TREVU,
CAMBORNE, CORNWALL,
THIS BOOK
IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.

25

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
MR. AND MRS. ROGERS	3
HOW THEY GOT THE CHAPEL AT ST. PIRAN'S	53
UNCLE DICK CURNOW'S CONVERSION	91
A CORNISH GHOST STORY	121
SHOW US A SIGN	133
CHRISTMAS EVE IN THE 'VIVID'	141

Mr. and Mrs. Rogers,

A CHRISTMAS STORY.

B



MR. & MRS. ROGERS.

Chapter the First.

INTRODUCES US TO AN UNPROMISING COUPLE.



R. ROGERS, what part may I give you, Sir?' said Mrs. Rogers, stiffly—for Mrs. Rogers always carved.

She had knocked at the table with the handle of the carving-knife and said grace in a rapid monotone, and now, with the edges of her sleeves turned very lightly back, with a table-napkin pinned at each shoulder, she stood resting the knife and fork on the fowl waiting for her husband's choice. Her lips were pressed together closely, while her eyes looked down from her lofty vantage-ground upon little Mr. Rogers.

As it will take him some time to reply, we may stay at the head of the table a moment or two longer. A reserved looking and somewhat prudish body is this Mrs. Rogers, certainly; her hair, streaked with grey, going very straight and very far down on either side of the face; her nose rather sharply pointed; her mouth severely shut; a woman tall and angular; dressed in black, with lace mittens half covering the long bony fingers that patiently held the knife and fork till Mr. Rogers should announce his decision.

Mr. Rogers coughed faintly. It was a way he had—a kind of apology for having an opinion about it at all—a sort of nervous forerunner sent on to make peace for the slower idea that followed it far behind. Passing from Mrs. Rogers over dishes that gradually lessened in importance, you came finally to a gravy dish, and somewhere behind it you found little Mr. Rogers. At this moment he was putting his head first on one side and then on the other, as if the choice of parts lay between the right and left of the bird. Then he lifted his eyes, coughed again, and said very softly,

‘Thank you, Mrs. Rogers, I have no preference.’

Whereupon Mrs. Rogers immediately plunged the fork through the fowl, and proceeded to cut it up, precisely as if her husband had asked for it all.

Mr. Rogers was a little man, or rather he *looked* a very little man. The little hair he had, brushed very smoothly over his little head; with little eyes and a little insignificant nose, and—well, that really was all, except a grey coat, and a white neck-cloth fastened in the smallest of white bows. There are scores of men inches shorter who make themselves look inches taller than Mr. Rogers looked. Nobody could know him five minutes without coming somehow to speak of him, as everybody else did, as *little* Mr. Rogers.

Now, as neither will speak during the solemn hour of dinner, except for formal inquiries as to demand and supply, we may look about without losing much. Mr. Rogers had married his housekeeper and general manager; and Mrs. Rogers, housekeeper and general manager still, addressed and regarded her spouse as the master. He, fifty years old before he was married, and years older than that in ways and habits, kept himself

to himself as much as ever. Mrs. Rogers, of uncertain age, but very rigid, and of 'staid' habits, was a woman to whom the old routine was the only one that suggested itself. Still she fed the calves and made the butter, and Molly and Betty and Dick and Harry, who slouched about the kitchen when her back was turned, were driven to their work with sudden swiftness and vast show of energy by the sound of her step. Not that she was ever angry, never even scolded; but she herself had a quiet way of getting on, and seeing that others got on too, which somehow always woke the kitchen up. So that the change that the marriage made was little more than one of name. They never quarrelled, far from it. One might almost say that they weren't familiar enough for that. She never overstepped the old limits; and he never grumbled. Nor was either dissatisfied, by any means. Neither looked for or thought of the tenderness and attachment of love. It was a partnership, in which she brought housekeeping, and he brought a monthly allowance and a permanent shelter—an arrangement that was perfectly satisfactory to both.

So on this Christmas-eve they sat in silence eating their dinner; and afterward sat on either side of the fire in silence still—he deep in the pages of the local newspaper—the *Branford Journal*. The silence was broken occasionally, however, by a little insignificant snore, such as you would expect from such an insignificant little nose, and then by a start, and a cough as a sort of apology. At his feet the old sheep-dog was coiled, starting in his sleep, too, as if he caught the infection from his master; then blinking at the fire and stretching himself with a great gape. At *her* feet,

projecting somewhat plainly—for she liked her skirts to be well out of the way—the cat slept, and blinked, and slept again, whilst the mistress sat busily knitting a large, thick woollen article of some sort, holding off the work sometimes that she might see better to ‘take up’ her stitches, and then clicking on again as if to make up for lost time.

So that is all, good reader. Only a little insignificant man and a reserved, uninteresting woman! Ah, what poor stuff this humanity of ours is unless it is good looking, or in love, or somehow sensational. A man growing turnips and a woman feeding calves! What a humdrum, drowsy, common-place sort of thing life is unless it fights, or murders, or dreams, or sighs, or is either dreadful, or else sentimental! Why make so much ado about it while it lasts? Why make such moan about the ending of it all?



Chapter the Second.

ROMANTIC.

LITTLE Mr. Rogers rose and coughed timidly. The dog sprang up in a moment, with his head on one side and eyes fixed intently on the master. Passing round the great table on which the dessert still stood, Mr. Rogers reached the door, and disappeared with a tiny little cough—a sort of good-bye. No sooner was he gone than Mrs. Rogers looked round to make sure that the door was shut, and then began chattering away to herself, as if the pent-up words of the last three hours had only just found a tongue. She spread out the work upon her knees and smoothed it over.

‘That will do, pussy—won’t it? Poor old Jem, it will keep his rheumatics far away.’ Then, laying the thick woollen waistcoat on the table, she stooped and lifted the cat on her lap and stroked it, whilst puss stood up, swaying his tail gently and loudly purring. ‘Ah, you old rogue, who spoils you, eh? Do you love your old mistress, pussy?’ Putting his face towards her, as if to protest against any doubt, she pressed it to herself—‘Yes, yes, pussy—I believe it, you dear old thing.’

Suddenly the fire leapt up in eager flames, to shine in the strange tenderness that lit her eyes, and to see the sweetness and gentleness that softened her face into

something almost young and beautiful. It certainly was worth looking at.

'But come, pussy, we must not be idling here you know.' So, taking up her work, she smoothed her hair into its straightness, and arranged her mittens on her bony fingers. The glow was gone; the mouth shut up again tightly, and in a moment more the mistress was gone too.

It is too late to go out now, good reader. Besides, there is a misty chill in the air. So let us sit down here by the fire for a quiet talk. We shall not be disturbed.

'So, then, there is a heart in this reserved house-keeper, after all?' quoth the reader.

A heart, dear reader! there is that. One of the truest and most tender that ever beat, if we could only get at it. It was buried deep down more than twenty years ago, and every day since then has helped to cover it up more closely. There are little springs that find their way up out of its depths here and there, and now and then. But you might come and go for another twenty years and never know it.

Yes, it is twenty years ago, and ten years more than that since it began; for she was quite young, scarcely out of her teens, but tall and womanly beyond her age. Fred Trewin was home from his first cruise—a dashing, handsome lad, good-natured as the sun, but full of frolic that stupid people could not discern from vice.

She lived then at Penberthy, the only child of the old Squire there—old Squire Penberthy, who was as crabbed as he was rich. The villagers, slow enough in most things, came to see it very soon, and gossiped

to each other as to what 'the ould Squire would say if he knew that "Mast" Fred Trewin were a keepin' company along with Miss Charity.' So Fred came and went for eight long years of true and patient love—love on her part kept shut up and unsuspected, except in the brief days when he was at home. At last came promotion, and he could marry. So, bold as a lion and all eager in his love, scorning all that was underhand as much as she did, he came bravely in and asked the Squire that Charity should be his wife. The old Squire got into a furious rage, and brought upon himself a fit of apoplexy—the least mischievous ending that it could have had. But, nursed and watched by Charity, the old man got over it. Vexed as ever, he got back his senses sufficiently to alter his will, and left all he had to the distant cousin who inherited the estate, and showed his wrath further by not suffering his daughter to come near him. So he lingered on for two years, sinking slowly into dotage, always scowling at his daughter, and not suffering her presence in his room. Meanwhile, Captain Trewin had sailed again, and again returned. Frightened at her changed face, and angry at her father's harshness, he pressed Charity for marriage. But she refused to leave her father; so, faithful as ever, Fred had sailed again. Then the old Squire died; and Charity, left penniless, sought out a quiet place where nothing could remind her of her grief, and came here as housekeeper. Captain Trewin was never heard of again—gone down in some wild storm, leaving no word, no trace, anywhere. So years went by—leaden years, shutting up the love and tenderness of former days. Twenty years had gone. Then Charity, partly thinking that she

could help him better, and partly dreading the penniless old age that otherwise lay before her, had listened to Mr. Rogers' timid proposal, and now, as we have seen, was Mrs. Rogers.

So, good reader, uninteresting folks have hearts, if we have but skill to find them. Underneath the dull routine of making butter and of feeding calves there are treasured memories and deep heart longings—aye, and, thank Heaven, sometimes not memories only, but sweet dreamings and glow of ruddy hope. Bidy, the milkmaid, is woman too, as truly as my lady; and Tom, the ploughboy, whistles with joy of his sweet secret, just as if his heart didn't beat beneath a smock-frock.

'And Mr. Rogers,' asks the reader, 'What of him?'

Oh, not much. Brought up here in this bleak bit of North Cornwall, nearly twenty miles from any town, with a stretch of dreary moorland on one side, and nothing but the sea on the other, what could you expect? The old vicar, half-a-dozen scattered neighbours, and the quiet people in the village below, made up his world—except that two or three times a quarter the Methodist preacher came round to preach in the little village chapel, and called there to take a cup of tea on his way.

An only child, and left an orphan in early life, Mr. Rogers had been brought up under the care of a bachelor uncle, a Quaker—a man with whom reserve was the queen of virtues. To let your left hand know what your right hand did was a contemptible weakness. His example and precept had daily impressed upon the little lad committed to his care that joy and grief were sins; that pity and kindness, sympathy and in-

terest in other people really made up the root of all evil, and ought to be punished by the law as criminal offences—almost capital crimes. An extract from one of the manuscripts left by this intelligent and thoughtful old gentleman, who had been the promoter and proprietor of one of the earliest papers in those parts, may interest the reader.

‘The British law rightly holds that the *receiver* makes the thief, and metes out to the former the severer penalty. Is it not equally obvious to any man of reflection that *charity makes the beggar*? It is *pity* that creates the sense of *misfortune*; where otherwise it should be accepted as but an ordinary lot. It is *kindness* that first calls into existence, and then sustains a *sensitiveness*, alike in the giver and in the receiver, which renders men *susceptible* to *pain and misery*. Visit then the crime of the mendicant upon the true offender—the *Philanthropist*. Send him to prison as the creator of the *rogue and vagabond*.—He it is who provokes *pauperism* by rendering habits of *thrift and self-help* unnecessary. He places a premium upon *poverty, rags, and indolence*. Who should ever care to provide himself with oil and wine if a *Good Samaritan* be waiting at every turn of the road with this provision of the best quality and gratuitously supplied? If the sick and the insane are to be provided with hospitals and asylums, what *inducement* has any man to keep himself *healthy in body or mind*? Who shall ever trouble to save for old age, if Parliament should ever become *weak and foolish* enough to provide (as some have had the madness to propose) *luxurious quarters* and a *rich abundance* for the *prodigal* and the *spendthrift*. *Money not earned, money which*

is not the *equivalent* of some *service rendered* or *benefit conferred*—in other words, money *given*—is, as one of old called it, *the Root of all Evil*. [The old gentleman had probably not read the passage, or would have quoted it correctly]. Hence *Charity* and *Kindness* and *Pity* and *Philanthropy* should be scouted by all men of intelligence as enemies that not only work *individual mischief*, but also are plotting against the *foundations of this realm*, and which violate the *principles of our national existence*.’

All this the little lad listened to and accepted as what he *ought* to believe. Believed it, indeed, if that means that he never doubted it. But if it means that he obeyed the teaching he accepted, then never was any more plagued with an evil heart of unbelief than this generous, impulsive, tender-hearted lad—in these respects a lad still—whom we have come to know as Mr. Rogers. The story is current to this day that as two old labourers were talking of this uncle and the orphan, one asked, ‘John, do yew belave the ould man got a heart in mun’s insides?’

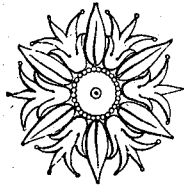
The answer was slowly drawled out, ‘No, no, I doan’t belave he hev got anything but a *gizzard*. But I dew know the young maister hev.’

He had—a real, deep, true heart, as we shall come to see, I hope, good reader. But all this early teaching lay on top of it, concealing it effectually enough, but by no means smothering it. A heart like the well in Scripture story, in which the woman hid the messengers. On top of it the soldiers found nothing but bundles of flax, empty and innocent. But underneath it there were the deep generous springs, and shelter and safety. All that his uncle taught was what little

Mr. Rogers tried to be, and he flattered himself that he was—reserved, stony-hearted, self-contained. But bless you, it was the grossest flattery imaginable. Kindness and charity were his besetting sins. As surely as an opportunity offered itself, and the temptation came upon him, so surely were Mr. Rogers' feelings too strong for his principles, and carried him away. But all this was a secret indulgence. Not to be suspected by any—'not to be known for worlds—not for worlds, Rogers,'—as he whispered to himself. And no guilty man ever dreaded with more horror the detection of his crime than did little Mr. Rogers dread the discovery of this shameful weakness and wicked charity.

But it is time that we went in search of our host.*

* Do not think for a moment, good reader, that this frozen uncle stands here as a representative of '*the Friends*.' Not by any means. None are more prominent than they are in philanthropy, in charities of all sorts, and in all the noble humanities, as everybody knows.



Chapter the Third.

OVER THE CASH BOX.

THERE are two doors leading from the dining-room. Taking that by which the master left, we pass at once into the entrance hall. There is nothing there but a stuffed fox, for ever twisted round, insanely trying to snap at his own tail; and half-a-dozen stuffed sea-birds staring with dreadful eyes, or more dreadful eye-sockets, in such strange positions as their bent wires compelled them to assume. Over the hatless pegs lies the Sunday whip, consecrated to 'morning church and 'evening chapel.' The opposite door, if not locked as it usually is, and the key of it in the basket at Mrs Rogers' side, leads into the drawing-room. Down over a little treacherous step—a nasty, ill-conditioned, plotting step, that lay in wait for you and then caught you unawares, and sent you stumbling right into the middle of the heavy-curtained gloomy room. A scent of ancient rose leaves came from a pair of big bowls over the fireplace. On the sideboard an old black leather flagon, edged with silver, stood up in the midst of the smaller cups that had been won by Mr. Rogers' pigs, or Mrs. Rogers' fowls. Old-fashioned 'annuals' and 'keepsakes' covered the table. The chairs, the sofa, and even the very legs of the piano were carefully tied up—a safeguard perhaps against rheumatism, for the place was cold and damp, and it was only on

very great occasions indeed that a fire was lit there. So rarely indeed that if a fire *was* lit, it usually sank down quite abashed at finding itself in so strange a place, blushed a little, and then went out again; whilst the chimney was so unused to smoke that it didn't know what to do with it and sent it blundering clumsily all over the room.

But the master is not here; nor can he have gone out of the front door, for that is chained, and barred, and bolted, and locked, as if this far-away parish of Saint Pough were the country residence of every London burglar, instead of being the most out-of-the-way place in the realm.

Away under the heavy staircase there is a sly little door, try that. Ah here is our little master in this snug little 'office,' as it is called. What a merry fire glows and crackles from the piled-up logs! And there, too, is the faithful dog dozing still. Mr. Rogers is stooping over the cash-box, busily engaged in counting money. He lifts himself for a moment, his head on one side and his little eyes half shut and fixed on a corner of the ceiling—the attitude most favourable to working out sums, as every school boy knows. Surely the master is grown. He pulls himself up until he looks almost tall. As he finishes the calculation his face is dimpled with merry smiles. Taking up four half-crowns from a pile that lay before him, he chuckles to himself, and winks slyly, and has to lay them down again that he may rub his hands together. 'I'll put four of 'em under old Jim's door—four. Ha, ha, ha, poor old fellow, sees 'em so seldom he'll scarcely know what they are. Ha, ha, ha,' and Mr. Rogers laughed aloud at his joke. But just then the catch of the door

slipped, and the door opened a little. In an instant the smiles were gone, the hands suddenly dropped as if he were quite ashamed of their fraternising thus. He coughed half-a-dozen timid little apologies; he blushed all over his little white head, and altogether looked so guilty that any clever detective could have traced any crime he liked to him, and any intelligent jury would have found him guilty at once without waiting for further evidence or leaving the box.

Taking time to assure himself that there was nobody there, Mr. Rogers rose cautiously, shut the door noiselessly, and bolted it. Then he shook his head, and rubbed his hands together slowly and shyly, as if they had not yet recovered from their fright.

Leaning against the mantelpiece, with his back to the fire, nobody would ever have called him *little* Mr. Rogers. He really was almost a fine man, and as the dimples and smiles came hurrying back again, he looked quite handsome. 'Well, what else is there?' he asked himself. 'You see, Rogers, that is the worst of it, as you've often said before. Living here in this out-of-the-way place, you haven't got fair play—you know you really haven't, Sir. Let me see now.' And Mr. Rogers began ticking it off on his fingers. 'First and foremost, there's Mrs. Rogers' new silk dress—dear, good creature—you couldn't match her, Rogers, 'pon my word and honour. Tisn't half enough, you know—really isn't. I hope it is come. Awkward—very awkward. Can't ask about it you see. Wouldn't have her know for worlds, Rogers, not for worlds. Hope 't is all right.

Ha, ha, hâ, she never will guess where it comes from—never.'

Then he turned to the fire, and taking up the poker he stirred the fire gently, so very gently that he might have been afraid of hurting it. But the fire for its part might have been tickled—it broke out into such a merry burst of dancing flame. Keeping time to his words with the poker he went on. 'Living here, Rogers, you know so little—so very little. What can you send away? The orphanages went yesterday—two geese, two turkeys, four fowls, apples and potatoes. All right. Shall know that they have got 'em from the *Branford Chronicle*. Wouldn't have it known for worlds—not for worlds you know—that you sent 'em.'

And at the very thought Mr. Rogers coughed timidly, turned nervously to the door, and blushed all over his little white head again. Assured that it was right, he went on merrily—

'Bless your hearts, little ones—bless your hearts—orphans! Why, I was one myself, come to think of it; so I was—ha, ha, ha—think of it, little ones, why I am related to the whole of you, so I am.' And the little man, who had not a relation in the world, laughed uproariously at this wonderful discovery.

Then he turned to his box again. 'So that's all Rogers—really that's all.' And his voice grew quite sad as he ticked them off on his fingers, nodding his head over each. 'Silk dress—orphans. Four half-crowns for old Jim; make old Betty the same. Ah, there's Tremayne's little maid, the one that had fever—ordered wine—must take her a bottle. And—well, that's all, Rogers, really all.'

Resting the little white head in his hands, he

sighed. 'Ah, Rogers, it really isn't fair, Sir. You don't know anything here in this out-of-the-way place. You *can't* do anything, really *can't*. There's nobody to spend it on. Such a horribly healthy place, Rogers—folks *won't* get bad anyhow. And so few of 'em too.'



Chapter the Fourth.

AN ALARM.

AS the master will be some time closing the cash-box, and carefully hiding every trace of his charity, blushing at the very thought of anybody knowing it, let us step on for a few minutes before him. Along this narrow passage, and through this door, then at once the ruddy glare of the kitchen fire bursts upon us, and a rush of savoury smells greets us. There is nobody here just now, so we need not fear to take a look at it. Down from the ceiling hang huge sides of bacon and monster hams, decked with the glistening holly and its scarlet berries, whilst the sacred mistletoe peeps slyly here and there. The long table is pushed against the window, for company is expected, and all the room is needed. To-night the servants and their friends have a supper, and there will be a romping game of blind-man's-buff, and carols have to be sung, and then weird stories from the old folks seated in the settle round the blazing log. The log itself certainly knows what is coming, and has begun its part in good earnest; whilst above it is the crock, bubbling away and singing a merry tune to itself, never stopping a moment lest the charm should be broken, and some evil should happen to those plum-puddings entrusted to its care.

It would be a pleasant thing to stay here and see the

company. Bidy and Molly have rubbed their cheeks until they shine like rosy apples, and are wonderfully 'tidivated' with ribbons and flowers. And the lads are coming out in great show of flowered waistcoat. Pleasant would it be to watch the awkward shyness of the early evening melt away in the heat of the Christmas fire; to see the first daring youth that shall claim the sweet privilege of the mistletoe bough; pleasant to watch the vast preparation with which young Dick gets ready to sing the solo of his carol, the tenor standing meanwhile with mouth half open and eyes fixed on the ceiling, ready for the high note on which he starts, whilst the black-haired bass beats time with his foot, his chin deeply set and a great solemnity resting upon him. Pleasant, too, to sit in the settle whilst old Tom Tinkum—wearing proudly the faded and patched scarlet coat, remnant of his glory as huntsman—tells the story of 'ould maister's faither and the ghoost as tould mun wheare they deeds was to, back long in thickey law soot weth the ould Sir Nech'las.' And how that the very same ghost 'have been seed 'pon every Chrissymas-eve sence that, a-goin' down the cellar steps and mutterin' to hisself and a-jinglin' the keys o' mun.'

But here comes the cook, ready to receive her guests. Her good-natured red face is crowned with a huge old-fashioned cap, whilst the little fat hands smooth the somewhat stiff and rebellious apron that does not take quite kindly to her rounded figure. Suddenly she starts, as a light passes noiselessly by the kitchen door, and there comes an unmistakable jingle of keys.

'It beant the maids,' said cook, looking round horrified, 'they 'm dressin'.' 'So fortunate, too, that

there's nobody about. Wouldn't have it known for worlds, Rogers, not for worlds.' It was a ghostly whisper that came from the cellar steps. Then the light disappeared, and all was perfectly still.

'Cruel afeard of ghosts,' as cook always said she was, she afterwards declared that she must have gone into 'hasterisks' there and then, but for the timely arrival of Mr. Podgecombe, the bass singer. Beckoning to him, she told in an unearthly whisper of what she had seen—'t were a ghostly white figure, it were!—and rattling chains!—an' weth such a glare o' light, all over mun.' Podgecombe, a little pale, took the candle immediately, held it up in the direction of the cellar steps, and looked about him very bravely indeed. Then, having assured himself, he made answer in his deepest notes.

'No, cook! no! As I do al'ays say my own self, it be nowt but stupersition—what I calls *stupersition*, cook, my own—'

But before he could finish the sentence he stepped back, very pale and trembling. It was with a high note, almost tenor, that he cried out, 'Aw—my dear life!'

There flashed again that mysterious light! Again came that clinking sound! Again from the hollow steps there came the solemn whisper: 'Not for worlds, Rogers; not for worlds, you know.'

Cook fell with a scream into Mr. Podgecombe's arms. Mr. Podgecombe, partly overcome by the burden that leaned on him, and partly by his own fright, reeled with a groan against the table.

As for little Mr. Rogers, alarmed at being seen, and never suspecting the fright he created, he blew out the

light, and hurried unnoticed round by the passage to his little room. Placing the bottle of wine before him, he looked round nervously. 'Really a narrow escape, Rogers; wouldn't have it known for worlds; not for worlds, Sir.'

In the kitchen, meanwhile, the company rapidly increased, for the scream had brought the maids running down stairs in great haste to find Mr. Podgecombe so far recovered as to be hushing the cook to and fro, telling her not to mind, and that they shouldn't hurt her, *that* they shouldn't—just as if he had been trying to get a baby off to sleep. This was a state of affairs that Molly, who was 'keeping company' with Mr. Podgecombe, regarded with an ill-concealed jealousy—right there under the largest bunch of mistletoe, too. But soon the story was told how that 'they had seen the ould maister's faither's ghoost—that they had'—and how that at the sound of Mr. Podgecombe's summons to stand, the ghost had suddenly disappeared, leaving behind nothing but 'the hawfulest ould smirch an' smell o' brimstone as never were.' Then Molly's jealousy turned into an admiring pride—her Podgecombe was the hero of the evening. Once only did the evil spirit return for a moment to torment her. It was as old Tom Tinkum told the familiar story, that cook could not help grasping at Mr. Podgecombe's arm and clinging to it tightly. But she turned a conciliatory look to the quick-eyed Molly, and explained that she really could not help it, 'her heart were all o' that theare flutterin' and wutterin' like a bird, it were.'

Chapter the Fifth.

FOUND OUT AND RUINED.

HASTILY putting on his hat, and thrusting himself into his grey overcoat, little Mr. Rogers hid the packets of half-crowns in the depths of his pockets, stowed the bottle of wine safely under his coat, and hurried off as noiselessly as possible, lest others should suspect him of this dreadful weakness. 'Wouldn't have it known for worlds, Rogers, not for worlds, Sir,' he explained to himself as he sprang across to get into the shadow of the hedge.

It certainly was an unfavourable night for any man who so dreaded observation. The moon was full, and the night so calm and clear that not a passing cloud lent a moment's obscurity.

The old-fashioned farmhouse of Tregleave stood on the crest of a hill, such as it would be hard to match except in Devon or Cornwall. To-night the clear light shone all down the winding road, far down to the whitewashed cottages and glimmering lights of the little village of Polcombe, nestling below there in one of the loveliest valleys in England. The laugh of merry lads who kept up their Christmas fun with rough sports came ringing on the still air now and then. As it ceased, you heard again the music of the stream that leapt over the mill wheel, and went now broadening out for play about the mossy rocks, now narrowing itself

for a swift run past the banks of fern that almost hid it, and that tried to catch it on its way as it went singing to the sea.

The clear light fell directly upon the farmhouse and all that side of the valley—on the field and its flocks of sheep; on the steeper bit beyond, covered with furze and crowned with a pile of rock like an old weather-beaten castle; then it fell on the steep cliff and the grassy slope above it, and on the great stretch of silver sea. On the opposite side of the valley the misty shadows hung over the steep woods, except where the top of the ridge stood out against the sky, and the light came shining in between the trunks and branches of the trees. But further on the light fell upon that side, too, as the valley widened, and you saw the silver line of the stream as it leapt over the shingle into the sea—saw, too, the cliff that rose a sheer three hundred feet, and shut in the little bay upon that side. The sea was beautifully calm, rippling into curves of light, breaking playfully in silvery bursts about the shining rocks, or sporting with the shaggy sea-weed that swung to and fro in the lapping and wash of the the wave.

Yet calm and beautiful as it looks to-night, there is not a rougher or more perilous bit of coast to be found. Without warning, without apparent reason, the ground sea rises suddenly and sweeps in swamping breakers on the black cliffs, dashing against their jagged sides in thunder, flinging up a glorious burst of spray, and falling back again in a hundred rushing waterfalls. Caught at such times between the headlands, without a bit of shelter or a harbour of refuge anywhere near, the coasters are driven in upon the rocks, swept

through a sea in which no lifeboat can live—the only chance of rescue being the rocket apparatus of the coastguard. All about the coast are sad proofs of these terrible storms, the gate-posts are pierced with rivet-holes, barnacled fences crown here and there the broad green hedges. By the roadside lies a pile of painted spars, or rust-stained beams, the salvage of some ship. In the churchyard there is a row of nameless graves; the figure-head of their vessel sometimes placed above them—their only memorial. And when old folks want to fix a date, it is thus that they most readily distinguish it. ‘When was the little maid a-born to, Sir? Why, it were back long in thickey winter when the *Avonmore* were wrecked, Sir—her were born the night avore *her* were wrecked.’ The emphasis, of course, indicating the ship.

But Mr. Rogers turned away from the sea, down under some trees, along a little lane dappled with light and shade, and finally stopped in front of a cottage, burdened with such a weight of thatch that it seemed to press the four walls quite down in the earth. Cautiously looking about him, and assured that no one was near, he crept to the door. Just then, however, the door was opened, and the little master had only time to step out of the light into the deep shade on either side. It was old Jim who came hobbling out, leaning on a pair of sticks. He made for the little furze rick at the end of the house; and Mr. Rogers, seeing the chance, crept hastily to the door, laid the packet on the threshold, and flew back again to the friendly shelter of the hedge. Old Jim came hobbling back with the handful of furze, when he kicked something along the floor.

‘Whatever be it then?’ the old man drawled, looking about for it. Mr. Rogers nearly spoilt it all by chuckling under the hedge. Old Jim stretched down after the strange-looking packet, and picked it up. The fire light fell upon his face, as he stood with his eyes widely staring and his mouth half-open, in puzzled wonder; whilst the fingers could not restrain their curiosity, but kept feeling through the paper, trying to guess at it. Then a solemn shake of the head told that he was no nearer the secret, and again the bent hands went on unrolling the many folds of paper. Suddenly out fell the four half-crowns, ringing on the floor, and rolling all over the place. The old man was bewildered—‘fairly mazed,’ he called it. Leaning on one stick he unconsciously let the other fall, whilst he lifted that hand to his head scratching it vigorously by way of bringing back his scattered wits.

‘Pixies,’ said the old man, looking uncomfortable. ‘Must be; there beant nobody else about the place. ‘Comed last year, jist the same, didn’t mun?’ And again he was driven to scratching his head. Turning round to the doorway, he looked out into the darkness. ‘They ’m up to their pranks, I s’pose—’pon the draxle ov the door, tew—it be just like I ’ve heerd folks say about mun.’

A smothered ‘Ha! ha! ha!’ came from the opposite hedge, and little Mr. Rogers would have been found after all, if old Jim had had his other stick handy. As it was, the only safety was in flight; so little Mr. Rogers ran, holding back his merriment until he got to a quiet place, and then laughing until the tears ran down his face,

‘Ha! ha! ha! as good as a play, Rogers, as good

as a play, Sir,' he cried. Not that Mr. Rogers had ever seen a play in his life. Perhaps if he had he might have thought this a good deal better. Ha! ha! ha!' he chuckled again. 'Pixies' pranks, was it, Jim? Bless the dear old fellow; what a story he'll have to tell! It will last him a year—till next Christmas-eve; then perhaps the pixies will come again, Jim.'

How long it might have taken Mr. Rogers to get over the joke there is no knowing, had not approaching steps turned the laugh into a little hypocritical cough, and sent the hands flying down from their too familiar clasp into a stiff propriety. Then, as the steps died away, and all was still again, the little master hurried away to Tremayne's.

Along the lane and round a sharp corner, and then he came suddenly to the cottage. So suddenly came on it, and thinking still of old Jim and the pixies, inwardly chuckling as he recalled it all, that before he thought of what he was doing, he knocked hastily at the door. Then, seized with horror at doing anything like this in such an open way, he seized the bottle of wine by the neck and tried to pull it out hoping to leave it at the door and be off. But the bottle was large, like its master's heart, and the pocket was small, like the master himself; so Mr. Rogers pulled and twisted in vain—the troublesome thing would not come. Heavy footsteps sounded inside the door, and the latch clicked. Gasping with horror Mr. Rogers sprang back in an instant, and hid around the corner of the house.

Now this incident, having so much to do with the history of Mr. Rogers, requires that we go back some

little way in our narrative. It chanced that night that Tremayne had been plagued to a point beyond which his usually quiet nature could endure no more.

'Boys will be boys,' or, to put it more exactly, 'Byes will be byes yew knaw, mun,' as Tremayne explained during the evening, is a statement that may be accepted of that 'persuasion' generally, but it is especially true on Christmas-eve. Then as Tremayne remarked, 'Byes be byes more nor ever yew knaw mun.'

To-night the moon had tempted the youngsters forth for mischief, and when games had lost their attractiveness, to knock at Tremayne's door and run away suggested itself as an irresistible amusement—at least to themselves. So they had knocked once. And the big man, wondering who had come, laid down his pipe and went to the door, only to hear the scamper of feet and a shout of laughter.

'Byes will be byes,' said Tremayne good-humouredly.

Now he had scarcely taken up his pipe again and got it in full blast before there came another knock. But the big man was not to be disturbed a second time. He nodded his head and puffed away defiantly. 'Knock away, my lads, knock away; I were a bye my own sel' wance. It plaises yew, and it don't hurt me.'

The knock was repeated more loudly.

'Go on, my byes; yew 'll get tired, I reckon, avor I shall.'

In answer to this remark of Tremayne's the latch was lifted, and a pleasant voice asked, 'May I come in?'

Then the good wife, Betty, sprang out of the back kitchen—'Aw, Tremayne, whatever yew be a-thinking

about then for to go for to lev Mrs. Rogers a-standin' theare like that? For shame to 'ee then,'

Poor Tremayne, bewildered, explained as we have already seen. But the incident had exhausted his meekness, and only another provocation was needed to raise all the big man's wrath.

Soon there came another knock. This Tremayne answered at once, suspicious and cautious. Again came the irritating shout of triumphant laughter.

'Drat the young mortials—that ever I should hev to call mun by sich a name. If I catch mun, I'll gie it to mun—that I wull.' And he shook his fist angrily at the turning by which the lads had disappeared.

Meanwhile Mrs. Rogers had seated herself by the fire, with the pale-faced child on her knee, and had filled the little heart with joy by the gift of a doll. Turning it round in her wasted white hand the little maiden lifted herself to look at it, and then lay wearily back against Mrs. Rogers, who put her arm about the child and pressed her tenderly to herself.

Now it was at this moment that the knock came of which the reader already knows. Big John Tremayne sprang up, and flung the door open just in time to see a figure disappear around the corner. He followed noiselessly, and pounced upon the offender suddenly.

'Not for worlds, Sir, not for worlds,' squeaked a little voice entreatingly.

'I've a got yew neow, and I'll give it to 'ee, who sumever yew be,' cried Tremayne savagely, trying to drag his prisoner back, and managing at the same to drag the overcoat collar over the head; and so brought him to the light.

Then there slowly emerged a little white head and a

little face looking about in horror muttering, 'Not for worlds, Rogers! not for worlds;'

Poor Tremayne was seized with ague. His knees shook in terror. His teeth chattered—unable to say a word, he could only lift a trembling forefinger to his head, and gasp piteously.

Betty stood holding a corner of her apron to her eye and did manage to draw out an explanation. 'Aw them dreadful warmints o' boys, which it were all along o' them, Sir.'

'Which I thought you was wun o' mun.' Sir, axin your pardon,' added Tremayne, shivering more than ever, and lifting his forefinger a great many times to his head.

Mrs. Rogers looked on half amused and half in wonder. What errand could have brought Mr. Rogers there? And then he could not really have been playing such pranks as this appeared to be? Whilst as for poor little Mr. Rogers he was neither annoyed nor angry—only bewildered at this dreadful exposure. Here, to be caught in the act of bringing a bottle of wine to Tremayne's little maid. And, worst of all, in the presence of Mrs. Rogers! He coughed; he blushed; he fumbled his hands about in a miserable fashion. Then, dragging the bottle of wine from his pocket, looking as guilty as if he had stolen it, he coughed and stammered—

'I, I, eh—came, eh—I mean this is for Tremayne's little maid—for your little maid, Tremayne. Wine, you know—a bottle of wine—doctor ordered it—didn't he? And—and—and—.' Then Mr. Rogers pulled his hat down over his little head, as if it were a great deal too big for him, and hurried away muttering to him-

self—‘Not for worlds, Rogers, not for worlds, would I have had you found out, Sir.’

His character was gone. It didn't matter what he did now, or who knew of it. His weakness would be the talk of the place; and he who had prided himself upon his clever secrecy! All the world could look in and see his innermost soul. Disguise was useless. And before Mrs. Rogers, too!—that was the cruellest blow of all. Of course the world knew everything now, even to the silk dress. Well, there, all was gone, utterly gone. He didn't cough—didn't even blush. He clasped his hands together tightly; they might be joined now as closely as they liked—right and left, left and right—there could be no more secrecy between them. And Mr. Rogers felt the most injured and disappointed man in all the land. It was with the desperateness of the most abandoned that he hurried on to old Betty's place and knocked at her door—knocked so loudly that her neighbours came to their doors on either side to see what the noise was about. He knocked again almost immediately, and louder still. Then one of the neighbours called out, ‘It bea'nt no good knockin', Sir, her be deaf as a hadder, her be. Yew must open the door an' go in.’

Little Mr. Rogers walked in without a moment's hesitation. There was the old lady dozing before the fire, so that he could have left it on the table quite well. But there—had he not been found out? So he went up and laid his hand rather heavily on her shoulder.

‘La, who be it?’ said Betty, with a start, ‘Yew give'd me sich a turn. Why, 'tes maister! Ax yerpardin', Sir; never thowt o' seein' yew thes yere time o' night.’

‘Here,’ said little Mr. Rogers, putting the parcel in her hand, and hurrying away without another word.

The old lady got up and felt along the crowded mantelpiece for her spectacles. Slowly wiping them and putting them on solemnly, she turned the parcel round and round, looking for the opening of it, and afraid to cut the string with which it was tied. She might have sat all night bewildered with the gift, had not a friend come to help her.

It was Mrs. Rogers, who leaned over her and shouted at her ear: ‘Well, Betty, what have you got there, then?’

‘Don’ know, mum, I be shewer; bean’t ne’er a ‘ead nor tail to mun, I reckon.’

‘Who gave it to you?’ asked Mrs. Rogers, wondering whether her husband had been there, too.

‘Maister,’ cried Betty, looking up and nodding, as if it were a thing that needed much confirmation. ‘Yewer maister I dew mane, mum. Went away agen ’fore I could thank mun, he did.’

With her curiosity thus stirred, Mrs. Rogers opened the parcel and showed Betty the half-crowns.

‘Vower o’ mun!’ cried Betty, turning them over one by one. ‘Why I never knawed maister dew the likes o’ that afore. Vower o’ mun, tew. But, come to think about it, theare was vower last Christmas, tew, an’ I never knawed wheare they comed from. Why, I never thawt o’ the ould maister! And it were he all along. La! to think of it, now!’

Light began to dawn on Mrs. Rogers too. One thing after another arose, and found a new meaning in this discovery. Presents, handsome and costly, that she had put down to some old friend of former times,

who had heard of her whereabouts, had come from Mr. Rogers, had they? And many a strange freak of liberality that had puzzled the village was cleared up now. It was all his doing.

'Vower o' mun, missis; an' then he went away agen afore I could say so much as thankee. He be crewel kind, he be. Tell maister, plaise, that he be what I dew say; he be crewel kind, he be.'

But Mrs. Rogers must be hastening home. There was one call more to make. Old Jim was to have the woollen waistcoat that she had knitted for him. As the old man looked at it, the very sight seemed to warm him. He stretched out the sleeves; he felt the thickness; he lifted it up against his cheek to feel its softness. 'Yew'm too kind, missus, that yew be. I be quite in luck's way to-night.'

'How is that, Jim?' she asked, anticipating what was coming.

'Look yere,' he replied, as putting his hand in his pocket, he took out a half-crown piece and laid it on his knee. 'An' look yere,' he went on, laying another beside it, 'an' yere tew—an' yere. Vower o' mun. An' where they comed from I dunno no more nor a baby.'

'Singular,' said Mrs. Rogers, looking, however, as if she could quite understand it.

'Iss it be, missis—so I keeps on tellin' mysel'. An' yet it beant singular 't all when yew do mind the kind Father in heaven. It be just like His blessed love who gave His Son to us 'pon Christmas-day.'

'Yes; I am sure He sent it to you, Jim. But who brought it?'

'Can't tell, missis. Some folks do talk 'bout pixies

and oal like that, but I doan't know what to make o' mun, 'cepts that my Father isn't so poor but He hath plenty o' servants to go 'pon His errands. 'T were just the same last Christmas, an' afore that tew, an' I beant goin' for to deny that there be things as dew happen as there be no accountin' for mum, nohowsomever; I dew believe that.'

'Well, I suppose, then, I am a pixy sometimes,' said Mrs. Rogers, pleasantly.

'Yew be that, missis; an' a proper good wan, tew, for there be good an' bad 'mong they, just like other things.'

'Well, good bye, Jim, and a right pleasant Christmas to you;' and Mrs. Rogers shook hands kindly with the old man.


'An' the same to yew, ma'am, thank'ee. I can't pay'ee, but I can ask my blessed Father to give yew an' the maister the happiest Christmas yew ever had—an' I will, tew.'

Mrs. Rogers sighed only, and hurried away. Her happy Christmases were buried twenty years ago, and could never come back again. At least she thought they never could. But we shall see.



Chapter the Sixth.

WE COME HOME TO SUPPER.

 DENSE mist had crept along the valley and up the hill-side. It hung so thickly in the still frosty air that heavy drops fell from the branches of the trees. All was hidden beyond the space of five or six yards, and what was seen appeared so strangely misshaped and distorted as to be scarcely recognised. To Mr. Rogers, as he climbed the steep path homeward, it was quite congenial and pleasant. It sympathised exactly with his feelings. It expressed them in a figure. All the bright, clear, sparkling light with which he had set out was gone—all gone. And now there was nothing but mist. And he, whose character he thought everybody could sum up in a moment, standing out as sharp and clear as the frosty air could make it, was now strange; and as he said with a gravity that was far removed from punning, 'You are become a mystery, Sir, a mystery, and that before Mrs. Rogers, too.' Arrived at home, he hurried away to the little parlour, anxious that no one should see him. He sat down in front of the fire, and, resting his head on his hands, groaned like a ruined man.

'All this weakness of yours laid bare, Rogers—dragged into the light of day, Sir, and that before Mrs. Rogers! Horribly humiliating. And she so strong-minded, too—with no such weakness in her

nature, no such mean and contemptible softness. An admirable woman, Sir! a noble creature! with such a reserve, such complete possession of herself. It is all out now, Rogers—all out, Sir. You are weak, Sir, and you have flattered yourself that everybody thought you cast-iron! You are impulsive, Sir, and you have prided yourself on your superiority to anything so commonplace as people's feelings!

And as Mr. Rogers spoke he seemed shrinking in together until you almost expected to see him disappear. He went on—'What respect do you suppose Mrs. Rogers can feel for you now? What control will you secure over the servants? What influence can you have in the affairs of the parish! Oh, Rogers, I could almost pity you. Yes, *I do!* So weak, so foolish, so soft—so *kind* I might almost say, Sir, that'—and he turned to see that the door was closed, and dropped his voice to a whisper—'I pity you Rogers—I do indeed—'pon my word and honour.'

Now whilst Mr. Rogers thus bewailed his fate, Mrs. Rogers was groping her way through the dense mist as best she could, busily engaged in putting together all that the evening had revealed. A new and strange emotion stirred in her heart as she talked to herself of it.

'I knew how patient, and gentle, and faithful he was. But how could I ever suspect that such kindness lay in his heart. And to think that those presents I have been having for years came from him—that dress again to-day! I never spoke to him of them, thinking that he had no interest in anything but the price of wheat and his fat cattle! And then those strange gifts, that came so unexpectedly in the village—that every-

body put down to the eccentric vicar, or the freakish young Squire—to think that Mr. Rogers should be at the bottom of it all! The dear little man, how I should like to go straight in and thank him, and tell him that I do really *almost* love him for it.'

Mrs. Rogers reached the door of the house, and stayed for a moment. The merriment of the kitchen rang out noisily, and the light streamed from the windows, trying vainly to beat back the mist.

'But that dream is gone,' she sighed sadly, 'gone for ever. I shall never find the key to any heart now, and claim its store of love for my own. All that is gone for ever.'

A few minutes afterwards Mrs. Rogers renewed the topic. She sat by the fire talking matters over confidentially with pussy—he purred away as her hand stroked him tenderly. First, however, she rose and carefully shut the door. Surely it might have occurred to her that another beside her husband kept a heart full of warm love all covered up and hidden. But she never thought of that.

Yet really what is the use of shutting the door, Mrs. Rogers? Do you know that your looks are blabbing all the secret of your joy at this discovery? She looked quite twenty years younger. Her eyes shone with a strange brightness, and a fixed smile broke up and drove away a fair half of the lines of care and sorrow. And she talked away so light-heartedly that pussy 'smelt a rat'—so to speak—and stopped his purring now and then, and looked full in the face of his mistress, with eyes half shut and questioning, in wonder as to what had happened.

'So, pussy, I've got a secret to tell you—such a

secret, you never would have guessed it, *never*. Do you know that your master is a hypocrite—a downright, dear little hypocrite. But I've found him out; and now between you and me, pussy, I tell you what I should like to do. I should like to walk straight into his little parlour and tell him all my heart, you dear old thing.' And, taking pussy's face, she gave it a squeeze, almost tighter than pussy cared for.

Molly's sudden appearance with the supper broke the talk. And if Molly's thoughts had not been so wrapt about her Podgecombe surely she must have seen with half an eye the altered appearance of her mistress. The mistress herself could think of nothing else but how to get at that locked-up heart.

'Surely,' she thought within herself, 'if Mr. Rogers did but know how much joy he gave to others, he could not help being made glad by it. I must thank him for his kind gift to me. First of all, I will give him old Betty's message; and if I could manage to let him see that he had made my own heart glad too, it might help to open the door. I must try.'

Mr. Rogers came into supper looking nipped, withered, shrivelled up. He did not even cough. His hands hung despairingly at his side as he hurried along to his chair, and he sank into it and went almost out of sight. The little he ate he took sullenly, and without once lifting his eyes.

Presently Mrs. Rogers spoke, and spoke in a tone so cheerful and glad that her husband could not help noticing it. But to him it meant all that his worst fears dreaded. It was triumph, derision, scorn.

'Mr. Rogers, I happened to drop in this evening at old Betty's.' (Mr. Rogers winced.) 'She wished me

to thank you for your present to her. You are 'cruel kind' was what she told me to say—cruel kind.'

Mr. Rogers writhed in agony. Plainly enough that key would not fit. He actually groaned. A little insignificant groan perhaps—still it was a groan for all that. His whole soul clamoured within him.

'There Rogers; there is a woman for you! Oh, a noble woman, Sir, A queen of a woman? *She* has no wretched weakness; no foolish and wicked—yes, *wicked*—pity, Sir. No *cruel* kindness as she rightly calls it. And you, Rogers, think of yourself, Sir. Weak!—I must say it, Sir—weak. Soft, Sir. Oh Rogers, I despise you, Sir—I scorn you. I almost—yes, I may say *quite*, I quite *pity* you Rogers. Think of it—I deliberately and altogether *PITY* you! Poor, poor Rogers!' And the little man did really heap upon himself all the scorn he had in his soul, which, however, was not very much—it was so well filled with better things.

'Of course, Betty would tell her all about that, too,' he went on angrily within himself. 'And of course, she knows all about old Jim. Of course she can put two and two together, and will guess all about the dress and everything else. Oh, Rogers, you are ruined, Sir—ruined, and that on Christmas-eve.' And again he groaned.

'Are you poorly, Sir,' asked Mrs. Rogers, with the cheerfulness all gone. Mr. Rogers coughed very faintly, and in a voice only a little above a whisper, said, 'No, thank you, Mrs. Rogers.' Then he sank further down in his chair, and looked smaller than ever.

'He is annoyed at Tremayne's unfortunate mistake,

Mrs. Rogers said to herself. 'And it really was annoying—very. I must try and draw away his thoughts from Polcombe.' So she began again in her pleasant way.

'And I have to thank you, Mr. Rogers, as well as old Betty, for your kindness'—

Then she stopped, alarmed. Poor Mr. Rogers gasped and looked as if he would choke for a minute or two. Then he groaned again, 'Oh, Rogers, Rogers!—found out and ruined—I pity you, Sir—PITY you,' clamoured his thoughts again.

He must be ill, and, looking at him anxiously, all the reserve crept back again, and Mrs. Rogers sank into silence. It was only the silence that was usual between them. But to Mr. Rogers it meant contempt and scorn.

'Of course she won't speak to you, Rogers. Can you wonder at it, Sir? You are weak, and she knows it. A noble woman, really. You are not worthy of her, Sir. You know it—and she knows it, too. Yes, you are weak, Rogers—*weak!*'

So the couple sat in silence, and then silently took themselves off to rest, where the silence was broken only by Mr. Rogers' little insignificant snore, save once indeed when he muttered sadly, in his sleep, 'Found out and ruined, Sir—ruined!' and he snored again.

Mrs. Rogers thought she heard a voice calling from a long way off, 'Charity, charity;' it called, 'The sea hath given up its dead.' Then she saw a hand hold out a golden key. She took it wondering, and read upon it the inscription in quaint old letters—

Ye MASTER KEY yat fittethe all HARTES, and doth ne
FAIL.

But it was only a dream, and dreams never mean anything, as everybody knows—except in Christmas stories.

Chapter the Seventh.

OF THE GUEST THAT CAME TO BREAKFAST ON CHRISTMAS
MORNING.

THE early breakfast at Tregleave was over; all traces of it cleared away, and as yet there is no sign of this coming guest. Mr. and Mrs. Rogers have sat—he at least in his usual silence, but for her part she was strangely cheerful, and kept thinking within herself that the key was coming that should unlock all hearts, and what time so fitting for it as Christmas morning? Little Mr. Rogers had given way to a sullen, reckless despair. His horror at being found out was gone, and had left him hardened beyond all care. All was known, and it didn't matter now what he did. And he crunched his buttered toast with the air of a man to whom anything fierce and dreadful would have been a positive relief—to have given away his house and lands, for instance, and Mrs. Rogers and himself thrown in as a little 'makeweight,' this would have suited him exactly.

The sun was struggling hard with the mist, and getting the upper hand of it too, as the little master stepped forth with the faithful 'Shep' at his heels. He could see half across the field as he went brushing the white sparkling drops from the grass. By the time he got to the hedge, the sickly white light—a sort of

faint hint of a sun—grew into a round red ball, clean shaven of his rays. Down the steep path by the little brook with its sad monotonous music; past the orchard with the trees all black and bare and dripping everywhere, and it was clear enough to see the sheep, looming at first large and mysterious, suddenly coming full into sight for a minute, and then scampering into the invisible. Across the brook, through the gate, and along the path to the valley below—then the mist suddenly lifted like a curtain, and rolled itself up in long trailing clouds about the hill-sides.

The path that Mr. Rogers had taken joined the road leading down to the sea, just opposite to a solitary cottage. It looked as if it had quarrelled with the village half-a-mile further up, and had sulked away down here by itself. Mr. Rogers might have sympathised with it, so eagerly did he go round to the other side of it to find the door—for it had turned its back on the road as if it would have nothing to do with anybody. At the sound of the steps a troop of children rushed to the door, half dressed, ragged, and dirty; then they hurried back, bewildering their mother with a dozen shouts in a dozen different keys, 'Yere be maister a-comin'!' The youngest of those who had found their legs added to the confusion by falling down and bumping its nose, whilst the lean cat did her part by curving her sharp back and spitting angrily at 'Shep.'

The poor bewildered woman—who might have been the personage made famous in poetry, so far as her having so many children that she didn't know what to do—was more confused than ever at so strange a visitor, troubled further with a suspicion that his

coming had something to do with the rent. She got up and curtsied, holding the two smallest members of the family in her arms, and cleverly managing at the same time to pick up the fallen youngster and give him a shake, and to push another aside who stood wickedly laughing and siding with the cat.

'Good morning, good morning, Eliza, good morning.' The words were innocent enough in themselves, but the way they were spoken meant something dreadful. 'He *would* see. He wouldn't be found out and ruined for nothing—not he indeed.'

'It be the rent, then,' thought Eliza, 'Never seed mun like thes afore.'

'And good morning, little ones. A merry Christmas to you; a very merry Christmas—*very*;' and the emphasis on the last word was really tremendous.

'Thank'ee, Sir,' said the poor woman, doubtfully. 'Thank'ee kindly—drat the chiel, take that—an' the same to yew, Sir, an' many o' mun.' A ringing box on the ear had interrupted the sentence, and sent one sturdy youngster squealing outside; for he had picked up a stone as big as his little hand could hold, and now was toddling to throw it at 'Shep,' who dodged, growling, between his master's legs.

'Shep, behave sir,' said the little master. 'Now look here, Eliza; bless me; well, I really didn't know John had so many children. I must see to it, you know. It won't do at all—not at all.'

'Please, Sir,' said the good woman, confused and trying to find some apology for her offence. But she quite mistook Mr. Rogers' words. He was reproaching himself for not knowing it before, and for not helping them. Thrusting his hand angrily into his pocket, he

took out as much loose silver and copper as he could find, and, having laid it on the table, hastened away.

'There, Rogers, you are weak, Sir—soft, kind, and everybody knows it. You'll never be respected again; so what does it matter what you do now?' and the little man hurried on, muttering fiercely. In a moment his courage failed him; he stopped and turned half way round—'I think I will ask her not to mention it—not to Mrs. Rogers, at any rate.' But it was only for a moment. 'No—can't be worse, Rogers—can't be worse, whatever you do.' And again he hurried forward, in a defiant way, toward the sea. It shone only a little way beyond, calm and bright; and Mr. Rogers was in such a mood that it would not have surprised you in the least to see him play ducks and drakes across the glassy surface, with all the sovereigns in his possession.

He hurried along, past the piles of sand, and over the pebble ridge. Then he stopped instantly, and his face changed. Broken spars, and all the signs of a wreck, lay along the edge of the receding tide, or floated further out in the little bay.

'Must have struck in the mist,' said Mr. Rogers sadly, 'and in the dead of night, too. Poor things! Calm enough for them to swim ashore too, if they could only have seen it, and had time to strike out—very likely got off in their boat though.'

He walked slowly down to the side of the water, where it rippled, and curved, and kissed the shore, and looked about eagerly to see if any help could avail now. Suddenly 'Shep' crouched on the sand and looked intently away amongst the big rocks that lay heaped up under the cliff. Then he growled, whilst the hair bristled on his back.

‘What is it, Shep?’ asked the master, moving in that direction, whilst the dog went slowly on beside him, growling still.

Then up sprang a large black ‘Newfoundland,’ and bounded towards Mr. Rogers, almost knocking him off his legs. It looked into his face and moaned, then ran on towards the rocks, then back again, as if entreating him to make haste. ‘Shep,’ not liking the look of things, crouched on the sands again, and growled threateningly.

With half-a-dozen thoughts suggesting themselves, Mr. Rogers hastened after the dog. He clambered over the rounded boulders, until suddenly the dog stopped. Looking over the rock Mr. Rogers caught sight of a little bundle of clothes.

It was drenched with water, and yet it was warm. The dog must have been lying on it. And, lifting the loose end of a shawl, he saw the pale face of a little child.

At first he thought it was dead, but presently there came a feeble cry.

‘Oh, you dear little one,’ cried Mr. Rogers, as tears filled his eyes, and he pressed it to himself, and kissed the little white cheek. At the sound of his voice the cry grew louder.

‘Don’t, please don’t;’ and the little man, distressed, kissed it again. The baby, however, associated the movement with the supply of food that it judged to be due, and began to smack its little lips upon his cheek.

‘Hungry, of course, poor little dear,’ he explained, with a readiness that did him great credit, seeing that he had never handled a baby before. ‘What must we give it, I wonder? There’s a goose for dinner.’

But that is such a long time. Oh, yes, of course, of course. The doctor ordered Tremayne's little maid some wine.'

Pressing it to himself, and wondering what these stupid tears could be doing in his eyes, he hurried, panting and puffing, over the pebbles, and up the road again, whilst the dogs had introduced themselves, and now were bounding along together, the best of friends—only that the big black fellow came running back to the master's side at least twice in every minute, and then, satisfied that was all right, rushed off with a joyful bark.

As the group neared the cottage, one quick-eyed youngster caught sight, and carried back the tidings: 'Yere be maister agen; an' he 'th got a chiel!' It was enough to rouse the curiosity of the household; so they all clustered about the corner of the cottage, whilst the cat was doubly enraged at the two enemies that now appeared.

'Oh, Eliza,' shouted the little man huskily. 'The very woman. You've had so many—so very many—you know all about it. Come up to the house directly. Please do, directly.'

The little man was out of sight before the sentence was finished, for he had turned up the field path again. The woman, bewildered as to the meaning, handed the two babies to the eldest girl, and then with a dozen hanging on her skirts, tried to overtake Mr. Rogers.

But she might as well have tried to fly. He was through the second gate as she went in at the first, and by the time she had come up to the second, the master was just crossing the hedge on the top of the

hill. The baby had found some passing solace in its thumb, and in the rapid movement, and now it lay in his arms quite still, with its great eyes fixed upon him so that Mr. Rogers could not help staying to look at it.

'Bless you, dear, *dear* little thing,' he cried, as those stupid eyes of his began to rain again, and he stooped to kiss it, then hurried off faster than ever.

Dick came rushing into the kitchen, giving cook and Molly quite a turn. 'La! why here's maister a-comin', an' he 'th got a baby. I seed mun with my own eyes.'

Cook and Molly rushed to the door, and Betty burst down from the back kitchen. But they were all too late. Mr. Rogers had gone in at the front gate. Mrs. Rogers had been sitting before the fire, having a quiet word with pussy about her dream, when she suddenly caught sight of Mr. Rogers with his strange burden. Wondering what it could possibly mean, she had hurried to the door, and Mrs. Rogers was busy now with bolt and chain and lock and bar.

'Quick, quick, please,' cried Mr. Rogers impatiently, and with a husky voice,

Coming in hastily he put the little child into his wife's arms, and hurried off without a word of explanation. The baby fixed its eyes on Mrs. Rogers for a moment, then struggling to get its arms free from the shawl that enwrapped it, it smiled merrily, and lifted up its face towards her.

She leaned over it for a moment, whilst all her heart opened, and she kissed it tenderly. Of course cook, and Molly, and Betty crowded on the scene; and, as the mistress quietly took off the wet things

she despatched them for warm blankets and hot milk, and, as soon as she was alone again, bent over the child and tenderly kissed it once more.

Nobody knew what had become of Mr. Rogers. But he explained his absence in a few minutes, as he appeared, carefully handling a bottle of very old port wine, which had not been disturbed since his uncle had laid it down years ago. He was sadly disappointed at seeing the little one sucking down spoonfuls of warm milk eagerly. He quietly set the bottle by the fire thinking that it would come in perhaps for baby's dessert. Then he began to tell Mrs. Rogers where he had found it, and of the dog—troubled greatly during the story with this weakness of the eyes.

But in the middle of his story a new idea struck him. His eyes were no longer on the child, and Mrs. Rogers had to keep leading him back to the subject.

'Well, I knew there was something there,' said the little man. His thoughts were off again, and he muttered to himself, 'Weak, Rogers, 'pon my word and honour. Never thought she would take to the little one like that. So glad; so glad.'

'Well;' said his wife, wondering why he could be looking at her so.

'Oh yes, I knew it in a minute,' he said aloud: and then whispered to himself, 'She kissed it, Rogers, and there is actually—well, bless me! yes, a tear in her eye. Oh, you *are* weak—weak, Mrs. Rogers, I believe you are. I do almost pity you.' And then, as if this were too great a liberty yet, he coughed nervously, and slightly blushed.

How long the story would have taken at this rate

nobody can tell. But just then there came a knock at the door, and in answer to Mrs. Rogers' 'Come in,' Dick thrust his head in with a grin.

'Plaise, missis, yere be Lizer Pode with a dozen more, and her saith master said her must come up to waunce to nurse the child.'

Mr. Rogers hastened to tell her that they did not need her services, 'Mrs. Rogers is weak enough,' and be coughed over it nervously, 'I think I may say weak enough to manage quite well, Eliza, thank you. But stay here, I must not forget that you have so many, so very many children.' And Mr. Rogers took a large basket and filled it with good things—piled it until it threatened to topple over; and if cook had not come in just at the right moment Mr. Rogers would have sent away their own Christmas goose. But the whole family went back equally well pleased, and agape with wonder, as to 'whatever could have happened to maister: he were so uncommon different.'

When Mr. Rogers came back the little child lay asleep on his wife's lap, the cheeks flushed with the heat, and the chubby little hand tightly holding her finger. The great black dog was sitting there, too, his head resting against her; and Mrs. Rogers was bent over the child tenderly, whilst tears of strange joy filled her eyes.

Mr. Rogers stood looking at it for a minute or two. Then he laughed a musical little 'Ha, ha, ha,' and rubbed his hands together violently. 'I am so glad—so very glad—ha, ha.'

'Hush,' said his wife very gently, you'll wake her, you know. So Mr. Rogers had to content himself with rubbing his hands and laughing in every way that he could, except aloud.

Leaning over his wife he whispered, 'So glad; you can't tell; so glad; and his eyes glistened with tears. 'You are weak, too—kind, too—you really are.' And, leaning over the child, he kissed his wife—and his wife kissed him.

Hearts were too full to speak for a few minutes. Then Mr. Rogers thrust his knuckles into the corners of his troublesome eyes, as if by way of punishment, and managed to find some kind of a voice that asked; 'What shall we call her, dear?' And the little man took his wife's hand as if he feared she might not think that he meant herself by that new name.

'The sea has given up its dead,' Mrs. Rogers said to herself, 'and this is the golden key that has unlocked our hearts.' Then she turned to her husband and saw a new soul looking at her through those eyes—a soul all tenderness and sympathy. 'Shall we call her Christmas, dear?' she asked.

'There—bless you, dear, the very name,' said Mr. Rogers, 'I thought of—*Christmas*—because upon this blessed day our Father in heaven sent down the Holy Child to save us all.'

'Yes, the Golden Key to open all hearts to himself,' Mrs. Rogers whispered.



How they got the Chapel
at St. Piran's.



HOW THEY GOT THE CHAPEL AT ST. PIRAN'S.*

Chapter the First.

'THE GHASTLY WAYS OF UNBELIEF.'

TUT, tut, boy—tut, tut. Don't 'ee go letting the chield hear 'ee talk such nonsense. You'm making me quite ashamed to listen to 'ee.'

As the old lady spoke, she turned round from the side of the fire to add the indignation of her looks to her plain speaking.

'But, mother, you know that the steward is every thing. The earl won't do anything without him, and so long as Mr. Mawmon says that the old place will do there really isn't any chance of our getting another.'

The 'boy,' as his mother called him, was a stout, broad-shouldered man of forty or more. He stood now looking out through the latticed window with a troubled face. Farmer and butcher, he managed to get on very comfortably, so far as this world was con-

* The reader who may desire to have the source of my story shall find it duly recorded in that book of the Chronicles of Early Methodism—the *Arminian Magazine*.

cerned; and as for the next, he did his share in relation to that by an earnest, religious life, and was a leader, local preacher, and general head and chief of the little Methodist society in St. Piran's.

'Well, and he's right, too,' cried the old lady, shaking her large white cap and nodding her head very vigorously, 'quite right. The old place was good enough for father and me, and big enough too. And I can't see for my part that folks now-a-days be so mightily improved that they must go a setting up to be so very partie'lar. He's right, is John Mawmon. But there! lah, Jan Penruan, I'm ashamed for to hear 'ee talk so, for all you'm my son. Iss, fie—and before the little maid, too!' And the old lady turned to the fire again, as if her indignation found some sympathy in the flames that leapt and laughed in the huge chimney.

But in a minute after she turned round as calm and gentle as if nothing had disturbed her.

'No, Jan, my dear: there's never any earl nor steward either that can stop you're having that there new chapel, for all the old one is big enough; only you must go the right way to work about it. How come we to get the old one I should like to know? And the parson so dead against us as he was, too; and own brother to the old lord.'

'Yes, but grandfather was always such a favourite with the old earl, you know, grandmother.'

The pleasant voice came from the window. Sitting there quite in a bower of green leaves and scarlet blossoms, Grace Penruan had thrust out her pretty face and joined in the conversation. A girl of eighteen summers, one did not expect to find in her the 'chield'

concerning whom the grandmother had expressed such anxiety. She sat crumbling bread on the table for a little lame chicken that had come to some grief in the poultry-yard, and its shrill 'cluck, cluck' and the hard tapping of its beak sounded like a pleasant accompaniment to her own sweet voice.

The old lady tightened her lips with a sigh, and knit her wrinkled brows over the pair of eyes that flashed angrily. She snatched her crooked stick from the corner of the fireplace and struck the ground.

'There 't is, Jan Penruan—there 't is! The chield is getting into just the same ghastly old ways. I'm fine and glad it do say that we must be angry and sin not. I can't help it. To hear anybody going on like that! Favourite—iss, of course, he was. But, but—' (and the old lady's voice trembled as she spoke, and she struck the floor more gently)—'who made him a favourite, I should like to know?'

'Well, he married you, grandmother, and you know how that you nursed his lordship, and how fond he was of you. That had a good deal to do with it, I'm sure.' And Grace spoke with such a pleasant voice that, like the minstrel's harp of old times, it might well have soothed the troubled spirit. But all it did was to change the vexation to grief.

'There—that's it; that's it. And the old lady sank back in the chair. 'Your grandfather was this, and I was that, and the earl was the other, and the Heavenly Father was nothing at all! Aw, Jan Penruan, that ever you should come to talk like that.'

And the old lady sighed again and shook her head. Then she went on: 'These here ghastly ways of unbelief—they're dreadful, sure 'nough; dreadful.

Why, isn't *He* the Landlord of every bit of it! Isn't He the Lord of lords, and the King of kings, too! Couldn't He make the father of all these here fine lords an' ladies out o' the dust! Couldn't He fetch Joseph out o' prison, and make a prince o' him in a day! And couldn't He take Moses out of the bulrushes and make a king's son of him directly! And couldn't He make Peter's fortune by catching a fish!

The old lady stayed a moment, as if appealing to her son; then she went on more gently.

'Lah, Jan Penruan, however can 'ee go talkin' like it! He could do all that; but He can't give you land for a new chapel, because the earl and John Mawmon don't want to! And yet you do kneel down and say, "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name;" and then you do go bowing and scraping to everybody to help 'ee, like as if your Master couldn't do anything without his lordship and all the rest o' them. 'Tis dreadful—dreadful!—these here ghastly ways of unbelief. And all the time 'tis writ down in His Book so much for you as for anybody else: "*The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof.*" I'm ashamed of 'ee, Jan Penruan, for all you 'm my son.'

Then the old lady set down her stick, and leaning forward on her chair, she turned her hands to the fire, and hid her face behind them.

For a time the little chicken had it all to himself, with his shrill 'cluck, cluck,' and the hard pecking, preaching his sermon too in his own fashion about those 'ghastly ways of unbelief.' Perhaps Grace was the only one who heard it, but it came right into her heart, and did her good. 'Cluck, cluck; only look at me. I know that grandmother is right—of course she

is. Here am I, a poor little lame chicken that can't pick up so much as a crumb outside there, yet here I am, petted and fed to my heart's desire. Cluck, cluck, Grace's favourite, am I? Nonsense.' And the little preacher dabbed at the table as if in imitation of the old lady's stick. 'Nonsense—'t is all because of what is written in the Book: "*Your Heavenly Father feedeth them. And are ye not much better than they?*"'

Again the little chicken had it all to himself for some minutes.

Then Grace spoke out—'Well, father, grandmother is right, isn't she? Wouldn't it be a good thing to have a prayer-meeting about it on Christmas morning?'

John stood looking still out of the window. He drawled the reply very slowly—'Well, I s'pose there couldn't be any harm in it.'

'Harm!' cried the old lady, springing up in a moment and turning round. She looked quite handsome in her anger; her eyes grew large and brilliant, and a rush of colour glowed on her cheeks. She had drawn up her head almost haughtily, and now the sharp outlines of her face—the projecting brow, the hooked nose, and pointed chin, stood out quite boldly against the black shadows of the chimney behind her. 'Harm! Jan Penruan. Harm! I can't think wherever you do come from. Your father never had no such ghastly unbelievin' ways. There, I'm afeared the boy do take after me!' Then the storm died away in an instant. 'Poor dear,' she muttered to herself as she sat down by the fire, 'he do take after me.' And she sighed more heavily than before.

Again the little chicken had it all to himself for some minutes.

It was the old lady who broke the silence. Turning round, she said very tenderly, 'Here, Grace, my dear: come over and warm yourself. 'T is come colder, isn't it?'

And as Grace sat down on her stool at her grandmother's side, the old lady's hand stroked the glossy black hair fondly. 'Bless her,' she muttered to herself, 'taketh after her grandfather.' Then she sighed again, 'Poor dear Jan be more like me—so many ghastly ways of unbelief about him.'

But John Penruan had taken himself off, busied about the great supplies of meat with which they celebrated Christmas at the hall.



Chapter the Second.

WE STROLL THROUGH ST. PIRAN'S.

ST. PIRAN'S was as pretty a little place as one could find in all the county. Little cottages stood dotting the hillside, peeping from their leafy shelters, for elms and oaks bent over them lovingly, and apple trees grew thick in the adjoining orchards. At the foot of the hill went the road, in which the cottages clustered together more closely, each gay with flowers in front, and with a stretch of thrifty garden produce behind. Then you came to the village green, bordered with an avenue of stately trees—the heart of the place, where the life centred. There stood the village school, to which the merry children ran with shouts, and where they stayed for play when the schooling was done. There on the opposite side was the old church, dark with its twisted yews, where the villagers crept on Sundays, and where generations of them slept when their long day was done. There, too, was the steward's house, looking out from its long, narrow windows and its lofty attics, as if to keep the whole place in order.

Beside the road there ran the river, stretching away to the wooded heights that rose up out of it on the opposite bank. Very fine it was when the tide was up, and the soft woods were mirrored in the water; when the brown-sailed barges came lazily drifting along to the old pier at St. Piran's; when flocks of sea-gulls

dotted the water's edge, or sat brooding on its glassy surface. But when the tide was out the beauty went. Then there was only a muddy creek, where brown figures of undistinguishable sex bent picking cockles.

This was St. Pirans—a place that really had no reason for its existence except the one fact that it all belonged to the earl. The park and the woods, the gardens and stables, his lordship himself and those who lived with him, gave work to all the parish. Except, indeed, for the very old folks there was always something to do; and for them there was a long row of almshouses where they found themselves comfortably housed and well cared for, and showed their grateful appreciation by living to prodigious and unheard-of ages—a contrast to the noble lords themselves, who were but a short-lived race; and many an old gossip would tell of 'the old earl,' and explain, 'I don't mean my lord's fayther nor his fayther afore he, but I do mean that there one's grandfather.'

For the villagers themselves, life was reduced to a very charitable endeavour to destroy everything of discipline and endurance; and so there went, too, everything of independance. There were so many charities for all stages of life that to think of the future was a work of utter supererogation—and *that* the villagers turned from as heresy. There was a premium on babies. There was a free school—Lady Nancy's—with an effigy of a youth in ancient dress over the boys' entrance; and over the entrance for the girls was the figure of a young lady with a huge bonnet of the coal-scuttle order that crowned a long limp dress. There was a charity for apprenticing those who were old enough to leave school; and a charity by which

each maiden earned two pounds for getting married, and every timid swain was tempted by a like generous bribe. And not to speak of sundry doles and alms that helped them through the year, there was finally the retreat to which the oldest applicant was entitled at the time of any vacancy. All this, subject only to the two conditions, that each happy recipient must have been born in the parish, and that each and all were regular attendants at the parish church.

So it came about that the whole parish, with just one little exception, belonged to the earl. Not only every foot of land, but every body and soul in the place, from the babies—that came in such numbers that they might have been perfectly aware of the advantages of such a birthplace—up to the oldest inhabitant, all were his, to act and vote and worship according to his lordship's will and according to the steward's orders; or the place that knew them should know them no more for ever. Yet it is but right for us to remember, good reader, that I am speaking of the state of things some seventy years ago, when such 'landlord's rights' were almost always claimed and exercised, and when the opportunities of diffusing knowledge were so few that men took their opinions, both political and religious, from those above them, and neither desired nor thought of any other authority.



Chapter the Third.

CONCERNING THE POLRUANS—THEIR PLACE AND PEDIGREE.

IN his lordship's great pot of golden ointment there was just one little fly, a mere gnat, yet it was at times enough to fret and trouble each succeeding earl. Some close election fight of a hundred years before had led to the gift of half-a-dozen freeholds. Worth little enough at the time they were given, and for the most part bought up again almost as soon as they had served their purpose, there was but one bit that had not come back to the estate. That was John Polruan's place at Tresmeer.

The pleasant farmhouse had belonged to the family for four or five generations now; long enough to beget a sturdy independence that stood out in striking contrast to the helplessness of the villagers. The very look of the Polruans was different. They carried their heads well up like men with backbones in them, and not mere jelly-fish taking the shape of any hand that held them. They looked you full in the face with an honesty that could neither be threatened nor bought. Their very words rang out like good coin; they spoke with such a sturdy straightforwardness and truth. For their religion the Polruans had gone, not to the parson, but to the Word of God, and they dared to act accordingly—much to the horror of the old parishioners, and to the annoyance of the successive clergymen. And

for their politics they neither studied their own advantage nor feared to offend, but said and did that which they believed to be right—very often with yet greater annoyance alike to earl and steward too.

At their farmhouse it was that Methodism first found a home, though his lordship had threatened and the parson raged; and the first members in the little society were old John and Grace Polruan. And when at last the chapel was built, it was in the Polruans that it found its chief supporters.

Of course such independence provoked a certain amount of jealousy. There were here and there, too, craven fellows who smarted under the plain-speaking both of father and son; and who felt the vexation of men that know they are wrong, yet have not the courage to do the right; and they avenged themselves by snarling spitefully at the mention of Polruan's name. Yet, in their hearts they all admired and respected his courage and straightforwardness. From his lordship downwards, all knew that there was no man upon whom they could count more surely for a kindness; none whom they could trust more fully, or who would help them more quietly and readily. Of the old earl the story ran that, when taken with his last illness, he had asked the doctor if he was going to die. The doctor timidly evaded the question, until the earl somewhat angrily demanded an answer.

'Why does your lordship want to know?' asked the doctor.

'Well,' said the earl, 'if I am going to get better I must send for the parson. But if I am going to die I should like to have old John Polruan.'

And forthwith old John was sent for. Faithfully

and lovingly he talked to his lordship of Jesus the Friend and Saviour of sinners; and earnestly he pleaded for him until light came and his soul was filled with peace and joy through believing. His lordship's last act before his death was to bid the steward give to John Polruan the lease of a site which he indicated for building a Methodist chapel. Then the earl had died in faithful old nurse Polruan's arms.

So the first place had been built; in the eyes of old John and Grace it was the Lord's doing, and wonderful accordingly. But wretchedly small and out of the way, and on Sunday evenings crowded as it was to suffocation, little wonder that the younger John and those with him felt that they ought to have a new chapel. It had been talked of and debated for five or six years, at least. But earl and steward and parson were dead set against it; and not one in the little society at St. Piran's could see the faintest glimmer of hope. Except, indeed, old Grace Polruan; as we have already heard, she somewhat fiercely maintained that there was but one hindrance, and that was *these here ghastly ways of unbelief*.



Chapter the Fourth.

WE MEET WITH AN IMPORTANT PERSON.

IT was a busy time with John Polruan. Christmas-day was on the Friday, and as it was already Tuesday afternoon he had much to do, and not much time to do it in. There were to be great goings-on at the hall: a larger company than the oldest inhabitant ever heard tell of was to meet there this year; and on Christmas-eve the servants were to have their entertainment. Not that John Polruan or any other Methodist of those times could have anything to do with such vanities; all this concerned him only so far as the supply of beef and mutton was needed. Then, too, there was the meat that was given to the poor on Christmas morning—four pounds for each labourer on the estate. So John had to be busy.

Grace was off inviting the ten or twelve members of her father's society-class to a seven o'clock prayer-meeting on Christmas morning. 'Grandmother thinks that if we want a new chapel the least thing is to ask for it,' she explained with her pleasant manner and her sweet voice. 'And she says that the right One to ask is our Heavenly-Father.'

So it happened that there was nobody left at home but the old grandmother, and she sat before the fire clicking her knitting-needles every now and then when she stirred from an occasional doze. Suddenly the old

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lady was startled by a knock at the front door—a long, loud, and altogether very important knock. It was such an utterly new and unheard-of thing for anybody to come by that roundabout entrance that she quite jumped out of her chair, and let ever so many stitches slip as the needles with the half-finished stocking fell to the ground.

‘Mercy on us,’ she cried, straightening her cap and smoothing her hair, ‘whoever is it, I wonder?’ Then hastened along the passage and pulled back the bolts, and managed to turn the old, rusty lock.

The door was at once pushed open from the outside by a big woman with a very red face, and a great many very red ribbons, carrying on her arm a small bag of a staring crimson colour. Short and exceedingly stout, she looked the more so because she had flung back her shawl over her shoulders, and stood now puffing and blowing, whilst her hands were pressed against her sides, as if by way of keeping herself together.

‘Really, I can’t think—whatever you folks—do want to perch—your houses up—in such out-of-the-way—places for. It might be—a-purpose to kill them—as isn’t used to it—a-taking anybody’s breath away—till they can’t—hardly speak.’

Then, rubbing her face with her handkerchief, the stout visitor walked in without further ceremony.

Old Mrs. Polruan, annoyed at the coolness of her visitor, and wondering what her business could be and who she was, put on her stateliest manner.

‘Will you walk in here, please?’ she said, as she curtsied in old-fashioned style and opened the door of the little parlour.

Stumbling over a step that led down into the room, and that really was an awkward entrance, the stout visitor sat herself heavily in a capacious arm-chair, and wiped her face again.

'What orful hillconvenient places these old tumble-down houses are to be sure!' And the stout visitor puffed again and languidly fanned herself with her handkerchief. 'However you poor creatures can put up with them I can't think. But I s'pose you're used to it, like heels 'to skinnin', as the saying is, and that do make a sight of difference, don't it?'

'Do you wish to see me or my son, ma'am?' asked old Mrs. Polruan, with a grace that rather surprised the visitor, and brought her to a manner that was a little more polite.

'Ah, yes, I had forgotten that. Polruan lives here, don't he? Mr. Polruan, I mean. Tresmeer or some such place, they told me—redic'lous names you do give the places, too.' And she puffed again, and wiped her red face.

'I will tell him,' said the old lady, moving towards the door. 'He is very busy. May I take him your name, or give him any message?'

'Well, my name is Mrs. Crawling, the new house-keeper from up to the 'all. And I'm a-come with the horders. Only I'm in no hurry if so be as he's engaged.'

So Mrs. Polruan hastened away, leaving her visitor, to look round at the pretty little parlour, with its wool-work pictures and its store of books.

'Umph,' remarked Mrs. Crawling to herself: 'they carry their 'eads too 'igh for my thinkin', these 'ere Polruans, which is a thing as I can't a-bear to see in folks

as do belong to these 'ere lower orders—as you may say they can't so much as call the hair that they do breathe their hown.'

And Mrs. Crawling puffed again, as if even she, with all her aristocratic associations, were not always mistress of that necessity.

Then she took a book from the table and turned at once to see what name was inscribed on the cover—
'To my daughter Grace: her dear mother's hymn-book. May we all meet in heaven.—J. P.'

As Mrs. Crawling read it she tossed her head contemptuously. 'So that's the young minx, I suppose, that nobody is good enough for, which that Whackley the blacksmith stuck up to, and got hordered off in quick time, as the old woman was a-telling me.'

Then the visitor turned over the next page, and looked at the frontispiece. 'A nice old gentleman, too—I wonder what his name is.' And, leaning forward to let the light fall on it, Mrs. Crawling read the name, 'John Wesley.' She dropped the book in disgust. 'Why, they're horrible Methodists, too. Ah, that lets the cat out of the bag, as the sayin' is. So that's how you come for to set yourselves up for so much better than heverybody else, is it, Mr. What's-ye-name? A pack of nasty cantin', whinin', snivellin' hypocrites, as would twist a cock's neck for crowin' 'pon a Sunday, and would send anybody to perdition for so much as heatin' of a 'ot dinner. Well, there, if I was only the hearl my own self—'

What would have happened, according to Mrs. Crawling, in such a condition of things will never be known; for at that moment the parlour door was opened and in came John Polruan.

'You have brought the orders from the hall, ma'am,' said he, as Mrs. Crawling opened her bag and drew out the account-book.

'Yes. And his lordship's horders is to settle up for the 'alf year, Mr. What's-yer-name.'

'Polruan,' said John, taking the book.

'Ah, yes, houtlandish sort of name, too, Mr. Polruan. I can't think of it all in a minute, Mr. Polruan. And of course, Mr. Polruan, you'll make the usual allowance, you know, Mr. Polruan.'

John was entering the amount of the order, whilst the housekeeper stood with the money in her hand. He had not noticed Mrs. Crawling's last remark, so, having made up the total, he handed her the bill without any reply.

'Of course, Mr. Polruan, Sir, you know as there's what they call perkisites, Mr. Polruan. Of course you allow the same as they does in London, Mr. Polruan?'

'I don't understand you,' said John.

'The hinnocent lamb,' Mrs. Crawling muttered to herself. 'Why in London the *gentlemen* gives me so much as pounds to a time on a 'eavy settling like this, and they calls it perkisites.'

'But, surely you must know that they have to take it out of his lordship's pocket in some way.'

'Well!' replied Mrs. Crawling, failing altogether to see Mr. Polruan's point.

'Well!' cried John indignantly, 'and do you actually propose that I should rob his lordship in order to make you a present?'

'Oh, no—of course not,' and Mrs. Crawling blushed a deeper red, and fumbled with her bag: 'not when

you put it like that: but in a regular way of business, you know.'

'No, Mrs. Crawling, I can't: and I am sorry that anybody could ever do such a thing, or that you could ever ask it.' And John Polruan signed the bill and handed it to her.

'Then, John What's-ye-name, you're a fool!' muttered the woman angrily, as she put the book in her bag, and hurried out of the room.

John Polruan closed the front door after her, and barred and locked it with a fierceness as if he would shut out all such people and their crooked ways from his house for ever.

As he passed through the kitchen, his mother sat in the window, making most of the fading light.

'Well, John, and how did 'ee get on with the new cook, then?' she asked, looking up for a moment, thrusting the worked-off needle into a little bundle of straws that she wore on purpose, stuck in the band of her apron. 'A dangerous body to be the wrong side of, I reckon.'

'Then we must try and keep the *right* side of her, mother,' said John, cheerily, 'the *right* is always the safe side, isn't it?' And he bent down and kissed the old lady's forehead.

'Bless the dear boy,' she whispered to herself as he hurried away to his work. 'He 'th got a brave deal of his father, too, for all he taketh so much after me.'

'Cluck, cluck, cluck,' went the little lame chicken, preaching his sermon still. And this time it came into old Grace Polruan's heart, and did her good: '*Your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?*'

Chapter the Fifth.

CHRISTMAS DAY, AND WHAT IT BROUGHT WITH IT.

THE loud clock at the hall had rung out the hour of twelve upon the still, frosty air. The solemn old church clock, that always waited for its aristocratic neighbour, followed respectfully just thirty seconds behind. So Christmas Day had come again, to bring goodwill toward men and peace on earth, where men could find room for Him who comes to save us from our sins. If not, it might bring only the plotting of ill-will and cruel strife.

'There, 'tis twelve o'clock?' said Grace Polruan, as she finished the last bit of decoration with which she had been garnishing the kitchen and parlour at Tresmeer; and then she crept away noiselessly towards her little room, whispering, 'A merry Christmas to all the world;' and wishing it with all her heart.

'Hark—why, 'tis twelve o'clock already. You 'll 'ave to make 'aste,' somebody whispered there in the frosty light at the back of the hall; and a tall, broad-shouldered man hurried away in one direction, whilst a shorter, stouter figure moved towards a side door and slipped in noiselessly.

'There—twelve o'clock, and he isn't come yet,' grumbled the carol singers, as they waited at old Mrs. Whackley's asking for Tom, the leader of the church choir.

'He 'th been oncommon busy all the evening. Couldn't so much as go near the servants' dance up at the hall till half-an-hour agone,' his mother urged in his defence.'

'He wasn't there then, nor yet when we come away,' said a chorus of voices.

'Come to think 'pon it, he hadn't shifted his clothes, neither,' said his mother doubtfully.

'There's something in the wind, lads, for Tom Whackley to be busy 'pon Christmas-eve. He'll be hurting of hisself with overwork, or something dreadful,' said one, amidst a general laugh, in which old Mrs. Whackley joined.

'I hope I may live till that come 'th to pass,' the old lady mumbled from her sunken lips, and laughed again. 'But I heerd the hammer going till eleven o'clock and after.'

So the singers started without him. They had gone but a few yards when they came suddenly upon him. He tried to hurry past, but they gathered around him.

'Why, Tom, whatever have 'ee been doin' of! an' Christmas-eve, tew. But better late than never. Make haste, and come up to the hall. 'T isn't often we do get so many great folks to sing to.'

'And there's a new sweetheart for thee, tew, Tom: thickey fine cook that's come down from London. So big as three Grace Polruans.'

'I shan't sing to-night,' said Tom Whackley with an oath, rushing away and leaving them staring.

'Why, Tom hath turned 'Methody,' I dew believe,' said the wag of the party. 'Thinketh there'll be a chance for mun up to Tresmeer, I reckon.'

‘Might turn ‘Methody’ for worse things than that,’ said another, and all gave their assent.

Doing their best without the blacksmith, the singers visited the hall and went through their programme. They had sat by the great fire, and feasted from the plenty which piled the kitchen table. And now, an hour later, they came along the footpath that led by a shorter way to the village, for they must treat the parson and the steward to a carol or two.

Suddenly two figures left the path, and hurried right and left.

‘Who’s that?’ asked one and another.

‘That man was Tom Whackley, I’ll swear,’ cried the foremost. ‘The other looked like a woman, but I couldn’t be sure.’

‘There’s something queer in the wind, lads,’ said an old man of the party. And all moved onward quietly wondering whatever Tom was up to.

* * * * *

At seven o’clock the little company of Methodists gathered for the prayer-meeting. Moving slowly along with their lanterns, a dozen or fourteen met to pray about the new chapel. It certainly was a dismal place in which they worshipped this morning. The dim tallow candles stuck here and there served for little else than to make the darkness visible—flickering and guttering in the draughts that came from window and door. With low, uneven walls, and earthen floor, and a few forms for seats, a more dreary or cheerless place could scarcely be found.

But all hearts had been warmed by the singing of the first hymn—

‘Come, ye that love the Lord,
And let your joys be known.’

Then, as they kneeled to pray, dear old 'Granny' Polruan, as they called her, carried them all up to the gate of the Celestial City—ay, and further than that, right into the presence of the King.

'Thou loving Lord Jesus! We do love Thee, sure enough, and we do praise Thee, to think that Thou wert born in a stable and laid in a manger. Bless Thy dear name, Thy love was stronger than for to mind about the old walls, and the cold winds, and the poor folks that come for to bid Thee welcome. And so 't is still. Thou art here 'long with us, bless Thy name. And Thou hast all power in heaven and on earth. And they do want a new chapel for to worship Thee in, O Lord; but we do thank Thee for the old one. And Thou canst give it to them if 't is Thy will, so easy as Thou did'st say, "Let there be light, and there was light." And, blessed Lord, whether we do have the new chapel or whether we don't, help us every one to have done with these here ghastly ways of unbelief. Amen.'

Certainly if unbelief could be killed, that prayer-meeting must have been his death. The presence of the Lord filled the place. Prayer was turned to praise. John Polruan, who was generally rather slow, and not much given to rapture, this morning might have been one of the angels that do excel in strength, such an excellent triumphing was there in the power and wisdom and love of God. And when the brief hour was done, he, at least, went home assured that nothing could hinder it now, and resolved that he would keep the Lord right there before him, high and lifted up upon His throne, far above earl, and steward, and everybody, and everything.

* * * * *

The clock at the hall struck nine, and the solemn old church clock followed. About the great kitchen fires waited groups of old parishioners—the women in red cloaks, the men in long serge overcoats that hid their breeches and the thick brown stockings. Groups of labourers in their clean smocks joined them, and now and then the servants stopped to add some bit of news.

It was very evident that something serious had happened. The Christmas merriment had died out of all faces, and they talked in grave tones with sober looks and solemn shakes of the head.

There, at the further end of the kitchen, piled on the tables, were the pounds of beef and mutton which were to be given presently to the poor. And now came the steward and his lordship, led by Mrs. Crawling; evidently some explanation was going on.

‘Have you sent for John Polruan?’ asked his lordship, ‘for we can do nothing till he comes.’

So immediately a messenger was despatched with all haste to Tresmeer. John Polruan, with his mother and daughter, was just rising from prayers when there was a loud knock at the door. Before it could be answered, the door was opened, and a frightened face was thrust in for a moment only. ‘Please, Mest’ Polruan es wanted up to the hall, now to once.’ Then the messenger went away as suddenly as he had come.

‘Whatever is it?’ cried old Granny Polruan.

‘What can it be?’ wondered Grace, turning pale.

‘Blessed King, Thou art upon the throne, whatever it is,’ said John Polruan to himself, as he put on his hat.

‘Cluck, cluck, cluck,’ went the chicken, as it picked

up the crumbs from under the breakfast table: '*The Heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?*'

When John arrived at the hall the little group that waited at the door fell back before him with a strange silence. He read in every face that there was some trouble in which he was involved. He passed along the great kitchen, but not a scarlet cloak curtsied to him; not one of the old familiar faces bade him a good day. Then he stood in front of the three—his lordship looking very sad; Mr. Mawmon, the steward, looking very severe; Mrs. Crawling, the cook, with her hands on her hips, looking red and triumphant.

'His lordship's horders was four pounds,' she begun. The earl waved his hand to her to be quiet.

'John,' he said kindly, 'I think there is some mistake here; and I am confident that you can explain it.'

Mrs. Crawling shook her head, decidedly. Mr. Mawmon stroked his chin with his finger and thumb, doubtfully.

'The order, I think, was for four pounds of meat in each case.'

'It was, my lord,' said John.

'I see, too, that you have charged for four pounds. Now these have been weighed in the presence of the steward and myself, and we find that each lot is more than a quarter of a pound deficient.'

John looked confused—guilty, the steward thought.

'My lord, they were all weighed under my own oversight. Most of them were a little overweight; but I am prepared to take my oath that not one was less than four pounds.'

‘I dare say you will know if the meat is precisely the same as when you sent it.’

John looked over the lots. ‘Yes, my lord, they are precisely the same.’

‘Then they are, as I say, all deficient.’

Taking up one after another and throwing them into the scales, Mrs. Crawling remarked, ‘There, your lordship, seein’ is believin’, as the sayin’ is. P’raps Mr. What’s-his-nàme’s scales are wrong.’

‘Perhaps, my lord, these weights are not right,’ said John.

‘P’raps Mr. What’s-his-name will try ‘em his hown self.’ And the cook held out a couple of two-pound weights instead of the one that they had been using. Again it was given against him.

‘*The weights* is right enough, your lordship.’ And Mrs. Crawling pointed to the scales triumphantly.

John was utterly bewildered. ‘I can’t understand it, my lord, I’m sure.’

His lordship’s face grew sadder. Mr. Mawmon looked more severe. Mrs. Crawling became redder and more triumphant.

‘Your lordship will see that it does not only affect this particular supply for the charity, but the household supply likewise, and to a similar extent,’ the steward pointed out in a very solemn tone of voice.

‘*Hegs-actly*,’ cried Mrs. Crawling, tightening her lips and nodding her head.

‘Your lordship, moreover, will not have failed to perceive, I am assured, that this sort of thing may possibly, and has probably, been going on for a considerable period of time.’

‘*Pre-cisely*,’ said Mrs. Crawling.

His lordship sighed. 'John Polruan, I *did* hope that you could have given some explanation of this most unfortunate occurrence.' And his lordship spoke in the tone that he used for convicted prisoners at the Quarter Sessions. 'Every aspect of the matter is very grave, but to me the blackest part of it is that, at this Christmas season, you should have deprived these your fellow-parishioners of their charity. Of course I shall see that they do not suffer, but your fraud'—

'*Fraud* my lord!' John cried, as his voice faltered.

'I wish I could use another word, John Polruan. You bear a name that has always been a pledge of honesty and straightforwardness. And I cannot tell you what a surprise and grief it is to me that—'

In a moment the thought flashed upon John's mind that *the Lord was King*; far above earl and steward and everything else; and he lifted his face with such radiant honesty that the earl stopped.

'Have you anything to say, Mr. Polruan?' his lordship asked.

'Nothing, my lord; only I am convinced that this matter shall yet be cleared up to your lordship's satisfaction.'

The cook tightened her lips and shook her head. *That* would never be; they might take her word for it.

'But meanwhile my duty is plain,' his lordship went on; 'you cannot supply my household again, and unless there should be some explanation, of which I am sorry to say I can see no prospect, your good name is gone.'

In spite of his faith in the King it was a hard

struggle, His lips quivered, and the tears gathered in his eyes. He could not get out a word; but as the earl turned to leave, John, too, hastened between the silent ranks of the parishioners, and left the place.



Chapter the Sixth.

THE FRUIT OF FAITH.

GLAD to have the staring faces behind him, John Polruan turned into the little footpath that led through the woods to Tresmeer. The fine old trees, with mossy trunks and twisted branches, grew thickly on every side of him : whilst this morning the bracken and the brushwood and the dead leaves were all decked out with the silver tracery of the hoarfrost. Now a rabbit hopped across his path ; and a pheasant rose with its startling whirr and went sailing overhead ; or out of the holly flew a screaming blackbird, or a brave robin perched on the trunk of some felled tree and struck up a Christmas carol. 'Blessed Lord, thou art the King,' cried John, flinging off again the gloomier thoughts that had begun to creep over him. 'Here are ten thousand tokens of Thy love. And for me Thou hast given Thyself. I will, I do trust Thee, with all my heart.'

Seated by the fire at home, the old lady and her granddaughter waited anxiously for his return. Now as he came in he looked so cheerful that he completely drove away their fears.

'What was it, then ?' asked the old lady, looking up. 'Nothing so very dreadful after all, I s'pose.'

'Nothing so very dreadful, mother, if it weren't

for our ghastly ways of unbelief.' And John sat down at her side.

Grace took her father's hand tenderly in her own. 'Then they ought not to have frightened us out of our senses by sending for you like that, if it were nothing serious.'

'Well, it was something serious, dear. Very serious, too—there's no denying that.' And John spoke so gravely that both faces grew troubled at once.

For a minute or two not a sound was heard but the ticking of the old clock, and the 'cluck, cluck' of the little lame chicken as it wandered over the place.

'There's something wrong with the weight of the charity meat. His lordship and the steward have weighed it with the cook; and each lot is nearly a quarter of a pound under weight. I can't understand it.'

Grace's hand tightened its clasp. For a moment a sadness came over her father's face, and his voice faltered. Then the light shone again and the voice regained its pleasantness—'But the Lord is King, mother, and it will be all right.'

Old Granny Polruan only looked steadily into the fire. Grace sat with tearful eyes fixed on her father's face.

'So I am not to supply the house any more.' Then John stopped again.

'Cluck, cluck,' went the chicken, as it hopped on to the table—'Cluck, cluck.'

'But the worst of it all is that—that his lordship'—again John's voice faltered—'has charged me before half the parish with—with *stealing*.'

In a moment the old lady turned round and looked at him—sitting there so quietly! talking of it with so little trouble! She sprang up and clasped her stick, whilst with the other hand she gripped her son's shoulder. Her black eyes flashed and her cheeks were crimsoned. Stamping her foot, she cried, 'Stealing! stealing! a man of your father's name charged with—with *that!* And you don't go mad with rage! And you sit there like that! And you don't go searching out the lie—and, and—'

'Mother!' said John very quietly, looking up into her face. In an instant the colour died; the fierceness vanished; the voice sank to grief. She let the stick fall, and resting both hands on her son's shoulder, she leaned down and hid her face.

'There—that's *me!* And to think that I should have set up for to teach other folks about the ghastly ways of unbelief!' Then she looked up again. 'Yew'm right, Jan: yew'm right. And I'm proud of 'ee tew. Yew'm right. And yew be your father's boy all over. Bless 'ee.' And the old trembling hand stroked his hair tenderly. 'There, I always had so many ghastly ways of unbelief about *me—always.*' And she sat down rocking herself to and fro before the fire and sighed.

Just then the chicken came hopping along the table and perched, as it often did, on Grace's shoulder. And there right under John Polruan's ear it began its sermon, so close that they all three heard it, and it came to each heart and did them good.

'Cluck, cluck! Will you listen to me a minute please? Cluck, cluck.' And the little preacher turned his head from one to another quite elegantly. 'You

know that I am nothing but a little lame chicken,' and it drew up the crippled foot under its feathers, and stood on its one sound leg. 'But the Heavenly Father careth for me. And He brought me in here, and made my fair mistress look after me so well that I want for nothing; but am as happy as the day is long. Cluck, cluck. And to be sure, He'll take care of your good name, master—I know He will. Are ye not much better than they? Cluck, cluck.' And then, having finished the sermon—which was short, as all Christmas sermons should be—the preacher hopped down again and went his way.

Yet, in spite of John Polruan's faith, it was a trying year. The villagers looked askance at him. Men who owed him a grudge took care to fling this in his teeth. And the business was almost given up. The little company of Methodists, however, confident in his uprightness, were only knit to him with a closer love and sympathy. But as for the new chapel, no one had a word to say about that; not even Granny Polruan could find any hope of that now.

And yet they had prayed for it; two or three had gathered together and sought it as touching His kingdom. Why not hope and believe? Why not, indeed—except for these ghastly ways of unbelief?

* * * * *

Another Christmas-day had come. No early morning prayer-meeting had roused the household before daybreak this year. There was already a faint light of dawn far away over the river as the little company at Tresmeer sat down to breakfast. Suddenly there came a loud knock at the door. It was repeated impatiently; and before John could open the door a frightened face

was thrust inside, and the panting messenger cried, 'Please, Mest' Polruan is wanted up to the hall, and he must come to once, please, for her's dying, so the doctor saith.'

And before any further question could be put, the messenger was gone.

'What is it?' thought Grace.

'Whatever can it be?' cried the old lady. 'Never is the countess, to be sure. Her wouldn't want our Jan nãither.'

Away went John, along the familiar footpath and through the woods, now dripping with the mist. Before him, in a dip between the hills across the water, the sun rose—a great, round copper ball, shorn of his rays. The mist had gathered itself into clouds that clung along the woodside, or crept in places along the valley. All was perfectly still. No rabbit frisked along the green sward; not even a robin struck up once, or a blackbird went screaming from the holly. The sad, dull dripping from the trees, and the rustle of the dead leaves as John hastened along, were the only sounds.

Again in the great hall he was met with silent and troubled faces, amongst whom one moved whispering some later tidings.

Without a word of explanation, all taking it for granted that he knew why they had sent for him, he was led up the stairs and along the passages, until he reached a room of which the door was opened, and the earl himself stood waiting for him. His lordship held out his hand, and almost frightened John by shaking hands with him warmly.

'Thank you, Mr. Polruan, for coming so quickly,' his lordship said, in a hoarse and sorrowful voice. 'It

was very good of you. She has sent for us that she may see you in our presence.'

Beside the earl stood the steward, who held out his hand too, seeing that his lordship had gone so far; but his lordship had put his heart into *his* greeting; Mr. Mawmon only put his fingers.

Hastening into the room, there, propped with pillows, and gasping for breath, John found Mrs. Crawling; evidently dying. She turned a face of agony to him.

Can you—forgive me—Sir?' she gasped. 'They know—all about it, and will tell you. Oh, can you—ever forgive me?'

Then at once it flashed upon John. It was all cleared up now.

'Yes, yes,' cried John, 'with all my heart,' and he took her by the hand tenderly—'with all my heart.'

For a minute or too she lay with closed eyes, as if unconscious. Then, looking up again, she asked, 'And—will you—ask God to—forgive me, too?'

'He will—He will;' and, leaning over her, John spoke the comfortable words of the blessed Lord Jesus. Then all knelt about the bed, as he pleaded with God to give her the light of the Holy Spirit, and besought the Lord to speak His forgiveness and love to her heart.

When John had finished, all still knelt for a few minutes in silence; and as they waited there she passed away.

'Thank God that you came, Polruan,' said the earl, wiping his eyes, as they went out of the room together. 'Do not go away. Breakfast will be waiting for you in the housekeeper's room. You must please do me the

favour to stay to the distribution of the Christmas charities. I have sent for your mother and daughter, and I hope they will be able to meet you here.'

'Thank you, my lord,' said John wondering.

And, sitting alone in what had been Mrs. Crawling's room, John let his over full heart pour out its gladness and thanksgiving to the Lord in heaven. He was scarcely able to think of how she had contrived her wickedness; the thought of her passing away thus, and his joy at finding himself free from suspicion, once more left no room in his mind for anything else.

At nine o'clock the great kitchen was filled. There were old couples in their red cloaks and long brown overcoats, with comfortable lappets to keep the shoulders warm. There were labourers in clean smocks, with comely wives, and troops of sturdy children. The buzz of gossip ceased as the earl came in with the steward, and beside them stood John Polruan, with his mother and Grace.

Then his lordship stood up to address them. 'You remember, all of you, the painful scene in this place on Christmas-day of last year. I wish you could forget it. Mised and deceived as we all were, it was unhappily my part to charge one whom we all knew and respected with what it seemed impossible for us to believe. That matter, as you have all heard by this time, no doubt, has to-day been cleared up. Now I wish before you all to tell Mr. Polruan how deeply grieved I am that I should thus have injured him.'

'My lord, please don't say so,' cried John, overwhelmed.

'It is not enough for me to say that we all believe

him to be a man honest and true as his father before him—and I can give him no higher praise.'

'There!' cried old Granny Polruan, pressing her son's arm, and looking on him very proudly.

'But I desire to-day to give, so far as I can, some lasting token of my regret at what he has suffered, and my estimate of his thorough uprightness.'

Then his lordship turned and faced John. 'Mr. Polruan——'

'Call mun Jan, your lordship; will 'ee please?' whispered the old lady, almost beside herself with joy.

'John, then,' said his lordship, laughing, 'I hope you will give me the opportunity of making this slight reparation.'

Poor John couldn't get the words out; his heart was too full. He stammered some broken thanks, and added something about the favour of his God and the respect of his fellow-men being more than anything else, and that having them he really had nothing more to ask.

Then old Granny Polruan's voice spoke out, shrill and trembling. 'Why, your lordship, he 'th been praying for ground for a new chapel. Perhaps this be the Lord's way of sending it.'

Mr. Mawmon stroked his chin doubtfully.

'The very thing,' cried his lordship. 'So it shall be. Let Mr. Polruan choose the site. And now Mr. Polruan—John, I mean, let me shake hands with you in the presence of our neighbours in token of our regard and our joy this day. Of her who is gone it becomes us to say nothing. There is another involved in this unhappy business, I am sorry to say; but the warrant

will be issued this morning for his apprehension. I mean young Whackley, the blacksmith."

John had not heard of that. Startled as he was, yet he spoke out in an instant.

'My lord, then I have another favour to ask in place of the new chapel. I ask that you will allow me to give young Whackley your lordship's assurance that for him there is a full pardon on your lordship's part, as there is on mine.'

'But the ends of justice demand'—and Mr. Mawmon stroked his chin, and looked very severe.

'I think I could venture to be bound for his good behaviour,' John urged.

'I'm sartain sure yew could, Mest' Polruan, and bless 'ee for it, tew,' and old Mrs. Whackley sobbed and curtsied.

'So it shall be, then, since you wish it,' said his lordship.

'But not instead of the new chapel,' cried old Granny Polruan.

'No, indeed,' laughed his lordship.

And so they got the pretty little place at St. Piran's that stands there to this day, witnessing alike to the power of faith and to the truth of our Christmas tale.



Ancle Dick Curnow's
Conversion.



UNCLE DICK CURNOW'S CONVERSION.



Chapter the First.

WHICH IS ALL ABOUT SOMEBODY ELSE.

I GOT the story from old Miss Jennie. To ask 'Miss Jennie who?' would be to provoke a stare of the utmost amazement. There was but one Miss Jennie in all the world—that is to say in all St. Ivart's; and in the opinion of every soul in that parish, all the world and St. Ivart's were one and the same. And no wonder either. For nature had cut them off from the rest of the world by a huge granite-crowned hill; and the road, which went ever so far round, was a succession of such steep ups and downs, past dangerous tidal creeks, and altogether so rough, that nobody went there who could help it. And when he did get there the visitor found such a lovely bay, and such a set of sturdy, warm-hearted, independent folks, that he never went away again if he could help it. So shut in and shut out landward was St. Ivart's. But seaward away stretched the Atlantic for thousands of miles—all their's so far as they could see, venturing out on its billows and bringing home the hake and mackerel and above all the pilchard, which was commercially speaking the

life and soul of the place. St. Ivert's might think all the world of itself but unquestionably the pilchard was all the world to St. Ivert's.

Here lived Miss Jennie. Up a narrow street that led from the rough stone pier, and you came to a house rather bigger and better than its neighbours, with whitewashed wall topped with feathery tamarisks enclosing an old fashioned garden in which big fuschias and thick-stemmed geraniums flourished all the year round. A little green gate led in over the flat stones to a whitewashed house, the very roof itself patched with the universal whitewash. Then you stopped in front of a little low door, painted a vivid green colour. Every door in St. Ivert's was green for that matter, a Cornish sea green, and every house was whitewashed. But then you knew Miss Jennie's by the garden. The rest of the little town was huddled together as if the houses were afraid of being blown away by some of the tremendous gales that swept the place and had clutched each other for safety. Miss Jennie's stood all by itself in rather a haughty and isolated way; it did not need anybody to lean upon, and was quite able to take care of itself. And *that* was Miss Jennie all over.

Here she lived—when she was at home; which was not very often. For Miss Jennie was everything; she was class-leader, prayer-leader, and general society manager; she was the visitor of every sick and poor lady in the place; she was the looker-up of all absentees from school or from class, or from any of the services; she was the wise healer of breaches, the stern and dreaded reprover of all offenders; and last, but by no means least, she was the nurse of all women, in times when

such help is more especially needed, the soother of newborn babies—it was wonderful how many of them there were at St. Ivart's—and she was the gratuitous compounder and dispenser of endless balms, lotions, pills, potions, ointments for everybody. And *that* too, was Miss Jennie exactly. Where other good people brought a bunch of grapes, she brought 'herbs;' where others would think of a pudding, she suggested a poultice.

To say that Miss Jennie was loved would not be true. The fact was that everybody was rather afraid of her. And yet if you asked any of them about her they all declared that Miss Jennie was the best friend they ever had, and that nothing seemed right unless she came in to manage it. Every man and woman and child in the place would have done anything for Miss Jennie, and a fair half of the people would have laid down their lives before a hair of her head should have been hurt. New superintendents of the circuit, if they could not discern between deep interest in the welfare of the church and a mere meddling interference with its affairs—and some men never know one from the other—would be sure to 'collide' unpleasantly with Miss Jennie; but a grain of perception and even less of spiritual discernment was always enough to set matters right.

Altogether Miss Jennie was one of those uncommon people whom everybody spoke of as 'a character.' Tall, square shouldered, with a large square face; thick and bushy eyebrows hung over a pair of piercing eyes; a hooked nose; a mouth that could be shut up very tight if she pleased, and yet that could whistle and chirrup to the babies in a way that fascinated them instantly, even in their most furious fits—that is what a

picture might have shown you. But the live Miss Jennie was a great deal more than any photograph could show. You met her going up those steep hills, the long conspicuous feet taking enormous strides; a large well-filled bag, on which a huge cabbage rose was worked in wool, hung from one arm, whilst the other swung in a very energetic way. You saw her slipping into a score of houses, in almost as many minutes, scolding at one, doctoring at another, here getting a dish of tea for some old bedridden dame; here measuring out two liberal spoonfuls of 'doctor's trade,' as they called it, and leaving a couple of huge, hard, ill rounded pills to be taken at night.

Or perhaps you came upon her staying to read a chapter from the Bible to some old sick saint. Ah, then was the time to catch Miss Jennie. Till then you wondered that anybody could ever think of calling her an *angel*. Everything that was artistic, æsthetic, traditional, imaginative, angrily repudiated the suggestion. Angels are graceful, angels are young, with golden hair and soft eyes and beautiful complexion. And Miss Jennie was wrinkled, and her hair was a mixture of black and white, and when she read the Bible she put on a pair of spectacles, tilted on the tip of her nose, and requiring her to hold up the book and elevate her chin at such an angle that it gave her voice quite a nasal twang. But if you could have been there then; if you could have knelt down in that little room you would have understood it all. The hardness died out of the voice, and there came a tender, touching, trustful pleading as of a little child. Somehow the tears always came when Miss Jennie prayed, and you felt sure everything would be given when Miss Jennie asked for it. That

was how every heart in St. Ivart's came to cling to Miss Jennie. On the dreadful nights when the gale had risen suddenly, and the breakers were thundering in the bay, and the fishing boats were at sea, the light always burnt in Miss Jennie's room, and folks whispered that she spent the night in prayer at such times; and very often some troubled mother or fearful wife would creep to the little door and beg Miss Jennie 'to mind' the lad or husband in peril on the sea; and then would go back again, calm and strong, as if they heard through the storm the whisper of His 'Fear not.' You could quite believe then the story they told, of how one summer and autumn no fish had come into the bay, and the harvest of the sea threatened a terrible failure. Want was already pinching the poorer amongst them, and all dreaded the prospect of the winter. Then one night Miss Jennie had pleaded at their weekly prayer-meeting; pleading it seemed as near to the feet of Jesus as any ever came of olden time; and then how that going homewards she bade them have all ready for a haul, they were coming. And the next day at dawn the cry rang from the look-out house, 'Heva, heva,' and the bay was alive with the fish.

Miss Jennie's counsel to the fair maidens of St. Ivart's anticipated and emphasised the familiar advice of later times. 'Going to be married! Don't—don't. The men may be all very well, I dare say: but there, they have agot such a lot o' ghastly old ways.' And she consistently followed the advice she so readily gave to others. More than once some daring gallant had approached her, feeling his way to this tender subject. But it was very abruptly 'nipped in the bud.' One polite suitor who had come on such an errand timidly

tried to break the ice by offering her his arm on the way to chapel. It was pushed away instantly with a sharp reproof. 'For shame—for shame; go settin' all the boys a laughin' 'pon a Sunday.' Another gentleman, very fine but somewhat elderly, got himself up in such a way as he thought likely to impress the sturdy maiden, and waited upon her in the most approved fashion, asking her to become his wife. She turned upon him. 'Well I never! You come to your time o' life, and to go thinking o' such old nonsense! Better you'd go home and prepare for another world.'

Unsentimental Miss Jennie certainly was, having her own opinions about most things, and her own ways of doing, having the courage of her convictions. Quiet sympathy, the strength of most women's hearts, as it is their most precious gift, was not a necessity of Miss Jennie's nature. And well for her that it was not. Where a more tender nature would have been crushed, she lived and triumphed. The first Methodist of her family, she had been persecuted as a girl with that incessant and petty snubbing which is more wearing than harsher treatment. Of a higher social position than the rest of the little flock, it was not only the enthusiasm about religion that appeared so dreadful—blasphemous the clergyman called it; very much worse was the intimacy with labourers and fishermen and miners. People can do with heresy if it is only rich and respectably connected. If early Methodism could only have caught a real lord bishop to ordain its preachers, it would have lost one half of its horrors—would have lost, moreover, rather above nine-tenths of its power: wherefore let all the churches be thankful.

Chapter the Second.

IN WHICH WE GET NEARER THE STORY.

I HAD come down to St. Ivart's making inquiries about this old Dick Curnow. Everybody gave me the same advice. 'Iss—the ould uncle Dick Curnow, I can mind 'en, to be sure—o' course everybody knowed the ould uncle Dick. But there if you want to knaw anything about 'en your ownself you must ax Miss Jennie.'

At last I stood at the little green door and knocked, curious to make the acquaintance of one whom I seemed already to know so well.

'Come in,' said a voice on the other side. And there I found Miss Jennie, stirring some medicinal decoction; her face made redder than usual by the heat of the fire. The little table was covered with leaves and roots; whilst the room itself, a sort of upper kitchen or lower parlour, was filled with the smell of the boiling stuff, more potent than savoury.

Miss Jennie lifted her face out of the saucepan, holding the cover in one hand, whilst the other grasped the spoon with which she went on stirring as she spoke. 'Good morning, sir,' she said suspiciously, her face looking a hundred notes of interrogation—Who was I? Where did I come from? What was my business?

The moment I mentioned the name of Dick Curnow the face altogether changed. 'Dear old uncle Dick,'

said she, at once speaking broad Cornish, and using the familiar 'uncle,' which is often applied to old men in those parts. She lifted the saucepan off the fire, held out her hand cordially, and offered me a chair, whilst she sat down on the opposite side of the fire for a chat.

Yes, Miss Jennie knew the story well; she had met for years in uncle Dick Curnow's class when she was a girl, and going to class meant something then, sure 'nough. Might be a good thing if it meant so much to-day, and folks would think more of it, might be. But there, she wasn't one of the croakers, and hoped when she couldn't find any more to praise the Lord for down here she might go to heaven. These here old ravens that was a croak, croak, all the year round, nothing was right except it was exactly as they wanted it. Whatever good they could be Miss Jennie couldn't tell, unless it was for to show what black, bilious, dismal creatures even sort of religious folks might come to if they began a grumbling and growling. Iss—Uncle Dick had sat scores of times by that very fire and told about them old days.

Then Miss Jennie stopped abruptly. The homely Cornish brogue was suddenly changed, the old suspicious manner returned again.

'But pray, sir, what is your name?' she asked fixing her eyes upon me rather fiercely.

'Pardon me,' said I, as pleasantly as I could, 'what can that have to do with your story?'

'Umph,' said Miss Jennie, putting her lips together very tightly, and nodding her head sideways for a minute or two. Then looking up again half-amused, and half-sternly, 'I think I know, sir.'

I laughed in reply, 'Then I need not tell you, Miss Jennie.'

'Yes,' she said, nodding her head again at the saucepan, 'I know. And you mean to put him in a book. And——' The sentence ended in a long series of nods.

'Well,' I asked quietly.

Then the little sharp eyes were turned upon me fiercely again as if they read me all through. '*And you are going to put me in a book, too.*'

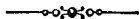
'And why not?' I asked, trying to look indifferent to the searching fire of those sharp eyes, and fearing that I should lose my story of Dick after all, unless I came to terms.

'Because, sir, I don't like it,' said Miss Jennie. 'Books only give the peculiarities of people, and exaggerate them too.'

'Yes, and downright hard-headed, hard-working, common-sensed goodness that can do something more than sing about heaven or cry over it is a peculiarity worth telling about, isn't it?'

Then the Cornish came back again, and all the homeliness. 'Well, well, I was going for to make 'ee promise that you wouldn't. But there—I b'lieve you must please yourself. And to think that I should have found 'ee out like that, too.'

'But about Uncle Dick Curnow,' said I. And so doubtless saith my impatient reader.



Chapter the Third.

IN WHICH WE GET TO UNCLE DICK CURNOW AT LAST.

‘**H**E was eighty-two, sir, when he died, was the
ould Uncle Dick; and that is a goodish many
years ago now. A good height and tremendously
strong in his young days. If you had seen the dear old
man sitting down here all so quiet and good you never
would have thought what a wild one he was once.’

But I must leave Miss Jennie’s narrative, using it only with the rest of the information I had gathered. Good old Dick had been in his early life certainly the very leader in the fierce sports of those times. And no Irishman at a fair ever found more delight in a scrimmage than did the Cornishman of a hundred years ago. It was not enough for the champion of one parish to challenge the best man of some other place; the favourite method was for all the able-bodied men of the parish to gather ‘one and all,’ armed with stout sticks, and to go forth against the men of another parish whom they had challenged to such a battle. Broken heads and limbs were the necessary result of such contests in scores of instances, and not unfrequently loss of life. Now Dick Curnow’s glory was to challenge any three men to fight with clubs. In wrestling and hurling and fighting and smuggling he was always the leader; the strongest and most daring of those parts.

He was still a young man when the arrow of the truth first struck him; it stuck in his heart and he could never get it out again. It was Mr. Wesley's own hand that drew the bow at a venture—the text did not seem a likely shaft to smite such a one as this Dick Curnow. The sermon was preached to a vast crowd of people on 'the Downs;' the text was this; 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.' Dick had listened, deeply wrought upon. There came over him a rush of bewildering thoughts; and more than thoughts—*convictions*. Hitherto, the strength that could knock any man down, that loved a fight and a fair wrestle, and the spirit that would not stand to be put upon by anybody, these were the grand things; this was all that was worth living for. But here in an hour all that was upset; and what he used to despise as good for women and children only had become the really beautiful things that he—big Dick Curnow—was breaking his heart about. Yes—to be gentle and humble and loving was finer than anything else.

When the congregation broke up Dick had gone away by himself to the sea side. He sat on a rock, high up the cliff, whilst the waves crept in and out hundreds of feet below him. The sun was setting. The breadth of golden glory that stretched away towards it over the waters changed to crimson. The ruddy glow filled all the sky and coloured all the sea, and tinged the cliffs, the grassy slopes, and the rocky places. But Dick sat still as one stunned—seeing nothing, and only wondering. What did it all mean, then? Must he turn round and be good? Must he go to chapel and sing hymns and pray? And if they put upon him, mustn't he fight them for it. No; he was

sure it could not mean that. And there, the preacher was a little man; they said he was afraid of nobody, but for all that he was not made like Dick Curnow. He was made to go about preaching, of course. And Dick Curnow—he was made strong and big to go about fighting, of course, and wrestling, and smuggling. For somebody must fight and wrestle, he supposed, just like somebody must preach. But it did seem hard, too; and as the sunset fell upon that round honest face, the red glow shone in the tears that trickled down his cheeks. It couldn't be helped now, but if he only had been a cripple, or weak, or anything but big Dick Curnow, he might have been good and meek.

On this part of Dick's story Miss Jennie had her comment. 'He said that he used to go about wishing that he was a cripple or a little child, or a *woman*, anything that was *weak*. A *woman* indeed! But there, the men al'ays is so ignorant. I s'pose they can't help it, poor dears.'

So young Dick lived on as before, thinking that there was nothing else for him. But, in the quiet night, or, in the midst of the deep stillness underground, the words would come back to him,—*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth!* And again there rose before him that true and beautiful life—to be quiet; to love; to forgive. Yes, that was the real life, and Dick shook his head sadly. It was all too late now. He was big and strong Dick Curnow. Ah, if he had always been a little child, he might perhaps have been good then! In the winter evenings he would creep up to the chapel listening at the window intently. He looked in upon the little company with a kind of awe. How he wished that he

were weak and feeble and old, like Jan Treloar, the leader of the society. Then, sad at heart, he came home and was off with a set of smugglers.

One night as Dick listened at the window under cover of the darkness, the preacher had chosen for his subject the conversion of St. Paul. There was a somewhat vivid description of the persecution of the early Christians; of the death of Stephen and of Paul's part in it. Dick drew nearer and nearer to the little window, until his face pressed close against it. 'Here was a fightin' man; big and strong o' course,' Dick thought to himself. Then the preacher went on to tell of the light, and of the voice from heaven, and of the mighty change that was wrought in the man.

To Dick it was no bit of dead history; but a page of to-day, real and present. Suddenly the little company inside was startled by a voice, 'Please, sir, do he live anywhere hereabout, do he?' Instantly everybody looked round at the window, whilst Dick suddenly remembered where he was, and slunk off, whispering, 'If he's living within fifty mile o' this parish I'll find 'em out an' see if 'tis true.'

The next day Jan Treloar was at work in his little tailor's shop when Dick appeared in the doorway. The young giant looked up with such a pleading face and such an earnest voice that anybody might have read all the secret of his trouble in a moment. But old Jan never expected to see any signs of grace in this young leader of mischief. He sat up half a dozen stairs perched on his crossed legs in a sort of windowledge stitching away solemnly at some garment, meditating on the dust which it must enclose, and finding in it sad emblems of our frail humanity.

‘Please, Mest’ Treloar, where do that fighting chap live to, what they was a-tellin’ about up to chapel last night.’

Grave old Jan Treloar started very much as if one of his own needles had pricked him smartly. He stroked the pious fringe of hair that he wore down over his forehead and groaned.

‘A fightin’ man, an’ up to chapel! La, Dick Curnow, whatever are ’ee a-tellin’ about, then?’


‘Why last night up to chapel, Mest’ Treloar; an’ he so good as killed one of ’em too. I should dearly like for to see the man an’ hear oal about it from his awn lips, for to make sure that tes true. Livin’ anywhere hereabouts, is he, Mest’ Treloar?’

‘What!’ gasped Jan Treloar, ‘he do mean St. Paul! To think of it!’ And the old man held up his hands, horrified as much at the thought of the apostle being alive now as at his being spoken of as ‘a fightin’ chap.’ He groaned again over such shocking depravity. ‘La, Dick Curnow! Wherever do you expect to go to?’ And Jan Treloar stitched away at his work, shaking his head very solemnly and muttering to himself.

Poor Dick came away from the place more discouraged than ever. ‘Aw dear,’ he sighed, ‘I s’pose I’m worst of all the fightin’ chaps, an’ that tes no good for me to try to be good. And yet if the Lord spoke to one of ’em and made ’em all so good, why shouldn’t He speak to me. Perhaps He will some day. I do wish He would.’

Chapter the Fourth.

IN WHICH DICK CURNOW HAS HIS LAST TURN
AT SMUGGLING.

S the weeks of that winter passed away Dick's companions noticed a strangeness in him. The old sprightliness of manner was gone. He who used to be so quick to pick a quarrel was now very slow to avenge himself. And though he had not lost his skill in a turn at his old combats, yet there was a carelessness in following up his advantage which was quite unlike the Dick of former time. At the public-house, too, when the smuggled brandy passed amongst his many comrades, Dick's place was generally empty. They often talked of the change, wondering what could have brought it about. 'Love,' said a sly old sailor, winking his eye, 'the very fellow to set the girls' hearts a-flutterin' is young Dick;' and the old man dipped his red nose into the big tumbler, took a long pull, and winked again. 'Nonsense,' laughed another, 'he'd want all the more o' this here for to keep his courage up if that was it.' 'Some little concern of his own what he isn't going partners in—just like un,'—growled an ill-looking fellow who owed Dick a grudge. 'No,' said another putting down the empty glass which he had drained. 'Dick Curnow have been a different man ever since the Methody parson preached 'pon the downs, an' that's what 't is.'

'Ef that es it, I tell 'e, cumrades, he won't get over it—they never do,' said an old man in the corner, who was solemnly puffing at his pipe.

But as for young Dick himself, he went on quite unconscious of any change. To him the possibility of such a thing would have been a great joy. No, he could only think of himself still as big, strong Dick Curnow; he could never be good and gentle and loving, like the blessed were.

But there was one thing that Dick Curnow never thought of altering—did not wish to alter in. If he were ever so meek and gentle and loving, he need not give this up. It was *smuggling*. Men who 'met in class' took their part and place in the venture. Old Jan Treloar could have stroked that pious fringe of hair and steered a boat upon this errand at the same time; or he could have left his board to lend a hand at storing the goods and come back again without feeling condemned. The natural love of adventure might have been questionable, and the money-getting might have been condemned as encouraging covetousness; but with every Cornishman it was a bounden duty to protest thus against any interference with their sea rights, and the liberties of their creeks and harbours. Probably no requirement of Methodism was regarded as so harsh and unreasonable as Mr. Wesley's rule on this matter. A conscience had to be created in relation to it; and the most stubborn prejudices had to be overcome.

But with this winter came at once Dick Curnow's last venture and the beginning of his new life. The ship was expected at a little well-known and well-hidden creek to the north of St. Ivar's. It was a

bigger venture than usual, and for some days the men of the place had been anxiously on the look-out. At last a fishing-boat brought tidings that she was hanging off the coast. The coastguard had been decoyed to a distant part of their district by means of rumours and by appearances that looked suspicious. The signal was given, and soon the little ship cast anchor in the creek. All the place turned out to help. Swung on the backs of the donkeys that passed in long strings, or borne on the broad shoulders of the men, the kegs were carried away and stored in well-known holes and excavations, under gardens and cellars, or behind crafty wainscots, or up in unsuspected attics. Before the short, December day was done the little ship was nearly cleared. What was left Dick Curnow could stow in his boat, as he would have to pull round to St. Ivarts, and leaping on board Dick made his boat fast to the stern, the anchor was heaved, and the ship drifted out with a gentle wind. The sun had set, and the misty gloom of the evening was thickening; when Dick stood up in the well-filled boat, flung off the ropes, and struck out for the pier. Then suddenly out of the misty gloom swept the long boat of the coastguard close upon him. One man against eight armed men, and he, too, with his boat so heavily laden, there was no chance of escape. The officer sprang up in a moment, and called on him in the king's name to surrender.

'Iss—when you can catch me,' cried Dick, defiantly. The discharge of some firearm whistled uncomfortably near as the only reply to his impertinence, and the water flew from the eight oars that now gave chase. Dick headed for the land, a point that stretched

between St. Ivar's and the little creek. Kicking the kegs overboard, and pulling with his might, he drove the heavy boat well on until he could hear the waves breaking on the rocks not far away. But the pursuers crept nearer and nearer. The cliffs loomed out of the mist now; two minutes more and he would have his boat where they dared not follow him. But the pursuers were upon him, and, thrusting out a boat hook, one seized the boat, and Dick was helpless.

The officer put his pistol down, 'We have got you at last,' he cried, in a rage, mad at the trick that had been played upon him. But before a hand could be laid upon the boat, Dick shouted, 'Come on,' and the next instant had dived overboard. He rose far off in the gloom to hear their furious threats, and knew they were coming after him as near to the shore as they dared to venture. He struck out for a cave that opened close by, and thinking it a good place for shelter, swam in, and soon stepped on its hard sandy floor. Drenched and shivering with cold, he sat down, slapping his hands against his sides. Then wet, numbed, and almost stupefied, he crept about in the dark place, and looked out at the mouth of it, wondering if he could swim away and get to some other place. Were they waiting for him still? Suddenly the little remaining light of the cave was darkened with a deafening boom, and a dreadful rush of wind. Then Dick sprang up.

'I'm caught,' he cried. He knew, as everybody along that coast knows full well, what that booming meant. The cave, high-roofed and deep within, was at the mouth narrow and low. The tide had risen, until now each wave swept over the mouth, driving in the air that flew back again with the boom of a cannon

as the wave began to recede. Soon the cave itself would be filled with water. Dick began to grope his way upward and backward nearly as far as he could reach. Should he swim for it in the dark, diving past the mouth. No; those breakers that thundered so terribly there cut off all hope that way. What could he do? A little while and the waves would cover the spot on which he stood. He crept back until he stood on a little pebble ridge that came close up against the roof of the cave.

Again Dick sat down. All his strength and courage were nothing now—and never would be any more. He was just a little child—weak and helpless. Might he not kneel down to pray? Get right down on the ground like the other fightin' man did? He would. He had heard tell of another world; perhaps the Lord would let him be a little child there, instead of being big, strong Dick Curnow; and then, perhaps, he might come to be amongst the blessed. So Dick lay down and prayed his first prayer: 'Lord, I'm Dick Curnow. Please, Lord, I couldn't help being big and strong, an' I am sorry for it, please Lord. But please, I do want for to be meek an' gentle an' lovin'. I did mean to be when I got old and feeble. But I shan't ever be that now. Please, Lord, bless me, for all I was so strong and big—for I can't do nothing now, please, Lord, an' I'm just the same as a little child. Amen.'

Dick had scarcely finished his prayer, and had not stirred from the place, when instantly there flew over him a shower of sand and gravel. He was rolled over by something that rushed against him, and immediately after splashed into the water.

‘T'es the devil!’ cried Dick, picking himself up very slowly, and brushing the sand out of his eyes—not so much frightened as bewildered. What a dreadful man he must be! That instead of hearing a voice like the other fighting man did, he should have been knocked down in this fashion. But as he turned round Dick saw that where the creature had rushed from there was a little glimmer of light, white, clear, and silvery. Dick, in his simplicity, thought this was heaven. The good Lord had answered his prayer after all; or perhaps it was that shining of the Lord that came to the other fightin’ man. That would be best of all. Creeping up to the hole, Dick saw that on the other side of it there was another opening filled with this shining light. He began to dig at it as well as he could until the passage was large enough for him to get through. Here was an old mine-working that he knew, down which the full moon was shining brilliantly. It was not the Lord after all, then! and Dick was big and strong once more. Climbing up by the rough stones and the earth where the old workings had fallen in, he soon stepped out upon the top of the cliff, and went home. Sadder than ever he sat that night, cold and shivering before the fire, at his mother’s house. There—he had hoped he was going to be a little child. But there was no chance for him. He must be worse than anybody else, he supposed. What a dreadful thing it was to be so big and strong.


Here, too, there comes in another comment of Miss Jennie’s. ‘The doctor always laughed at old Uncle Dick’s devil. He said that of course it was nothing but a seal. May-be the doctor is right, for all that Uncle Dick would stick to it that *he* must know best,

'cause he was there. But seemin' to me that folks now-a-days would sooner for to believe it was a lion or a unicorn, so long as they could get the rids of the devil. Not that I should mind *that*—not a bit. But they 'm fools to believe that anybody can get the rids o' the devil by tryin' for to believe that he's dead.'



Chapter the Fifth.

IN WHICH BIG DICK CURNOW BECOMES A LITTLE CHILD.

HE adventure did not end by any means with Dick's escape from the coastguard. The cold and wet of that winter's day were too much even for this young giant. On came rheumatic fever, with all its helplessness. His strength was gone, and he lay in bed suffering dreadful pain, and unable to move hand or foot.

The bustling mother, herself a very strong, big woman, tended him with a rough kindness that did everything for him; speaking to him, as she always did, as *the chield*. Dick was her only son, and the pride and joy of the mother's life was in his strength and courage. When he came home from some encounter, bruised and cut, but yet victorious, nobody welcomed him with such triumph as his mother. She rubbed her hands with delight, and, folding her big arms, she nodded her head approvingly, and claimed more than half the victory. 'Me an' the chield do know how to do it, an' no mistake.'

Yet clean, honest, fierce in her likes as well as her dislikes, hard-working, there was not a young fellow in the parish who could sit down at a cosier fireside, or who lay under a snugger roof than did young Dick Curnow.

Now, as he lay quite unable to do anything for him-

self, his mother feeding him with the little that he could take, and holding the cup of water to his thirsty lips, Dick almost forgot his pain.

'Mother,' he whispered, tenderly, 'just like a little child again, isn't it?'

'Little chield! why o' course—whatever else was 'ee then I wonder.'

Poor Dick sighed. He had been great, big, strong Dick Curnow. But he *did* hope that he was quite different now. Then as the mother bustled about—for she was one of those women who have not a gift for sitting down and doing nothing—she heard her son feebly moaning and muttering something strange. At first she thought he was dreaming, or he might be wandering in his head. And if she had caught the words that Dick kept repeating, it certainly would have confirmed this last suspicion.

'Please, Lord, I aren't big Dick Curnow any more. Please, Lord, I'm just a little child. Please, Lord, do make me all gentle an' loving an' forgiving. Amen.'

But coming rather suddenly upon him once, in the middle of his prayer, his mother asked him, 'Who are 'ee talkin' to, then, my dear?'

'I was talkin' to the Lord!' whispered Dick.

To the mother this was terrible. It was the surest token of death—certain death. To pray like that—a prayer that was not learnt or read out of a book, was what she had only known people driven to when there was nothing else to be done. Her voice choked with grief, and she rocked herself to and fro. 'La, my dear chield, you aren't going to die yet, you know. The doctor haven't agiven 'ee up yet. Don't 'ee go doing such dreadful things.'

Thinking that it might be well, however, to be prepared for the worst, the mother proposed, as gently as she knew how, to send for the parson.

Dick startled her by suggesting that he would sooner see old Jan Treloar. At once the mother's roughness and fierceness came back again.

'The old Jan Treloar! whatever do 'ee mean, chield?' and she rose up amazed and indignant. 'What do the ould Jan Treloar know about heaven? he's cutting out breeches all his days, an' mending 'em. He don't belong for to knaw anything about religion; brought up to the tailorin', and not had no eddycatin' nor nothin'.' Then her voice and manner grew more kindly. 'No chield; I can't abide these here new-fangled notions, a makin' folks so good all their lives, like as if it were fitty for folks to be religious afore their time! I can't think how folks can hould with such nonsense; I can't.'

So the clergyman was sent for. A man with whom drunkards and thieves and outcasts were angels compared to the Methodists. But then remember, good reader, that I am speaking of a thing that happened a hundred years ago.

The parson, who never hurried himself except in the hunting-field and in reading prayers, came on leisurely to the house. He sat down by the bedside, and opened his prayer-book at the form of prayer for the visitation of the sick. His voice dropped into a kind of sing-song, and he hastened over them, running the prayers one into the other so quickly that it was almost impossible to understand a single sentence.

Then he shut up his book, and bent over the sick man. 'There now—you feel better, don't you? Just

so—just so. Of course you do. Keep up, you know, keep up. Take a little brandy sometimes. Mrs. Curnow, give him a little of the best French sometimes. Nobody can do anything more for you; nobody. Good morning.'

But Dick went on moaning and muttering his prayer, as if the parson's charm had somehow lost its magic, and had by no means done him any good.

'Don't 'ee go on like that, chield—'tis dreadful wisht for to hear 'ee.'

'Mother,' pleaded Dick, 'the old Jan Treloar could read the Bible to me, couldn't he, and not do no harm by it?'

'Read the Bible, do he?' cried Mrs. Curnow, thoroughly aroused again. 'Then Jan Treloar ought to be ashamed of hisself, an' I do hope that Jan Treloar will get what he do desearve—that's all.'

So two or three days went by, Dick still turning his helplessness and pain into a prayer—a most plaintive entreaty. 'Please, Lord, I am so weak an' feeble as a little child. And please, Lord, I thank Thee for it. And now, please, Lord, I will try for to be gentle and lovin' and forgivin' like the blessed. Amen.'

With Mrs. Curnow there was a long and fierce conflict between her dislike of the Methodists and her love of her son. At last there came a happy way out of the difficulty. A compromise was possible, for Jan Treloar had passed the house with a stranger who, the neighbours said, was 'a regular preacher.' Here, then, was one who only wore those garments the making of which so disqualified old Jan Treloar as a teacher of religion.

Before the day was done Dick opened his eyes to find, standing at his bedside, the very man who had

preached on that memorable night about the conversion of St. Paul. Now he could ask all about it—where he lived, and whether Dick could find him. It was a little bit of grief to learn that the fighting man was dead, and that it was all so long ago, too. But it was good to know that the mighty Lord who made St. Paul what he was could do a like mighty work for every one of us.

‘But why doesn’t He come to me with a great shinin’ light, and a voice speakin’?’ asked Dick sadly. ‘I have begged and prayed Him to; and I thought He was going to once; but He didn’t.’

‘The Lord has got many ways of coming to people,’ the preacher explained; ‘and many ways of speaking to them. Sometimes He sends sickness like this.’

‘Does He?’ cried Dick, eagerly, and his face lit up with gladness. ‘Is this one way that He comes?’

‘Yes, this is one way,’ and the preacher went on to tell Dick of the way of salvation. Then he kneeled in prayer.

As he rose to leave, Dick whispered, ‘Please will you read that in the Bible about bein’ gentle and forgivin’, and lovin’, and comin’ to be among the blessed?’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ said the preacher kindly.

‘About “blessed are the meek,” you know,’ Dick explained.

‘Oh, yes; you mean the sermon on the mount;’ and, sitting down, the preacher opened the Book at the fifth chapter of St. Matthew.

‘T was up on the Downs,’ Dick explained, thinking only of Mr. Wesley’s sermon.

But the visitor had begun to read, and did not hear

the correction. He read on until he came to the fifth verse. *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

Then the tears filled Dick's eyes and flowed down his cheeks. 'Do you think that ever I could come for to be one of them, please, Sir?'

'Why, bless you, of course you may,' said the preacher, as his heart warmed towards the simple and earnest inquirer.

'Well, you see, Sir, I used to be so big an' strong—I couldn't help it, you know, Sir, an' I didn't want to be, neither, for I knowed there wasn't a chance for me then. An' now I'm quite frightened to think about it. Whatever shall I do when I'm strong and big Dick Curnow again; for I don't expect I can always be weak and bad?'

The preacher smiled at Dick's simplicity. 'It is not *our* strength or *our* weakness. To be strong is one of God's good gifts for which to be thankful.'

Dick shook his head sadly. Jan Treloar was old and feeble; and Mr. Wesley was little, and the preacher looked thin and pale. All the good people he knew weren't big and strong like he used to be, and like he feared he should be again.

Day after day by further talk and reading and prayer the preacher led Dick on step by step until he came to see some things clearly enough to be comforted and hopeful. It was the Lord Who must do it all. The preacher was right. Dick's own strength or weakness had nothing to do with it. And Dick rejoiced to think that this pain and helplessness was one way of the Lord's coming. 'The Lord have knocked me down, and He can keep me down,' he repeated to him-

self. 'The Lord have took away all my strength; perhaps if I do keep askin' Him He'll keep me weak and feeble still, so that I shall never be big strong Dick Curnow any more.'

Thus, little by little Dick came nearer the truth, until upon St. Ivart's, as upon all the world, there dawned another Christmas-day. The bells rang out all merrily upon the still and frosty air. Dick lay thinking of Him who was born a little child in Bethlehem, longing that he had been there amongst the shepherds or with the wise men who came to worship Him. Would not Jesus come again and be the Holy Child within his heart, and dwell there! Then all would be kind and gentle and loving, and Dick would indeed be among the blessed. Then suddenly the light flashed upon him. Not about him, but *within* shone the glory of the Lord. Christ was come; and all within Dick's soul rang with joy. As surely as in the manger of old, there came and dwelt within his heart, from that day forward, 'a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.'

And Dick grew big and strong again. But evermore there lived and ruled within him that Holy Child of Bethlehem, who made all kind and gentle and loving like Himself. And so Dick came to be amongst the blessed.



A Cornish Ghost Story.



A CORNISH GHOST STORY.



‘**Y**OU Cornishmen think a great deal of your county,’ said my old friend Mr. Smith, as we talked of many circuits and many matters. ‘Little wonder that we do—where is there one to match it?’ was my modest reply.

‘Well, for some things I confess you do carry the palm—for hills, for pasties, for pilchards, and last but not least, for *ghosts!*’

Then the company around the supper table pricked up their ears. Old Mr. Smith, the supernumerary minister, was a treasure of odd tales and strange memories and wonderful experiences in the early days of Methodism.

‘Ghosts!’ cried everybody.

‘Oh, how charming!’ said a young lady, turning very pale. ‘Do tell us about them, *dear* Mr. Smith’—and a chorus of plaintive voices echoed the emphasised *do*.

‘Pooh! Pack o’ stuff and nonsense,’ observed our host.

‘But, Sir, there is much to be said in support of the fact of such supernatural apparitions. Philosophy should not scorn, Sir, but calmly investigate,’ replied our sententious superintendent.

‘Humbug,’ said the host’s son, trying to imitate the gruff voice of his father, and looking up for his approval.

‘Well, I’m old fashioned enough to believe in them,’ said a little old lady, nodding her head, ‘and in witches too; and I’ve lived long enough to see quite as much as most folks.’

‘Well, I saw one once,’ Mr. Smith remarked gravely, ‘and I never wish to see another.’

The company settled down at once, all eager to hear it.

Mr. Smith pulled up his shirt collars, stroked the short fringe of white whisker tenderly, took hold of his chin with the forefinger and thumb, set it on the edge of the many-folded kerchief, and then began very much as if he were preaching a sermon.

It was in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty-two, in the fall of the year. I was travelling in Bramblecombe Circuit, and was there as the junior preacher, or as it is flippantly termed to-day, the young man. I had been preaching one evening at a little village chapel, and started to walk home the ten dreary miles that lay between me and the circuit town in which I resided. It was very dark and raining heavily. My way lay over Worsedon Moor, one of the loneliest, bleakest, and most desolate places under the sun—that is if the sun ever does shine on Worsedon Moor. It was always mist, or rain, or pitchy dark when I passed it.

‘That lovely Cornish climate!’ said my host, slyly winking at me.

I had gone on for two or three miles when I began to be in doubt as to my road. I had surely gone wrong.

Yet there was no house anywhere near. I must keep on in the hope of getting to a cottage somewhere. By this time I was wet through, and shivering with the cold. And there was the horrible possibility of my wandering about all night, unless indeed I should perish of cold before morning, which seemed not unlikely. However, I pushed on, splashing through puddles and plunging step after step into inches of mud, when suddenly I saw a light. It was shining from a cottage window. I thanked heaven devoutly, and hastened onward. Here I should get direction—perhaps shelter for the night.

I knocked at the door, and immediately I heard some one moving within. The shadows of the window swept round as the candle was moved, and then, holding up the flickering light and looking out into the darkness, an old woman asked, 'Who ez it?'

'If you please ma'am,' said I, 'will you kindly let me come in for a few minutes—I have lost my way, and began to fear that I should be wandering about here all night.'

The old woman held up the light so as to let it fall full on my face, and looked at me out over her heavy spectacles. 'Why, bless me—tes—no, it can't be nayther—but theare, 'tes too, I do belave. Why you'm the new praicher, baint'ee my dear? Why I'm wan o' your people, ye know. Come in, do'ee come in. What be'ee doin' out 'ere 'en, this time o' night? An' like a drowned rat, too! Come en, come en, do'ee. I'm fine an' glad for to see 'ee, though there—iss fy, you be so wet as a shag, you be.'

In a moment or two more I was seated in the great fire-place, while a single puff of the bellows sent the

blaze of the furze leaping and roaring up the chimney as if it bid me a hundred thousand welcomes. Then, to cure any mischief within, there came very quickly a smoking bowl of broth, and soon I was all aglow with warmth. I could not but think of the contrast—inside the cottage all was snug and warm and comfortable; and outside I could hear the rain beating on the window, and the furious gusts roared and thundered and howled as if angry that I had escaped. I knew that the good people with whom I lived would readily suppose that I had sought shelter for the night, and not trouble about my absence. So I congratulated myself that I could at least lie down on the hearth, and get warmth and rest if not sleep.

‘Well, this is very fortunate that I should find myself in such comfortable quarters,’ and I set down the basin on the long kitchen table. ‘It is very different from what I had anticipated.’

‘Aw, my dear life, why I be fine an’ glad you comed—iss fy. Why I wouldn’ ha’ had ’ee trapezin’ about ’pon the downs this ’ere time o’ night, not for nawthing. There, to think of it too, the pixies up to all sorts o’ mischief, a-leadin’ anybody out o’ the way, an’ a-drawin’ ’um off to Deadman’s Bog! And weth a special spite agen parsons, too, as I’ve heerd folks say.’

Of course, in my own mind I ridiculed the idea of pixies and all their tribe; but as there was nothing to be gained by opposing her harmless belief I turned the topic of conversation.

‘Well, it certainly is very providential that I should find myself in such comfortable quarters—and with one of our own people too.’

‘A member goin’ on for this fifty-five year, Sir, and

ha'nt missed a quarterly ticket all that time. They'm in that basin up 'pon top o' the dresser—iss; an' I kept the poor dear man's 'long with 'em, Sir, till he died—'tis seventeen year agone come next Michelmas.'

'And what became of them then?' I asked.

'Why, they was buried 'long with un, o' course, Sir. Not that there's any virtue like in it, Sir; but he didn't like for to think o' their bein' all left lyin' about, and burnt perhaps; so I pasted 'em 'pon a sheet o' newspaper, and they was buried long weth en over to Penrudduck Church town. I belave he wouldn't ha' rested so comfortable in his grave ef I hadn't a-done it.'

'Well,' I said, abruptly coming to the point which I had been trying to reach for some time, 'can you give me a bed?'

The old lady looked up from the long black worsted stocking which she was knitting, and laid it solemnly on her lap. She looked cautiously round over her shoulder as if someone were standing in the steep staircase that led to the sleeping apartments. Then in a tone partly of awe and partly of confidence, she whispered hoarsely, 'A bed! Aw, my dear, doan't 'ee knaw about it, then? Have'n 'ee heerd tell of ut? Why, 't 'es knawed all over the county I do reckon—that Betsy Pengelley's house ez a-haunted. An' weth a special spite agen parsons too, as I've a-heerd folks say.'

'Nonsense—nonsense, my good woman,' I said, in my bravest and cheeriest tone. 'We must not believe all the silly stories we hear. Come now, have you a spare bed in the house?'

'Aw, no, my dear minister, tes no good for you to taalk—not a ha'porth o' good. Spare bed? iss; and

that's the very bed, and that there es the very room where they do walk to. No, I wudn' put 'ee en there not for nawthing. Why there would'n be a hinch of 'ee left en the mornin'—not enough for a crowner's inquest to sit 'pon!

I certainly did wish that I was at home; but I was not nervous—not in the least. Still I felt—

'Creepy like,' put in our host.

No, not that—but an indefinable sort of a wish that I had not reached that particular house. But I did not show it in the least. 'What is the nature of the apparition then?' I asked, in the same unconcerned tone.

'I don't know what the nature of 'em ez, Sir; but they be uncommon ghastly traade—what I do call, Sir, uncommon ghastly.'

Argument evidently would avail nothing, so I rose for action. 'Come now, my good woman, show me this room.'

Again she looked with frightened eyes at the staircase, and taking the needle from which she had worked off the stitches, she pointed it at me by way of emphasis, and went on, in her hoarse whisper,—

'Tis seventeen year ago, sence the poor dear man died. Well, my little granddaughter comed down an' slep in that there room, an' she heerd them there hawful sounds an' seed them there hawful sights, as frightened the little maid into fits, an' she had 'em dreadful tell she were growed up to a woman. Aw, no my dear, no chull, you shan't go en there t'all.' And plunging the needle into the stocking, she hurried away at it again, nodding her head and muttering to herself, 'No not for worlds he shan't. An' weth a special spite agen parsons, as I've heerd folks say.'

The only chance of success lay in my quiet determination. 'Come now, you have quite roused my curiosity. At least let me look at this wonderful room.' And I took up the candle.

Still muttering that I should only look in, she led me up the creaking stairs. The big lock and the bars that fastened it were thrown back, then pushing her forefinger through a round hole in the door she lifted the latch, and there we stood in the haunted chamber. It looked innocent enough. A large, heavy curtained bed seemed to fill it, but as we moved on with the dim light I found that the apartment was long, and that directly opposite the foot of the bed there was a large fireplace, and above it a tall mantelpiece with grotesque carving, and crowned by large, hideous china 'ornaments,' as they used to be called with cruel satire.

The sticks and furze were laid ready for lighting, so stooping down with the candle I said, 'You won't mind my lighting it, will you?' And before an answer came the flames were crackling, and shadows danced mysteriously over the bed and on the walls. 'Now I have only one favour more,' I said—'Will you air the sheets for a little while here, before the fire? I dare say I can set them right when I come up again.' And thinking that I had carried my point I made for the door. Snatching at the candle the old lady followed me hastily and gasped,—

'Aw, you gived me such a turn, Sir, leavin' me there all alone—I do always have a neighbour woman en, Sir, for to make un up!'

'Oh, if that's it I'll help you,' I said, hastening back and working energetically, thankful to have made matters right thus far.

Then as we sat by the fire below, a chapter from the Testament, a happy talk about it, and a few words of prayer closed the evening there and I rose to retire.

'Aw, I wish you wudden—I do sure 'nough. You'll see somethin' dreadful, I do knaw you will—for sure an' certain.'

'Good night,' I said cheerily, shaking hands with the old woman, 'I shall soon be asleep, and must hope for pleasant dreams.' As I came up the creaking stairs I heard her muttering, 'An' weth a special spite agen parsons, too, as I've heerd folks say.'

The candle was out; and I was in bed. I did not like it much, I confess. The wind howled dismally in the chimney. The flickering flames sent dancing shadows all over the room. The floor creaked in a most unaccountable manner. The place smelt all strange and ghostly-like, and I wished with all my heart that I was at home. But I was very wearied, and soon in spite of all my misgivings I was fast asleep. How long I slept I can't tell—certainly not long when I was awoke by a most hideous and unearthly screech.

I looked up, and found that the fire was still burning with a dull red glare, so that I could faintly see from between the curtains.

There certainly was something!

Something white, too!

It moved noiselessly towards the fire-place—so that I could look down over the foot of the bed and distinctly trace the white outline.

I really was frightened—horribly frightened. The noise I had heard in my sleep, and now this frightful presence standing there with uplifted hands, as if muttering spells and weaving charms there before the fire!

The cold perspiration dropped from my forehead. My jaw fell, and I was paralysed with fright.

My terror became an agony, as the figure turned from the fire and noiselessly glided to the foot of the bed. Then the clothes were lifted, and I was conscious that a cold clammy skeleton hand moved over the bed.

Presently it touched my toe.

'Oh!' I screamed.

Then came a voice.

'Wake be 'ee then, my dear minister? Why, I thought your feet might be cowl'd, so I brought in a petticoat for to wrap 'em up in, an' kep 'em warm. I was afeard the creakin' ould hinge would disturb 'ee, too. I'll grease 'un if I'm spared till to-morrow. Good night to 'ee, Sir, I hope you woant see nawthing.'

As she disappeared I heard her muttering to herself 'An' weth a special spite agen parsons too, as I ve heerd folks say.'

There—that was the only ghost I ever saw, but I never want to see another.



Show us a Sign.



SHOW US A SIGN.

A TRUE STORY FOR THE TIMES.



THIS is the demand of our day, *Show us a sign from heaven.* The simple and authoritative answer abides through all the ages: 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas.' The resurrection of the Son of God is the triumphant sign for every generation.

The Most High does not work miracles either to satisfy an idle curiosity or to refute a scornful scepticism. We are familiar with this demand from the enlightened men of our time, but it is instructive to note the absurdity of this demand when stripped of all scientific phraseology and seen in its naked folly.

Away on the western coast a good clergyman was visiting his flock one day, when he reached the house of a miller—a very ignorant man, but as positive and obstinate as if he had belonged to the most advanced school of thought. The clergyman crossed the bridge under which the clear mill stream hurried, and turning in by the old moss-covered wheel he entered the thatched cottage.

The master sat with dusty, floured coat, smoking his after-dinner pipe, and ready for a chat, or better still, an argument, if he could but get a challenge.

On the table, carefully covered by the hands of the tidy housewife with a large antimacassar, lay a handsomely bound Bible, which at once attracted the clergyman's notice, and suggested a suitable topic of conversation.

'Well, my friend,' he began, 'that's a very handsome Bible of yours; I am pleased to see it.'

The miller replied gruffly between the puffs—

'I ha'n't got nothin' at all to say agen the Beuk, Sir, not a word; if the Beuk were all, but 'e ben't.'

'What do you mean?' asked the clergyman; 'what is there besides the book?'

'Now the Beuk belongs to my missis, Sir,—she take en in shillin' nombers, a shillin' a month, and then had en bound up together, down to B—e. An' if that there Beuk were all, I would n' say a word agen it, for I ben't able to read a letter of en myself.'

'What is it then that you object to, my friend?'

Now the miller chuckled within himself as he saw the clergyman's eagerness rising, and with long pauses and many puffs between each word, he brought it out with an irritating deliberateness.

'Ben't the Beuk, Sir; not a bit. Bless 'ee no—not a word to say agen the Beuk, Sir, I ha'n't. But there—the Beuk ben't all; there be the—(a longer puff than ever)—*pictures*, Sir, pictures! They be 'igh-ly him-moral I do count, Sir, 'igh-ly him-mo-ral!' And the miller spoke with an air of indignation, as if the morals of the three kingdoms were under his sole guardianship. 'I don't care what *anybody* do say contrary

ways, *they be.*' The emphasis was distinctly intended as a challenge to the clergyman to argue the point. The mouth snapped at it with a bulldog grasp, and the dusty head nodded over it as if to say, 'That's right, miller, you stick to it.'

'Immoral!' exclaimed the clergyman, putting on his spectacles and lifting the Book; 'Dear me, that is very sad—and in a Bible too!'

'Iss, Sir, they be,' replied the miller, with a brevity that suggested an approaching battle, and a desire not to waste any ammunition, or to allow the enemy the slightest advantage.

Innocent enough the pictures were, in all conscience. The head of a very mild-looking Adam projecting from behind a lion couchant like a coat of arms; Noah's ark floated in the waters of the deluge as innocently as in those scenes of our childhood which made it so familiar; Joseph lay amongst the placid sheep, enrobed in exceeding many colours, and with a sweet smile of complacency.

'Well, I really can see nothing of what you call immoral,' said the clergyman looking over his spectacles.

The miller rose from his chair and turned over the pages until he came to a representation of the destruction of Jericho, then pointing with the stem of his pipe, he uttered a triumphant '*Theare!*'

The clergyman scanned it carefully,—the priests with curved horns, the tottering walls, the two or three figures with uplifted arms, intended to express terror, the two or three contented Israelites in the foreground watching the proceedings—there was nothing outrageous here.

'Do you call this *immoral?*' he asked, amused.

‘If it ben’t himmoral, *I* should like to know what be, Sir, *I* should.’

‘Well but immoral is—is——’

‘*I*’ (with increased emphasis on the letter) ‘do call that himmoral, Sir, which do go about the country teaching people a lot o’ things that never could ‘a happened nohow,—that’s what *I* do call himmoral,’ and the miller thrust one thumb into his waistcoat arm hole and puffed triumphantly.

‘O, I see what you mean!’ said the clergyman. ‘I beg your pardon, I didn’t quite understand your use of the word. So you think this never could have happened, then, do you?’

‘No, Sir, I don’t think about it—I be certain sure. That never could have happened, Sir,’ and the dusty head nodded more vigorously.

‘But, really, you don’t know all that has happened and all that has not; how can you be so positive about this?’

‘It did n’, Sir. You may say what you got a mind to—*I* (emphasised yet more) do *know* it didn’t.’

‘Well, but really it is folly for you to be so positive. It did happen, and you ought to allow some authority to those who are much better informed than yourself. You *ought* to believe it.’

‘I shean’t, Sir, I wean’t, and it did n’ happen ‘t all, Sir.’

‘How do you know?’ asked the minister, slightly provoked.

‘Well, now you do ask me like that, I’ll tell ‘e.’ He laid his pipe on the mantelshelf, and coming near to the clergyman, whispered, ‘*Why I’ve a been an’ gone an’ tried it—theare!*’

‘Tried it!’ the clergyman exclaimed, trying to suppress a laugh, ‘Well, how did you manage it?’

The miller proceeded with the tone and manner of a man relating a profound mystery.

‘First all of all I got the missis to read the account all through to me, and took note of it all along.

“‘Ram’s harns!’ I says to myself; “well, I can blaw that well ’nough, so I’ll try it.”

‘You know, Sir, I was bugler in the militiar, years agone. So I gets up early next mornin’, and I saws the tip off an ol’ ram’s harn, an’ when I got ’pon top o’ the moors I blawed. You see I thought I’d get myself practised up a bit ’fore I tried; so I practised up for a week till I could blaw a noise that went echain’ right away ever so far.

‘Then I thought I was about ready to try it, so I goes up agen a great stone wall we got, and I drewed my breath, and then—I was just goin’ to blaw, when I stopped.

“‘No,” says I, “if I do blaw that down, I shall have to build en up agen.”

‘So I looked round till I saw a little hay-tilly, where I do keep a bit o’ hay and things. So I goes up agen that, and I drewed my breath in so hard as I could, and then I blawed. Ah, the calves tore round the yard like mazed things, but *theare’s that theare hay-tilly just like as if I had n’ blawed a bit*. No, Sir, I wean’t believe it, and I shean’t, nor I cain’t, for I’ve tried it, an’ it ben’t a morsel o’ good—theare.’

And the miller returned with completed triumph to nod his head exultingly, and to finish his after-dinner pipe.

Christmas Eve in the 'Vivid.'

CHRISTMAS EVE IN THE 'VIVID.'



Chapter the First.

WE GET ON BOARD.

A BLUSTERING Christmas Eve it was—there could be no mistake about that. The kind of night to make people enjoy the fireside and snug warmth of home—that is, if you were sitting by it and not only catching provoking glimpses through the window, as I did now and then.

Wrapt from teeth to toes in my stout 'Ulster,' I hurried along the steep, winding, irregular streets of the little market town. The rain was coming down with a thoroughness characteristic of the county—there was a Cornish 'one-and-all'-ness about it that was unmistakable. The wind waited for you at odd corners and out-of-the-way nooks; then it burst upon you with such strength and fury that it nearly swept you clean away. The dreary streets were deserted. The gas lamps sulked, and looked as if they thought it a shame *not* to be turned out in such a night. The forsaken shops were empty and dull—it was plain that they had

made up their minds not to do anything on a holiday evening like this.

There was indeed only one other traveller abroad. I could hear his quick step coming on behind. Soon he overtook me and was hurrying by with only a 'good-night,' when he suddenly stopped and turned round.

'Do you know where the *Wivid* lies to, sir? I reckon her moorings is hereabouts, somewhere?'

He was dressed as a sailor, and carried in his hand a small bundle—evidently bound homeward for the Christmas holidays. A frank, pleasant-spoken fellow, it was a relief to have his company.

'I am going by her myself,' I said; 'and will show you the way.'

'Thank 'ee, sir; uncommon dirty night, ben't it?'

The weather was quite a sufficient topic of conversation to last to the sudden turn in the road where we found ourselves in a glare of light from the door and windows of *The Tregagle Inn*, and whence we were to take our passage.

You could see *The Vivid* as you stood in the doorway. She carried her name in large yellow letters on a black ground, covering the whole length of her sides. 'What was she, then?' asks my reader. Well, she was no cutter, that is quite certain, in spite of her name. No dainty yacht was she, made for dancing on the summer seas. No steamer, paddle or screw, no lumbering barge. She was—well, whatever she was or was not, her name was the only thing that was 'Vivid' about her. Four knots an hour was her professed pace, but like Tennyson's Isabel, hers was 'the prudence that withholds;' and she modestly restrained herself from the utmost of her strength and was content with

three and a half. But then it should be stated in all fairness that this included stoppages which were frequent and long.

She was—what else could she be?—the old lumbering van that went to and from the chief town of Cornwall.

'Where is that?' asks the reader.

Well, good reader, that is a difficult question: seeing that there are certainly five places, perhaps six, that lay claim to that honourable distinction, and that there are at least half-a-dozen more which think themselves quite as good as any one of the five. You perceive that the whereabouts of my story is not likely to be inconveniently traced, whilst each of the competing places will flatter itself that it, and it alone, is the chief town of which I write.

Let this suffice, that as I pen these lines I lift my head and look across to where she lies—wheel-less, shaftless, stripped, dishonoured. A mere rubbish shop for the carpenter's boy. No eager faces wait expecting her. No loving hands wave their farewells while yet she lingers in sight. No more the market-gossips, with well-stored baskets on their knees, sit chattering of the news. Forgotten, deserted, silent—she that had so much to do with life along the roads for seventy years and more lies there preaching to you and me the old sermon that all things come to preach, mostly unheeded, *sic gloria*—so all things earthly have their end.

A thing thoroughly Cornish was *The Vivid*. To say that she was 'racy of the soil' is suggestive of speed, and that would be a libel on her steady-going character. Four hours she took to do the journey from the queer little place that lived upon its ancient fame as a par-

liamentary borough of years ago, to the 'chief town' at which you got joined on to the world again by means of a telegraph wire and a single line of rail. When the journey was in daylight, the pleasant custom was for everybody to walk up the hills, and generally the passengers found it more pleasant to go on down the hill beyond than to wait; and as there was no level ground—for it was in Cornwall—there was a considerateness about it that Alexander (the horse) and Trigg (the driver and general proprietor) both appreciated.

Two or three of the passengers were already seated when my sailor friend and I 'crept aboard' as he called it. It did look about the most dismal place under the sun—well, for that matter, there was no sun, and there had been none for at least a fortnight—the dreariest place that mortal man could find in which to spend a Christmas Eve. A lamp, in which a dim tallow candle burned, equally divided its favours between the horse outside and the passengers within, and managed on both sides to do nothing more than make the darkness visible. The company was the most uninteresting that could be imagined. There was a very stout old woman with a band-box, a bundle, and a huge umbrella, who kept wiping her face all round with a bit of her pocket-handkerchief adroitly twisted round a stout forefinger, then puffing as if very hot, and saying only 'bless us!' There was a weak-looking mother with a spoiled boy of four or five, whom she kept rating soundly, and then tempted into good behaviour by bribing him heavily with sweetmeats. And I was to be shut up here for the space of three hours at least! There was no hope of my reaching the hospitable farmhouse at which I

was to spend the Christmas Day, until half-past nine o'clock that night.

I tried to console myself with the thought that my journey could not fail to afford me a fine opportunity of studying character,—that the old times of the pilgrimages might have rivalled it, but that the Chaucer of the nineteenth century could find nothing to supply its place like the well-filled van. What gossip there would be! The talk of the neighbours; of the babies; the stories of the newly 'hatched,' and 'matched' and 'dispatched,'—as somebody classified those three great events of human history which give us a claim on public interest and newspaper notices.

Then the startling rumours which each had picked up, and added to—unconsciously of course. And the wonderful ailments of one and another, and the yet more wonderful cures, together with the wonderful things that the doctors said about it all. I even tried to console myself by the thought of a special quickness and aptitude in turning all this to good account. It must surely be an ill wind that could blow nobody any good. Courage, there was something for me here. So I sat resigned philosophical, observant.



Chapter the Second.

WE START AT LAST.

SLOWLY the vacant places were filled up. The thumpings and bumpings overhead had ceased, and the heap of luggage was piled in its place. Then came a long and dreary waiting for nothing at all, and congratulating himself that he was *only* a quarter of an hour late, Trigg mounted the shaft, bulged in the protecting curtains with his shoulders, turned round to inquire kindly, 'All right, in there, are 'ee?' Then came a heave, a jolt, a pitch, and at last we were on our way.

But alas, for the modern Chaucer and the hoped-for study of character! The rain was beating against the sides of the van with a dreary monotony, whilst the wind every now and then burst upon us with such fury as if threatening to topple us completely over. Besides this there was scarcely a sound except the fretting of that spoiled boy, and an occasional 'bless us!' from the stout old lady as she nursed her bundle and band-box and big umbrella. My sailor friend was fast asleep, and snored aloud, whilst I was vainly trying to follow so good an example. Once only was the silence broken. Once only were our thoughts directed from the wild winds and plashing of the rain, and from all the weird and dismal loneliness of that 'dreary, dreary moorland' outside. It was by that spoilt boy. For a moment the

fretting was silenced. But for a moment only. Then came suddenly a cry—a grief that burst forth inconsolable, passionate, all broken-hearted.

'Drat the chield! what's the matter with 'ee now?' asked the impatient mother, angrily.

'Booh—ooh—ooh!' cried the boy, in the bitterness of his sorrow. 'Booh—ooh—ooh! I been an' gone an' clunked my nicey wethout chowin' ov un!' [He had swallowed his sweetmeat without biting it.]

There, what could Chancer himself do in such a place but try to fall asleep? Poetry out of such a company! Even my philosophy failed me. Study of character indeed! Bah, they had no character. In disgust and despair I drew my head deep under the collars of my ulster and followed the example of my sailor friend. I slept—perhaps snored.



Chapter the Third.

WE PICK UP A PASSENGER.

MY sleep was not for long. There came a jolt, that was more of a jolt than usual, a loud 'whoa,' a sudden stopping. Then we had reached the first halting place, *The Waggoner's Rest*.

It was the voice of Trigg the driver that we heard, plainly intended to convey some information to the passengers within as well as to somebody outside.

'Aw, iss, Miss, iss. We'm bound for to make room for 'ee somehow. This here Wivid never was so full but what her could make room for waun more somewhere --specially 'pon Christmas Eve, Miss.' And as he spoke he drew back the curtains and looked in.

All woke up in a moment then.

'La, Jan Trigg! Yew never be a goin' fur tew put nobody else in yere, be 'ee then?' It was the stout mistress of the bundle, band-box and big umbrella who was the first to remonstrate.

'There isn't a ha'porth o' room--not a ha'porth,' cried a little man in the corner, whose voice was so hard and grating that you could fancy it was a skeleton speaking with fleshless jaws.

'I'm sure an' sartain yew can't do it 't all,' protested the mother of the spoiled boy, dreading the effect of his being roused from his slumber.

By this time Trigg had helped the young lady on to the step, and now she stood looking in and wondering where she could find a seat. In a moment up jumped my sailor friend.

'All right Cap'n,' he cried. 'Just hoist me aloft, sooner than we should leave the young lady behind 'pon a Chrissymas Eve.' And he began to make for the entrance.

The generous offer, and the cheery tone in which it was spoken, shamed us all.

'Come,' I said, 'that will never do, to let you get out on top of the luggage on such a night as this. You'll be blown away. We must each of us give an inch all round—that will do it.'

'Ha! ha! ha!' laughed a man in the other corner. It went off just like the explosion of a cracker, making us all jump—whilst the stout old lady said 'Bless us!' with more than usual energy. 'Very good, very good indeed,' he cried, rubbing his hands and exploding again. 'Give the young lady an inch—and she'll take an ell. Ha! ha!'

'I am heartily sorry to inconvenience you,' said the new comer in a voice that made me wish that she would lift her heavy veil. She must have a sweet face who had so sweet a voice, and who could use it so pleasantly.

Everybody was glad at having made the effort for her sake; and the good deed itself seemed to spread a happiness amongst us; a feeling that was increased as just then a terrible blast of the storm burst on us and flew howling and roaring over the moors.

'Well, there, 't isn't, so to speak, the very comfortablest way in all the world for a man to spend his

Chrissymas Eve, 'pon top o' the Wivid on a dirty night like this,' said the sailor turning to me.

'I should think not,' said the explosive man in the corner. 'Ha, ha, ha—I should think not indeed.'

'I could never have allowed you to go outside on my account,' said the new comer with the pleasant voice 'It was very kind of you to offer me such a thing; and I thank you for it with all my heart.'

'Why bless'ee, Miss, there's worse places than that for a man to be 'pon a Chrissymas Eve—and there's hundreds o' poor fellows that do find that out.'

And so it was that there began—



Chapter the Fourth.

YE MARINER: HIS TALE.

T WAS four years ago that we put out of Plymouth, in the "Bella" schooner, with seven hands aboard. We were bound for Bristol. The wind set in from the north-west soon after we started, and got worse and worse till it blew a gale, and we was beating about in it for ten days. One poor fellow got washed overboard, and another got badly hurt—so there we was, two hands short, and nobody able to rest properly for five minutes together. Everything was drenched through and through, and you could scarce get a bit of victuals to eat. The sails was split and torn, and heaps of damage done, and we began to be afraid that we couldn't stand it much longer. Well, we managed to weather it until it came to the day afore Chrissymas Day. Then all of a sudden the wind dropped right away, next to nothing, and the sun came out and dried us a bit comfortable. The sea was running mountains high still, but we was beginning to hope that we should pull through after all. We put her to rights as well as we could, and found out that the mischief wasn't so very bad. "We'll eat our Christmas dinner in Bristol port to-morrow, my lads," says the captain, 'for I reckon we're somewhere above Trevoise Head now."

‘But John Vinnicombe, a Devonshire man he was, and mate—he shook his head—“Us ben’t out o’ the ewd yet and mustn’t holloa”—them is the very words he spoke. “I’ve a-had a token, Peter,” he says to me, “for three nights running,” says he, “and there’s poor Christmas fare in store for us, Peter Penrose,” says he, “and wuss for them that’s at home,” says he. And right he was, for so soon as the sun went down the wind came up again all in a minute, worse than ever. Away went one thing after another before we could think about getting her right. ’T was tremendous.

“Keep her up,” says the Captain, “and give Hartey Point a clear berth,” says he.

“It don’t make no odds, Cap’n,” says John Vinnicombe. “Her time is come, sir, and the Lord have mercy upon us.”

‘A good sort o’ a man he was, too, that there John Vinnicombe—a man that feared God and tried to do his duty always. Well, them there words was scarce out of his mouth before the Captain springs up, “Yew’m right, John Vinnicombe. There’s breakers not far off—hark!” Breakers there was, right enough—we could hear them booming like great guns, coming plainer and plainer every minute. We tried with all our might to put her head about, but it was no good in the world. And we was close agen them now. ’Tis one thing to tell about it sitting here—and quite another thing for to be right there in the middle of it. The Captain he tried to fire a signal, but he couldn’t manage it. There was every man hearing his heart beating terrible. Well, down she staggered into the great trough of the sea—then a wave broke right over her. In a second more she struck. I was swept off in

a minute and carried in towards shore. I managed to get hold of a bit of a spar, but that was washed right away from me directly after, and almost all my clothes was stripped off like as if they was so much paper. I was flung up against a rock and my senses almost knocked out, but I just knew enough for to clutch hold of it so well as I could and to clamber up out of the way a bit. I was in dreadful pain. My left arm was hurt so bad that I couldn't use it, and my head was bleeding streams; but I was thankful for to have my life. Once I thought I heard John Vinnicombe's voice and shouted. I fancied I heard a shout back again, then it was smothered and lost in the roar of the seas. You see, I couldn't tell a bit how long I could keep there where I was. The wind was howling about me like as if 'twas mad because I had got away; and dark as it was, I could see the white foam of the breakers like as if they was trying to jump after me. They came nearer and nearer, so I had to get up so well as I could and feel about for to get higher up. I managed to climb somehow till I got hold of a bit of grass—then I knew that it was above the water mark. But I couldn't hang on there like that, the stones slipping from under me, and all so weak and faint as I was too. Every minute the little strength I had was going, and the pain got worse; so I made a desperate effort and struggled up to a place that seemed to me to be a foot-path. Drenched, cold, and in awful pain I can just mind lying down there; and for what I know about my getting away, I might be there still.

'Twas the coast-guard that found me. He went off to the farm-house close by and got some help; and they took me up and carried me into their place. The

first thing I can mind is thinking I could hear the dreadful winds and the breakers there about me upon the rock—then all of a sudden I opened my eyes, and there I was warm and snug in bed. And there standing over me was my old master with his kind face.

“Why, ’tis Mr. Harris!” says I, staring.

“Why, Peter,” says he, “this is a pretty way to come back to see your old master—without any notice either and to take us all unawares.”

‘I couldn’t talk, but the sound of his voice seemed to do me good—’twas the very place where I’d gone years afore as parish ’prentice. What a heart he have a-got to be sure, and the missis too, and the young ladies. Well, they nursed me and brought me round very soon. But there—I mustn’t spin my yarn any longer. You see anybody might spend their Chrissy-mas Eve in worse places than outside of the Wivid.’

‘Were the others all lost?’ asked the gentle voice.

‘All drowned, Miss, and none o’ them was ever found either but John Vinnicombe. He was wedged in between a couple of rocks. I expect he reached the land and shouted to me, and then was knocked against the rocks and stunned, and afterwards drowned. Inside of his belt they found his Bible; and the leaf was turned down to them words—I’ve very often looked upon them and thought about them since then—*From the end of the earth will I cry unto Thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the Rock that is higher than I.*’

‘Was that my dear old friend Mr. Harris of Polduck?’ I asked after a minute’s silence.

‘The very same, sir. Do you know him?’

‘Yes, indeed I do. And, you are right—’twould be

hard to match him for a kind heart, or for broad shoulders either.'

'I often feel like going back to the old place, for master would sure to find something for me—only when once you have a-taken to the sea you can't settle down to anything else. You feel all so boxed up.'

'All so what?' asked the little man of the skeleton voice, putting a very bony hand up to his ear.

'Boxed up,' shouted the mariner at the top of his voice.

'Well, thank you,' said I—leading the way in a general chorus of thanks.



Chapter the Fifth.

YE ANCIENT MASON: HIS TALE.

TALK about being boxed-up on Christmas Eve—
I could tell a story about that.’

It was the little man with that peculiar voice; ‘Just like a corncrake,’ my sailor friend whispered to me, and nothing could have hit more exactly the harsh, hard, grating sound. As he spoke he leaned forward into the light. A little man with a singularly pinched and withered face, and above it a very high and broad-brimmed hat. The ears projected outwards in such a way as to suggest that their chief purpose was to support the head gear, which if they should fail would come down and extinguish him altogether. The large hollow eyes were opened as if in a perpetual fright. His mouth was little and sunken, and he opened it always with a peculiar roundness—a deaf man would think that he was always saying ‘Oh!’ The chin was hidden away down under the many folds of the black kerchief that loosely wrapped his very thin neck. The rest of him was lost in dark shadows.

‘That was being boxed-up on Christmas Eve—no mistake about it,’ the old man began again.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ exploded the cracker, ‘Good, very good, uncommonly good. A Christmas Box then.’

‘What—does—he—say?’ asked the old man, putting his bony hand up to the projecting ear.

'A Christmas Box,' shouted a neighbouring passenger.

Speaking very slowly, and with a creaking hardness that quite grated on one's ears, the old man asked—'What—does—he—mean?'

As nobody could explain, and as the cracker gentleman himself did not quite know, he shrank back and did not venture to interrupt for a time at least.

Presently the little old man went on again—'Yes, as I was saying—talk about being "boxed up." I could tell a story about that.'

And we thought he was going to begin at once. But the little old man only nodded his head, and waited so long that we had given up all hope of hearing it. Then he broke out quite suddenly.

'Twas when the old squire died, back twenty-two year agoe this very night. He died on the Saturday, and they were forced for to bury him on the Wednesday after. Well, Christmas Day that year was on a Tuesday, and so what with that, and the Sunday coming in between, I had only a-got one clear day for to get the vault ready, and that was the Monday.

'The squire's vault is right in the chancel—there is generations of them lying there, and all their muneyments so thick as ever they can be. Well, I'd been working all through the day Monday, and I thought I would stay on a bit for to finish the job.

'Twas a wisht old place for to be working all alone by your own self, sure enough; and I could not get anybody else for to help me—they was all gone away for to spend the Christmas. The wind was blowing and blustering all about, and would keep coming in, moaning and whispering all round the corners and

places, and the old oak pews would keep creaking in a ghastly way. And then up above me there was a lot of dreadful old figures and faces a-watching me all the time, and never so much as taking their eyes off me. The day was so short that I was obliged to work on by candlelight, but I made up my mind that I would not stay much longer. Half-an-hour or so and I could finish the job, then I would lock up the place and be off—glad enough to get out of it.

‘Well, just while I was a-thinking of going, who should come to the church but the old sexton. He opened the door and held up his lantern, and looked all about. I called out from the vault that I was coming in a minute, and made sure that he heard me. Poor old fellow—he has been dead these years, and I would not go for to say anything again’ him, but there, he was uncommon stupid and blundering all his days—that he was. “He’s gone,” says he to himself, and he pulled the door after him and locked it. I climbed out of the vault in a minute and ran to the door so fast as I could, and holloed with all my might. But it was too late. The door was locked and the man was gone.

“Here’s a place for anybody to spend his Christmas Eve,” I says to myself—“and not a Churchman neither,” I says. Well, I made up my mind that I would not stay if I could help it, so I went round and tried the doors, but there was no escape that way. Then I thought of the bells—if I could only get hold of one of them I would keep on ringing till somebody came. No, the belfry-door was locked. There I was then for the night, and that night Christmas Eve, too! The noises all about seemed to get louder, and it was just like as if they was laughing at me in the dark corners and behind the pillars.

'Well, I thought the best thing I could do was to work away so long as my candle held out, and then for to make myself so comfortable as ever I could, in the Squire's pew. So I set the candle up again, climbed into the vault and tried to forget all about my dismal old thoughts. But there—it was no good in the world. I began for to remember old stories that I had heard about the old Squire—the grandfather of this here one. How he had never rested quiet in his grave, but used to walk the Drive every night; and how they said that he had buried his money about in the park for fear of the French, and how his ghost would come looking for it. There—work so hard and so loud as ever I could, there was the moanings and creakings and whisperings, and like laughing away behind the pillars.

'Well, I worked away for half an hour or so, and then the candle began for to flicker in the socket. A very little while and I should be in the dark. So I crept up out of the vault, and made for the Squire's great square pew that was close alongside of it. I laid out the cushions on the floor; and with a couple of stools for pillows, and a sheepskin mat to cover me, my bed was comfortable enough.

'But there, it *was* a ghastly old place sure enough! My blood do run cold whenever I do think about it. As the candle kept bobbing up, I could see just over me a hideous white figure with a great scythe in his hands—he seemed to come nearer and nearer every time the light let me see him,—I couldn't help thinking either, that his scythe began to move just like as if he was mowing with it. And when I looked away from that, it was only to see a skull grinning down upon

me. I suppose it was the flickering of the candle, but it looked just like as if it was winking at me so much as to say, "Only wait a bit; and we will show you something that will make you stare. Won't we just?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" the cracker gentleman went off in the corner, making everybody jump, whilst the fat old lady nearly dropped the bundle and bandbox, and cried, "Bless us!" It seemed as if the laugh had come from the skull. Fortunately the little old man did not notice the interruption but went on in a hard grating voice'—

'Well, presently the old clock struck nine, clanging and banging for all the world like as if it was trying to wake up all the muneyments and figures about the place, and echoing and ringing in the corners for ever so long. Then all of a sudden out goes the candle.

'I lay there, tossing about and fancying all kind of dreadful things, keeping my head covered up all the time that I might not see anything. How long I had been lying there like that I can't tell, but all of a sudden there come a dim kind of a blueish light, and lit up all the church.'

'Dreadful creepy, isn't it?' whispered the mother of the spoilt boy.

The old man went on, his eyes staring as if he saw it all, and his bony fingers helping the description.

'The old Squire was the first to wake up—the oldest of them—he with the big ruff around his neck and the short cloak and the sword at his side. And in a minute his wife stood up and took his arm—the Dame Eleanor she's called upon the muneyment. And the two little dogs, they jumped off and walked along behind, so natural as life.'

'Bless us!' gasped the stout proprietor of the bundle, looking rather frightened.

'Then down came the white figure from over my head, and began for to mow with his scythe—to and fro, to and fro, as if for very life. And as for that there dreadful skull, he just rolled himself down somehow and perched himself up on top of my toes and grinned upon me, winking with all his might, first with one eye and then with another. And besides that all the heads and figures and muneyments in the place were a-walking about. There was the old Rector—I could see him so plain as anything, just his head and front with no back to it. And there was a great long brass gentleman all in armour—he was quite flat and went walking and talking with the old Rector in some outlandish gibberish—sort of French or Latin, I expect. And there was the little curly-headed angels a-flying about—little dears, all heads and wings they was, and nothing else.

'I was dreadfully frightened, and could scarcely fetch a breath—and was afraid of my life that they would all of them find me: and I wished with all my heart that this here dreadful skull would go away. Well, so he did. But he rolled about the place telling everybody that I was there—I could hear it quite plain. Then in a minute there they come, helter skelter, all rushing up round me so hard as ever they could tear, and stood all grinning and pointing at me. The great brass gentleman, that was all flat—he poked me with his sword; and the old Rector began for to read the marryin' service over me quite solemn, and then asked me the catechism. And that there dreadful white figure, he come nearer and nearer swinging his scythe

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close to my face. Then, in a minute they all fell upon me, and gripped me and shook me about. And—and—well there, 'twas my old woman's voice a-calling out—"La, Jan, wake up do'ee—However come 'ee to let that there stupid old chap lock 'ee up in this here dismal place. Such a search as we have had for 'ee too."

'It *was* a relief, an' no mistake, when I found out 't was only a dream. My wife and a neighbour had come with a lantern to look for me, and were almost frightened out of their wits when they saw me stretched out like that, in the Squire's pew. But there—talk about being *boxed up* on a Christmas Eve, once in a lifetime is enough of that I can tell you.'

We all thanked him very heartily, and very loudly too, for his capital story—all except the cracker gentleman, who whispered that for his part he couldn't abide such rubbish. But nobody could doubt the story as they looked at the little old man's frightened eyes, and listened to that strange skeleton voice.

Such a clatter and gossip was there when he had done—everybody so glad to find a neighbour's company in order to scare away the weird and 'ghastly' feelings of the story—that I quite despaired of any further entertainment unless I led the way myself. Dashing in during a moment's lull, I began—



Chapter the Sixth.

YE PARSON'S TALE.

THERE is no need for me to tell that tale at length ; for it could not be the same. Sitting here by the fire, its flames dancing merrily, and amidst my books and papers, one cannot write that story as it was told when those blustering winds were thundering around us on that bleak road. Then one felt at once the tenderness and great love of the story, and there every heart opened to it. And yet it cannot fail to do us good if we will hear it with our inward ears and with our hearts.

It was away in a place like our own Cornwall where the fierce storms swept in all the glory of their strength ; howling over the moorlands, rushing up the rugged heights, sweeping down steep valleys ; gathering their scattered forces for a rush across the lowlands, then storming the hills beyond ; until broken and scattered by the walls of some little village, the blast went moaning in chimney and doorway, roaring angrily at the window and on the roof as if in search of its wild company. In such a place it was that a poor couple travelled onward, footsore and spent—she, in a sorry plight for journeying ; he, silent and wondering. Then late at night upon that Christmas Eve they reach the

little place to find it crowded. The inn is full; so every house; the cheerless cave where cattle lay must be their lodging place. And there, in such a place, where was no fire to cheer, no bounty to gladden them, they spend their Christmas Eve. And there, where was no kindly neighbour to tend her in her pain, the Blessed mother bare her Son—the Friend and Brother of us all.

And now for ever dear to Him are all men.—But not least dear upon this Christmas Eve are homeless ones who face bleak storms—unsheltered from the winds and rain—poor men, and hapless women, and little unloved children; for whom no fire glows, no merry greetings come—ever on the Christmas Eve He thinks of these and pities them. As done unto Himself He takes the little bits of kindness to the sad and sick and poor. For every day the Holy Child is standing here amongst us seeking room; and asking from us food and clothes and loving care. And again He cometh bringing with Him the true Christmas joy—not for the rich only, who offer costly gifts, but making every one to hear the ringing bells of heaven and the tidings of great joy who helps as best he can to make more peace on earth, goodwill to men, and glory to our God.

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As my brief story ended, a silence settled upon all the company less promising even than their gossip. My sailor friend was already nodding asleep, and altogether it seemed as if the chronicler of that

evening's history would have to end here. But a sudden jolt and the stopping of the horse roused everybody's curiosity.

'Now then, Missis Grimble, yew'm come!' cried the driver, thrusting his wet and shining face inside the curtain.

'Bless us!' cried the stout old lady springing up, and at the same time knocking down her bundle, band-box, and big umbrella—puffing too, as if she were exceedingly hot. 'Bless us!'

Her removal greatly added to the general comfort and gave us all a chance of stretching a bit. Trigg had mounted again and we were on our way once more.

'Ha! ha! ha!' went off the cracker gentleman suddenly. 'Here, Trigg—the old lady has left something behind.'

'Whoa!' cried Trigg, reluctantly; for Alexander was so relieved at the lessened weight that in going down a slight incline he had actually broken out into what might almost be called a trot. 'Whoa 'Zander!'

'What is it?' he asked, pushing his face inside the curtains.

'Ha! ha! ha! Her room to be sure, Trigg—her room,' cried the facetious man.

'Gwan 'Zander,' said Trigg, indignantly, whilst the little old mason put his hand to his projecting ear and asked in that skeleton voice of his,—

'What—does—he—say?'

It really was a difficult thing to explain, and as nobody volunteered to do so the old man sank back in the corner only shaking his head very solemnly. The cracker gentleman, however, troubled us no more.

‘Now ’Zander, take it easy, my boy—we can’t help you to-night, and I’m going inside a bit.’ It was Trigg who had quite recovered his cheeriness. Almost before he had done speaking he stepped into the van and made the reins fast to a crook where the curtains met.

‘Got to the bottom of the two mile hill,’ he explained, taking off his dripping sou-wester; ‘once we’m over that, then we’m past the worst of it.’

Without a word more of apology or introduction, he began at once.



Chapter the Seventh.

YE DRIVER: HIS TALE.

‘**Y**EW’M right, gen’lemen, yew’m right—there’s worse places for a man tew spend Chris’mas Eve than the inside o’ the Wivid, or ’pon the outside either.’ Then thrusting his face through the curtains, he looked away into the darkness. ‘Gwan Zander—good old oss,’ he cried in an encouraging tone, and faced his audience once more.

‘’Twas fifteen year agone this very night,’ he began again, ‘’pon a Chris’mas Eve.’

I fancied my pleasant spoken neighbour started. She certainly drew the veil more closely to her face; besides, she had kept it up for a time and had only drawn it down again the moment Trigg prepared to come inside. And yet it must be fancy only—what could she have to do with Trigg, or Trigg with her?

A pleasant fellow was Trigg, to whom you took a fancy at first sight. A round, merry, weather-beaten face his was, full of honesty and good heartedness.

‘Fifteen year agone this very night,’ he went on. ‘Bless me, well! how the time doth fly, to be sure; it seem’th but a twelvemonth. Well, I was living home then ’long with mother. Ah, her most broked her heart over me, her did. Thank God her got mended again though, and her’s uncommon hearty now, sure enough, and so fine a woman as yew’ll see, though I dew say it

—as ought tew; and if all's well I'm off to morrow mornin' afore daylight for to fetch her over to eat her Chris'mas dinner 'long with us. Her'll be seventy-seven if her live to next St. Peter's fair.'

Then Trigg looked out through the curtains. 'Gwan 'Zander, gwan old oss.'

As he warmed to his story his manner grew jerky, and towards the end of the sentence the thoughts and words came out with a sort of rush that almost took one's breath away—it did his altogether.

'Yew see, it was like this yere. Yew'm always staying about to the public houses, a-putting up and calling in to 'most every one of them, and what with the cold and the rain, iss, and the dust and the heat, and what with the passengers a-saying "Here Trigg, do'ee come and have a glass of something for to keep out the cold," or else it would be "Here Trigg, 'tis uncommon thirsty weather, what will 'ee have?" So you see, long with one thing and another—there, I got into the way of it, and that's how it began.'

Again the head was thrust outside the curtain. 'Gwan 'Zander, gwan.' And so Trigg recovered breath to proceed with the story.

'Well, you see what was only a little for to begin with, now and then, and here and there, come to be a little more and a little oftener, till you do come to get into the way of going in a'most everywhere without thinking, and you do wait about without knowing, and you aren't particular to a glass or two more, a-stopping every place five minutes longer, and—well, there, it do go on like that till yew'm safe to come home *drunk*.'

It was as if to hide his face outside in the darkness

that the driver turned round this time—'Gwan 'Zander, gwan old oss.'

'Well, then, there was dear old mother—there'd she'd be a-sitting up till twelve and one, waitin' and waitin', and instead of a blazing fire and a bit of a hot supper like there will be to-night, there—you'd come home to an empty grate and empty cupboard too; and there the business a-slipping out of your fingers because they that could help 'ee can't put no trust in 'ee and is 'most obliged for to give 'ee up, and all the parcels a-muddled up that there as you'd think 'twas the pixies a-doing it, and all left to the wrong places—like when this here werry indentical Mrs. Grimble the monthly nurse, there was all her things tookt up to parson Trevan, and he is a batcheldore tew, and *his* new suit of clothes was left for this here werry Mrs. Grimble, and all got for to be done over again.'

Trigg drew a long breath as he looked out this time. 'Poor old 'Zander, then,' he said kindly.

'Ah, friends, give thanks to God, do 'ee now, if yew and nobody belonging to 'ee don't know what it dew mean for to be breaking the hearts of them that is more to 'ee than all the world, and for to lose your own good name and to be a-coming to rags, and the poor old oss not able for to get vitty [proper] victuals, and the house rent all behind, and the harness a-breaking every day through being so rotten, and lots of little things owing here and there, and the old Wivid a disgrace to anybody for want of a coat of paint, and and—and the young woman as yew'm a-keeping company 'long with a-crying and a-saying that her won't have nothing to do with 'ee any longer and all the time her don't like for to give 'ee up—the dear, and see 'ee go all to rack

and ruin, and as Solomon do say is a thing as do give red eyes to many more than them that do take the strong drink.'

Trigg dived through the curtain again—but this time there was no appeal to Alexander—only a vigorous clearing of his own throat as if something rather choked him.

'Then the accidentses as there used to be and the narrow escapes, and me not deserving any mercy once instead of having it over and over, and the fallings off, and there—one time when I was a sleeping and I was run into and knocked off the shafts and broked my collarbone; and there—another time through being all the wrong side I smashed up a pony trap which it took me ever so long for to pay for, and then all the parcels kept on a-losing of theirselves, and a-breaking all somehow afore you knew it, and the passengers a-being carried on for miles further than they was going to till they got there, and things all that contrairy and aggravating as made up my mind for to run away to California or somewhere, which I should have done but for the Wivid her own self and for mother—and—and—for Martha, because that would have broked her heart, for all her said her had gived me up.'

'Gwan 'Zander, gwan old oss,' cried Trigg, jerking the reins as if he himself were anxious to get on to some brighter part of his story.

'Well, things was going on like that there till this very night fifteen years agone, and by that time they was got so bad, well, there—they couldn't anyhow get no worse; and I had started out with a load so light as the night, which considering it was Christmas Eve, and a full moon tew, was dreadful bad, and the night

freezing sharp, and the horse through not being roughed a bit couldn't hardly get a foothold, and there—though I weren't what you might call so uncommon bad, for all that I weren't nohow fit for to go 'long with the Wivid 'pon a night like that.'

Then suddenly Trigg stopped and looked out through the curtain. My pleasant spoken neighbour turned to look out, too, lifting her veil, and trying to peer into the darkness.

'Gwan 'Zander, gwan,' cried the driver, still looking out as if he had made up his mind not to tell us any more.

'The rain has stopped, I think,' I said to the young lady, thinking possibly her anxiety was about the weather. But she did not hear me apparently, her eyes were still fixed upon the narrow opening between the curtains.

Then suddenly Trigg drew backward; so suddenly that my interesting neighbour had scarcely time to snatch down the veil, and she coughed a confused little cough that was very suspicious.

'There!' cried Trigg, 'I thought I should see it, dark as it is. I never missed seeing it upon a Christmas Eve since then, and I reckon I never shall so long as the Wivid do keep 'pon her legs or I be 'pon mine. That there was the wery identical place, and I never pass it night or morning, rain or fine, but I *dew* thank God for it; and I do think about the little maid, bless her, for you see it was like this yere—when I came to that spot I slipped my foot and fell; leastways, that is what they do say, and the oss he caught me with his hoof right in the forehead and went on a-leaving me there in the middle o' the road and must have been

dead afore morning what with the cold and the loss of blood.'

'Gwan, 'Zander, gwan,' and this time Trigg scarcely so much as turned his head.

'Well, who should be a-coming along the road but Mr. Tremaine in here to Trefursey, a-driving his little niece home for to spend Christmas Day long with the old couple, which he had a-picked her up a-coming home from market, and they came right upon me lying there in the middle of the road.'

'Gwan 'Zander, good old oss,' cried Trigg from inside the curtains. 'Well, he pulled up and come over, and when he feeled my hand, so I've a-heerd mun say, saith he, "Trigg's dead," saith he, t'were all so cold. But presently he find'th a bit of life in me still, and he knowed the Wivid weren't very far on, so he fling'th a rug over me and leaveth the little maid there for to rub my hands, while he went on for to fetch the oss back again, so fast as he could.'

'Gwan 'Zander.'

'Well, while he was gone I come to for a bit, and there in the clear moonlight I could see something drest in a white dress, and the hair it looked like golden in the shining of the moon, and it was a-bending over me, rubbing life into me, and a-saying all so gentle and loving, "Poor Trigg! poor, poor Trigg!" and I can just mind looking out and thinking it must be an angel a-comed for mother's sake, and then I s'pose I was off my head again.'—

'Gwan old oss.'

'Well, Mr. Tremaine he found the Wivid very soon, and he brought her back and there, he and the little maid they had for to lift me inside and lay me 'pon

the floor, and covered me up so well as they could; and there the little maid she had for to sit and drive the van while Mr. Tremaine was a-taking care of his own oss and trap alongside.'

'Gwan 'Zander, gwan.'

'Well, while he was going along, I can mind it so well as if 'twas only yesterday, I come to myself again for a minute and looked up—there was the moonlight streaming right in, wonderful bright, and there right in the middle of it was this here little maid a-driving, and her hair all gold like, fell down 'pon a sort of shining silver dress, seeming to me like it, and was a sort of white fur cloak, Martha do say; and then she turns round and saith so pitiful, "Poor Trigg,—poor, poor Trigg," and I was *sure* 'twas an angel then when she spoke so pretty, an angel come for mother's sake.'

'Gwan old oss, gwan.'

'Well, they brought me home and put me to bed; there I was bad for days and days, a hard job 'twas for to pull me through, too, which the doctor do say it was all along with mother's good nursing; and mother do say it was all along with God's blessing; and they'm both right, but so is Martha and me tew, and we do hold as it was 'long with that there little angel a-coming and speaking to me, in my dreams; for there would be the dreadfulest, ghaftliest old things come a-grinning and mocking me, and then the little angel would come with her golden hair and the white shining dress, and would drive them all away, and then she would say, "Poor Trigg, poor, poor Trigg," and I should feel all so quiet and comfortable directly.'

'Gwan 'Zander, gwan,' and as Trigg spoke he

didn't look out of the curtain at all, but wiped each eye carefully with his thumb-nail.

'There was one of them there dreams come true. 'Twas uncommon strange that there one was; seeming like as if I was in some *wisht* old place, and I was all in rags, and I was knocked about dreadful; and the oss was nothing but skin and bone; and the Wivid herself was enough for to break your heart, her were that there disgraceful looking; and there was Martha, too, her were crying and wasting away terrible, and everything was so bad as ever it could be, an' then all of a sudden there come this here little angel, and 'twas just like as if her was a-charming of us, for her look'th at me and says, "Poor, poor Trigg," and then her taketh hold o' Martha's hand, and Martha her stopped crying in a minute; and there afore you could so much as count ten there was the old oss in the shafts, and looking so well as ever, and there was Martha and me dressed in our Sunday best, and her a-looking lovely tew, and us was both riding inside of the Wivid, her were done up beautiful, and there was that there little angel a-sitting up driving us to church for to be—'

'Gwan 'Zander, gwan old oss,' and Trigg thrust his head out of the curtains and laughed aloud.

'And the dream it come true, too, the very next Christmas Eve, leastways her went along with us the little maid did all drest in white and with her golden hair a-looking lovely. And there, I haven't touched a drop of liquor since that, and I don't mean to, either.'

'Gwan 'Zander, gwan old oss, yew'm up the hill now,' and Trigg took down the reins from the crook.

'Put me down at Trefursey, Mr. Trigg, please,' said the young lady passenger, quietly lifting her veil.

'Why, la!' cried Trigg, turning round and gazing in astonishment, 'to think of it! why bless 'ee, Miss, and to think that I never heerd tell of your coming down. And there, to think if I had left *yew* behind, and 'pon Christmas Eve, tew. Please do'ee let me shake hands with'ee, Miss; and you'll come and see Martha, won't you, Miss, and——'

'How long this would have lasted there is no telling; but a loud voice brought the Vivid suddenly to a stop.

'Ho, there, Trigg! have you got anybody looking out for me?'

'Iss Mr. Tremaine, iss,' cried Trigg, delighted, 'here's the little angel, bless her—there, beg pardon, Miss, I do mean the young lady.'

Nor was I sorry to hear that familiar voice, for Mr. Tremaine was to be my host, too; and very pleasant was it, to me at least, to find that our acquaintance was not to end with that

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