VNIVERSITAS STVDII SALAMANTINI

The Salamanca Corpus: *Dorset Dear* (1905)

Author: M. E. Francis (Mary E. Blundell, née Sweetman) (1855-1930)
Text type: Prose
Date of composition: 1905
Editions: 1905, 1915, 1984
Source text:
Francis, M.E. 1905. *Dorset Dear: Idylls of Country Life*. London: Longmans, Green & Co.
e-text
Access and transcription: December 2013
Number of words: 89,116
Dialect represented: Dorsetshire
Produced by Susanne Weinzinger
Revised by María F. García-Bermejo Giner
Copyright © 2014– DING, The Salamanca Corpus, Universidad de Salamanca

DORSET DEAR

IDYLLS OF COUNTRY LIFE

BY
M. E. FRANCIS
(MRS. FRANCIS BLUNDELL)

"Vor Do'set dear,
Then gi'e woone cheer,
D' ye hear? woone cheer!"
—William Barnes

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
91 AND 93 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK
LONDON AND BOMBAY
1905

[NP]

These stories originally appeared in Country Life, The Graphic, Longman's Magazine *and* The Illustrated London News. *The Author's thanks are due to the Editors of these periodicals for their kind permission to reproduce them.*

[NP]

To the Memory

OF

LADY SMITH-MARRIOTT,

KIND NEIGHBOUR AND TRUE FRIEND.

[NP]

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
WITCH ANN	1
A RUNAWAY COUPLE	28
POSTMAN CHRIS	43
KEEPER GUPPY	60
THE WORM THAT TURNED	89
OLF AND THE LITTLE MAID	109
IN THE HEART OF THE GREEN	127
THE WOLD STOCKIN'	149
A WOODLAND IDYLL	168
THE CARRIER'S TALE	192
MRS. SIBLEY AND THE SEXTON	207
THE CALL OF THE WOODS	222
THE HOME-COMING OF DADA	246

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

THE MAJESTY OF THE LAW 256

THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT 279

"A TERR'BLE VOOLISH LITTLE MAID" 296

SWEETBRIAR LANE 317

WITCH ANN.

ANN KERLEY had lived in great peace and contentment for more than seventy-three years. Her neighbours considered her a good plain 'ooman, who always had a kind word for every one, and was so ready to do a good turn for another body as heart could wish. But, lo and behold! one fine morning old Ann Kerley awoke to find herself a witch.

The previous day had been sultry and wild, with spells of fierce sunshine that smote down upon honest people's heads as they toiled in cornfield or potato-plot, bringing out great drops of sweat on sunburnt faces, and forcing more than one labourer to supplement the shade and comfort of his broad chip hat by a cool moist cabbage leaf. Withal furious gusts of wind rose every now and then — storm wind, old Jan Belbin said, and he was considered wonderful weather-wise — wind that set the men's shirt sleeves flapping for all the world like the sleeves of a racing jockey, and blew the women's aprons into the air, and twisted the maids' hats round upon their heads if they so much as crossed the road to the well. Yet this wind would drop as suddenly as it had sprung up; the land would lie all bathed in fiery heat, and a curious sense of uneasiness and expectancy would seem to pervade the

whole of Nature. The very beasts were disquieted in their pasture; the corn stood up straight and stiff, each ear, as it were, on the alert; not a leaf stirred in hedgerow or tree-top; and then "all to once," as Jan Belbin pointed out, the storm wind sprang up again, tossing the golden waste of wheat hither and thither like a troubled sea, and making every individual branch and twig creak and groan.

Twilight was at last closing in with brooding stillness, and a group of lads, who had been working for an hour or two in the allotments, gathered idly round the gate, gossiping, and some of them smoking, before proceeding homewards. It was too dark, as Joe Pilcher declared, to see the difference between a ’tater and a turnip, and ’twas about time they were steppin’ anyways. He was in the act of relating some interesting anecdote with regard to last Saturday’s practice in the cricket field, when he broke off, and pointed up the stony path which led past the allotments.

“Hullo! Whatever’s that?” he cried.

The bent outline of a small figure could be seen creeping along their regular line of hedge. It was apparently humpbacked, and wore a kind of hood projecting over its face.

“ ’Tis a wold hag, seemin’ly,” said Jim Ford, craning forward over the top rail.

“There!” cried Joe, “I took it for a sprite, but I don’t know as I shouldn’t be just so much afeared of a witch any day. It be a witch, sure.”

“Don’t be a sammy,” interposed an older man. “ ’Tis nothin’ but some poor wold body what has been gatherin’

scroff. They’ve felled a tree up-along in wood, an’ she’ve a-been a-pickin’ up all as she can lay hands on for her fire. There, ’tis wold Ann Kerley. I can see her now. She’ve a-got a big nitch o’ sticks upon her back, an’ she do croopy down under the weight on’t, an’ she’ve a-tied her handkercher over her bonnet, poor body, to keep it fro’ blowin’ away. There’s your hag for you, Joe!”

“I be afeared, I say,” insisted Joe, feigning to tremble violently. He considered himself a wag, and had quite a following of the village good-for-noughts. “ ’Tis a witch, sartin sure ’tis a witch. Don’t ye go for to overlook I, Ann Kerley, for I tell ’ee I won’t a-bear it!”

As the unconscious Ann drew nearer he squatted down behind the gate-post, loudly announcing that he was that frayed he was fair bibbering. Two or three of the others made believe to hide themselves too, pretending to shiver in imitation of their leader, and peering out like him between the bars of the gate.

Such unusual proceedings could not fail to attract the old woman's attention, and she paused in astonishment when she reached the spot.

"Why, whatever be to do here?" she inquired.

Joe uttered a kind of howl, and burrowed into the hedge.

"She be overlookin' of we," he shouted. "The witch be overlookin' of we."

"Don't ye take no notice, my dear woman," said Abel Bond, the man who had before spoken. "They be but a lot o' silly bwoys a-talkin' nonsense."

"Witch!" cried Joe.

"Witch! witch!" echoed the rest.

[4]

Ann looked from one to the other of the grinning faces that kept popping up over the rail, and disappearing again.

"Whatever be they a-talkin' on?" she gasped.

"You be a witch, Ann," cried Joe. "If you was served right you'd be ducked in the pond. E-es, that you would."

A small boy, fired with a desire to distinguish himself, picked up a clod of earth, and flung it at her with so true an aim that it grazed her cheek.

"Take that, witch!" he cried.

Joe, not to be outdone, threw another; pellets of earth and even small pebbles began to assail the old woman from the whole line.

Abel Bond promptly came to the rescue, knocking the ringleaders' heads together, and impartially distributing kicks and cuffs among the remainder.

"Bad luck to the witch!" cried the irrepressible Joe, wriggling himself free; and the shout was taken up by the rest, even as they dodged the avenger.

"Bad luck, yourself," retorted poor Ann, trembling with wrath and alarm. "I'm sure nar'n o' ye do deserve such very good luck arter insultin' a poor wold 'ooman what never did ye no harm."

And she went on her way, grumbling and indignant.

But when she had reached her own little house in the "dip," and had walked up the flagged path between the phlox bushes and the lavender, and pussy had come

rubbing against her legs in greeting, her anger cooled; and by the time her kettle had begun to sing over a bright wood fire, and she had laid out her modest repast of bread and watercress, she fairly laughed to herself.

[5]

"Lard! they bwoys be simple!" she said. "They did call I a witch, along o' my havin' tied my handkercher over my head. Abel did give it to 'em, but I reckon he didn't hurt 'em much. Bwoys! there, they do seem so hard as stoones near. 'Witch!' says they. Well, that's a very notion."

She chuckled again, and set down a saucer of milk for the cat to lap.

"They'll be callin' you a witch next, puss," said she laughing.

Ann carried her bucket to the well as usual next morning, feeling rather more cheerful than was her custom. Rain had fallen shortly after daybreak, but the sky was now clear and limpid, and the air cool. On her way to the well her attention was caught by a loud clucking in her neighbour's garden, and looking across the dividing hedge she descried a hen violently agitating herself inside a coop, while a brood of yellow downy ducklings some few hours old paddled in and out of a pool beside the path.

"Well, of all the beauties!" cried Ann, clapping her hands together until the bucket rattled on her arm; "why, Mrs. Clarke, my dear, you must have hatched out every one — 'tis a wonderful bit o' luck."

"E-es, indeed," agreed Mrs. Clarke, "hatchin' out so late an' all. I hope I may do well wi' 'em."

"I hope so, that do I," agreed Ann heartily, and hobbled on towards the well.

One or two women were there, who responded to her greeting with a coldness which she did not at once realise.

[6]

"Fine rain this marnin'," she remarked cheerfully, as her bucket went clattering down the well; "we've had a good drop to-year, haven't we? Farmers may grumble, but, as I do say, 'tis good for the well. We'll be like to draw a bit less chalk nor we do in the

dry seasons. There be all sarts in our well, bain't there? Water an' chalk, an' a good few snails. There, when I do hear folks a-talkin' about the Government doin' this an doin' that, I do say to myself, I wish Government 'ud see to our well."

Usually such a sally would have been applauded, but, to poor old Ann's astonishment and chagrin, her remark was received on this occasion in solemn silence. To hide her discomfiture she peered into the moss-grown depths of the well.

"Don't ye go a-lookin' into it like that, Ann," cried a vinegary-faced matron in an aggressive tone. "Chalky water, e-es, an' water wi' snails in't is better than no water at all. 'Tis sure – 'tis by a long ways."

"Ah, 'tis!" agreed the others, eyeing Ann suspiciously.

She straightened herself and looked round in surprise.

"I never said it wasn't," she faltered. "Why do ye look at me so nasty, Mrs. Biles?"

"Oh, ye don't know, I s'pose?" retorted Mrs. Biles sourly. "How be your 'taters, Ann Kerley, this marnin'?"

"Doin' finely, thanks be," said poor Ann, brightening up, as she considered the conversation was taking a more agreeable turn.

"Not blighted, I s'pose?" put in a little fat woman who had hitherto been silent.

[7]

"Not a sign o' blight about 'em," said Mrs. Kerley joyfully. "There, I did just chance to look at 'em when I did first get up, an' they're beautiful."

"That's strange," remarked Mrs. Biles, with a meaning sniff. "Every single 'tater at the 'lotments be blighted, they do tell I. Mrs. Pilcher did say when her husband went up there this marnin' he could smell 'em near a quarter of a mile away."

"Dear, to be sure!" groaned Ann, sympathetically, being quite willing to condone any little asperities of temper on the part of folks suffering from such a calamity. " 'Tis a terr'ble pity, Mrs. Biles. There, 'tis along o' the 'lotments layin' out so open like, I d' 'low. Now my bit o' garden be sheltered."

The little fat woman, usually a meek sort of body, snorted fiercely.

" 'Tisn't very likely as your garden 'ud suffer, Mrs. Kerley," she cried, in a voice that trembled with wrath. "Your garden is safe enough — an' so was the 'lotments till yesterday."

"Well, I be pure sorry, I'm sure," said Ann, looking from one to the other in bewilderment. " 'Tis just as luck would have it, I s'pose."

"Luck, indeed!" cried Mrs. Biles meaningly. "There's them as went by yesterday as wished bad luck, an' bad luck did come."

Ann fairly gasped. Mrs. Biles threw out her hand warningly.

"Take your eyes off I, Mrs. Kerley. Take 'em off, I say! I bain't a-goin' to have 'ee overlookin' of I, same as

[8]

you did do to poor Joe Pilcher — 'tis well if the poor bwoy don't die of it."

Ann obediently dropped her eyes, a nightmare-like sensation of oppression overwhelming her.

"I d' 'low ye won't deny ye did overlook Joe Pilcher," went on Mrs. Biles; "there, ye did no sooner turn your back yesterday, nor the lad was took wi' sich a bad pain in his innards that he went all doubly up same as a wold man."

"Well, that's none o' my fault," expostulated Ann warmly, for even a worm will turn. "He've a-been eatin' summat as disagreed wi' he."

"Nothin' o' the kind!" cried the women in chorus.

"It corned so sharp as a knife," added one, "all twisty turny".

"The poor bwoy did lie upon the floor all night," put in another, "a-pankin' a-groanin' so pitiful. 'Ann Kerley has bewitched I,' says he. E-es, the bwoy come out wi' the truth. ''Tis Mother Kerley what has overlooked I,' says he."

"Well," returned Ann vehemently, "I never did nothin' at all to the bwoy. 'Tis nonsense what you do talk, all on you. He've a-been eatin' green apples — that's what the matter wi' he."

"Green apples!" exclaimed Mrs. Biles, with shrill sarcasm. "Dear, to be sure, if a bwoy was to be upset every time he ate a green apple, there wouldn't be a sound child

in village. He hadn't had above five or six, his mother did say herself, an' he can put away as many as fourteen wi'out feelin' the worse for it. Ye must agree 'tis very

[9]

strange, Ann — there, ye did say out plain for all to hear: 'Bad luck, yourself,' says you to the innercent bwoy. 'Ye won't be like to have such very good luck, nar'n o' you,' says you, an', sure enough, there be the 'taters blighted, an' there be the poor bwoy upset in's inside."

"I didn't really mean it, neighbours," faltered Ann, looking piteously round. "I was a bit vexed at the time, an' when the lads did start a-floutin' me wi' stones an' that, and a-callin' ill names and a-wishin' me bad luck, I just says back to 'em, quick like, 'Bad luck, yourself!' an' 'twasn't very like they'd have good luck; but I didn't mean it in my heart — not me, indeed. The Lard sees I hadn't no thought o' really wishin' evil to nobody — that I hadn't, neighbours. You don't believe I did have, do 'ee now, Mrs. Whittle?" — turning in despair to the little woman on her right — "you, what has knowed I sich a many year — you did ought to know I wouldn't wish no harm to nobody."

Mrs. Whittle looked sheepish and uncomfortable. Despite the sinister aspect of things, her heart melted at her old crony's appeal.

"Why, I scarce can believe it," she was beginning, when Mrs. Biles struck in: —

"Deny it if you can, Ann Kerley. There's the 'taters blighted, an' there's the bwoy took bad, an' it's you what wished 'em ill luck. What can ye make o' that, Mrs. Whittle? Ye'll 'low 'tis strange."

Mrs. Whittle shook her head dubiously, and Ann, deprived, as she thought, of her only ally, threw her apron over her head, and wept behind it,

[10]

"Don't 'ee take on, Mrs. Kerley, that's a dear," said Mrs. Whittle, softening once more. " 'Twas maybe a chance thing. You did say them words wi'out thinkin' an' they

did come true to be a warnin' to 'ee. We do all do wrong sometimes; this 'ere did ought to be a warn in' to all on us."

"I'm sure 'twill be a lesson to I," sobbed Ann inarticulately. "So long as I do live I'll never say such things again. 'Twas very ill-done o' me to ha' spoke wi'out thought, sich a wold 'ooman as I be, an' so near my end an' all, an' the Lard has chastised I. I can't do more nor say I'm sorry, an' I hope the A'mighty 'ull forgive me."

"There, the 'ooman can't say no fairer nor that," said Mrs. Whittle, looking round appealingly; "she can't do more nor repent."

"Oh, if she do repent it'll be well enough," said Mrs. Biles darkly. " 'Tis to be hoped as she do repent. But by all accounts 'tis easier for to begin that kind o' work nor to leave it off again."

She turned on her heel with this parting innuendo, and, taking up her full bucket, walked away. The others followed suit, and Ann, left alone, sobbed on for a moment or two with a feeling akin to despair, and then, drawing down her apron, wiped her eyes with it sadly, wound up her pail from the depths where it had lain forgotten, and made her way homewards.

For days afterwards she was ashamed to show her face, and rose at extraordinarily early hours in order to procure her supply of water, and crept out of her own quarters at dusk to make her necessary purchases.

[11]

One morning, about a week after the affair at the allotments, when Ann sallied forth as usual for water, she paused incidentally to look over her neighbour's gate. The hen-coop was still in view, the hen cackling, and the ducklings waddling up and down the path. But how few of them there were! Only three! What would have become of the others? Possibly they were squatting at the back of the coop. She was craning her head round in order to ascertain if this were the case, when a window in Mrs. Clarke's house was thrown open, and that lady's voice was heard in angry tones: —

"I've catched you at it, have I? I've catched you at it! Well, you did ought to be ashamed of yourself, Ann Kerley. To try an' do me a mischief — me, as has been sich a good neighbour to 'ee."

"Why, what's the matter?" returned Ann, backing away from the gate, and raising dim, distracted eyes.

"I've catched you in the very act," continued Mrs Clarke vehemently. "Says I to myself when the ducklin's kep' a-droppin' off like that, 'I wonder if it can be Ann?' says I, an' then I thinks, 'No, it never can be Ann; her an' me was always friends,' I says. Ah, you ungrateful, spiteful creetur'!"

An arm, clad in checked flannelette, was here thrust forth, and the fist appertaining thereto emphatically shaken.

"I'm sure," protested the unfortunate Ann, staggering back against her own little gate, "I don't know whatever you can mean by such talk, Mrs. Clarke; I never touched your ducks. I be a honest 'ooman, an' I wouldn't take nothin' what didn't belong to I."

[12]

"I don't say you stole 'em," retorted Mrs. Clarke, "but I say you overlooked 'em, an' that's worse; a body 'ud know what to be at if 'twas only a thief as was makin' away wi' 'em, but when 'tis a witch — Lard, whatever is to be done? I couldn't ha' thought ye'd ha' found it in your heart to go striking down they poor little innercent things. What harm did they do ye? Sich beauties as they was. But there, ye must go gettin' up in the very dummet that ye mid overlook the poor little creetur's, so that, one after another, they do just croopy down an' die."

"Mrs. Clarke," said Anne, solemnly and desperately, "I can't tell how sich a thing did come about — I can't indeed. 'Tis no fault o' mine, I do assure ye. I wouldn't ha' had they poor little duck die for anything. I never wished 'em ill. I was admirin' of 'em. I never had no other thought."

"Well, see here," returned Mrs. Clarke, somewhat mollified. "Don't ye look at 'em at all, that's a good 'ooman. Maybe 'tis no fault o' yourn, but 'tis very strange, Mrs. Kerley, what do seem to have come to you to-year. You do seem to bring bad luck, though you midn't do it a-purpose."

"I'm sure I don't," protested Ann, "an' I can't believe, Mrs. Clarke, as a body can do bad wi'out knowin' it."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Well, 'tis queer, I d' 'low," agreed her neighbour, "but when a body sees sich things for theirsel's as do happen along o' you, they can't but believe their own eyes. Ye mind that there bar-hive what Mr. Bridle got last month?"

"E-es," returned Ann feebly, "I mind it well. I never

[13]

see sich a handsome contrivance nor so clever. Mr. Bridle showed it to I."

"E-es, I d' 'low he did," agreed the other, with a certain triumph. "I d' 'low ye was a-lookin' at it a long time."

"I was," confessed Ann, with a sinking heart.

Mrs. Clarke nodded portentously. "That's it," she said. "The bees be all dead, Mrs. Kerley. Bridle, he did say to I yesterday, 'I couldn't think,' says he, 'whatever took the bees. I had but just moved them out of the wold skip and they did seem to take to the bar-hive so nice,' he says, 'an' now they be all a-dyin' off so quick as they can. I couldn't think,' he says, 'what could be the reason, but I do know now. I do know it was a great mistake to ha' brought Ann Kerley up to look at 'em.' "

"Oh dear, oh dear," cried the last-named poor old woman, wringing her hands, "do he really think I did hurt 'em?"

"He do, indeed," said Mrs. Clarke firmly. "There, my dear, it do seem a terr'ble thing, but you be turned into a witch seemin'ly, whether it be against your will or whether it bain't."

Ann stood motionless for a moment, her hands squeezed tightly together, her face haggard and drawn.

"I think I'll go indoor a bit," she said, after a pause. "I'll go indoor an' set me down. I don't know what to do. Mrs. Clarke ——?"

"E-es, my dear. There, you needn't look up at I so earnest — I can hear 'ee quite well wi'out that."

Ann turned away with an impatient groan, and went

[14]

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

staggering up her path. The other looked after her remorsefully.

"Bide a bit, Mrs. Kerley, do 'ee now. What was ye goin' to ax I?"

"I was but goin' to ax," faltered Ann, still with her face averted, "if you'd be so kind as to fetch I a drop o' water this marnin' when you do go to get some for yoursel'. There, I don't some way feel as if I could face folks — an' there mid be some about. 'Tis gettin' a bit late now."

"E-es, sure; I could do it easy," agreed Mrs. Clarke eagerly. "I could do it every marnin' — 'tisn't a bit more trouble to fill two pails nor one. An' 't 'ud be better for ee, Ann, my dear, not to go about more nor you can help till this 'ere visitation wears of."

" 'T 'ull never wear off," said Ann gloomily, as she walked unsteadily away.

Now, as Mrs. Clarke subsequently remarked, those words of Ann's made her fair bibber, same as if a bucket of cold water were thrown down her back. She was full of compassion for her neighbour, and, though she was willing to believe that the strange, unpleasant power of which she had suddenly become possessed was unwelcome to her and unconsciously used, she was nevertheless forced to agree with Mrs. Biles that that didn't make the thing no better, and that the more Ann Kerley kept herself to herself the safer it would be for all parties.

Meanwhile, the anguish of mind endured by the unwilling sorceress defies description. Day by day her deplorable plight became more evident to her. Now an

[15]

indignant farmer's wife would come to complain that butter had not come, and on poor Ann's protesting that she had never so much as set foot near the dairy, would retort that she had been seen gathering sticks at nightfall in the pasture, and had doubtless bewitched the cows. Now a village mother would hastily snatch up a child when it toddled towards the witch's house; even the baker tossed the weekly loaf over the gate in fear, and left his bill at Mrs. Clarke's, saying he would call for the money there. That lady informed her of the fact through the closed door as she dumped her morning bucket of water on the path without, adding that if she would like to leave the money in the bucket when she put it ready overnight, it would save trouble to every one.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

Ann Kerley understood: even her old crony was now afraid to meet her face to face.

As she realised this she fell to crying feebly and hopelessly, as she had done so often of late, and Pussy came and jumped upon her knee, rubbing herself against her, and gazing at her with golden inscrutable eyes. The warm contact of a living creature, even a cat, was comforting, and the old woman hugged her favourite closely; but presently, struck by a sudden thought, she pushed it away, and turned aside her head.

"There! get down, love! do — get away with 'ee, else I'll maybe be doin' thee a mischief. Oh dear, Puss, whatever should I do if anything happened to thee?"

The idea positively appalled her, and from that moment she was careful to avert her face when she set the cat's food before her.

[16]

Perhaps the greatest trial of all was the Sunday church-going.

"I d' 'low the Lard won't let I do nobody no harm in His House," she had said to herself at first, almost hopefully; and she had donned her decent Sunday clothes eagerly, not to say joyfully. She was by nature sociable, and had suffered as severely from the inability to indulge in an occasional chat, a little harmless gossip, with this one and that one, as from a sense of being under a ban.

So she had set forth cheerily, volunteering "A fine marnin', neighbours," to the first group she had passed upon the road. But dear, to be sure! how the folks had jumped and squeezed themselves against the wall to let her go by! She had not had the heart to greet the next couple, staid elderly folk, who were pacing along in front of her, full of Sabbath righteousness; but presently the man had looked round, and had then nudged his wife, and she had gathered up her skirts and scuttled on without so much as a glance over her shoulder. Poor Ann had fallen back and turned aside into a by-path until all the congregation had streamed in, and then had crept up the steps alone, and made her way to her place blindly, for her eyes were full once more of piteous tears.

But even there humiliation awaited her, for she found herself alone in her pew, none of its accustomed occupants being willing to worship in such dangerous proximity.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"I must be a terr'ble wicked 'ooman, sure," groaned Ann to herself, and raised her poor smarting eyes to the

[17]

east window, whence the figure of the Good Shepherd looked back at her, full of compassion and benignity.

But Ann quickly dropped her eyes again. Was He not carrying a lamb upon His shoulder? It seemed to her that even the painted innocent would droop and falter beneath her gaze.

And so thenceforth she started for church long after the other members of the congregation, and instead of seeking her own place, stole humbly to a dark corner, where, hidden away behind a pillar, she worshipped in sorrow of heart.

Such a state of things could not have continued if the old rector had been at home, but he was away holiday-making in Switzerland, and the locum tenens, a young curate from the neighbouring town, could not be expected to notice a matter of the kind.

One Sunday afternoon it chanced that Farmer Joyce, who lived up Riverton way, drove over to Little Branston, and was good enough to give a lift to his neighbour, Martha Hansford, Ann's married daughter, who was feeling, as she confessed, a bit anxious at not hearing from her mother.

"There, she haven't a-wrote since I can't say when," she explained to the farmer, as the trap went spinning along the road; "she don't write herself, mother don't, but she do generally get somebody to drop me a line for her, and I haven't heard a word to-month; no, nor last month either."

"Rheumatics perhaps," suggested the farmer.

"I'm sure I hope not, Mr. Joyce. My mother have

[18]

never had sich a thing in her life, an' 'tis to be hoped she bain't a-goin' to begin now."

"The wold lady's busy, very like," hazarded Mr. Joyce, after ruminating a while. "The time do slip away so quick, an' one day do seem so like another, folks can't always be expected to put their minds to letter-writin'."

"Lard love 'ee, sir," returned Martha, startled into familiarity, "farmer folks mid be busy enough, an' lab'rin' folks too — I can scarce find the day long enough to put in all as I've a-got to do — but mother! what can a poor wold body like mother have to work at, wi'out it's a bit o' knittin', or some such thing. No, it's summat else, an' I'm sure I can't think what it can be."

Mr. Joyce was not imaginative enough to assist her by any further hypothesis; therefore, he merely touched up the horse and remarked reassuringly that they would soon be there. And for the rest of the drive Martha devoted herself to the somewhat difficult task of keeping her three-year-old boy, Ally, from wriggling out of her arms.

Dropped at the bottom of the "dip" wherein was situated Mrs. Kerley's cottage, Martha hastened towards it, Ally trotting gleefully beside her. Instead of finding the cottage door open – as might have been expected this sunny October afternoon — and catching a glimpse of her mother's quiet figure in its elbow-chair, she found the house shut up, and apparently no sign of life about the place. The very garden had a neglected look, or so it seemed to her; and the little window, usually gay with flowers, was blank and desolate, the check curtain within being drawn across it.

[19]

"Mother!" cried Martha, in a tone of such anguish that Ally immediately set up a corresponding wail. "Oh mother, whatever is to do? Be you dead? Oh, mother! be you dead?"

To her intense relief she heard the sound of a chair being pushed back over the flagged floor within, and her mother's well-known step slowly cross the little kitchen.

"Martha! be it you, my dear?" But she did not open the door, and when Martha eagerly tried the latch she found that it did not yield.

"Mother, mother," she cried in an agony of fear, "oh, mother, what is it? Why don't ye let I in?"

"I can't, my dear," came the tremulous voice from within. "No, don't ax it of I. I dursen't, Martha! There, I mid do 'ee a mischief."

"Mother, what be talkin' on?" Martha was beginning incredulously, when her small son, impatient of the delay, fairly drowned her voice with shrill clamour for admittance, and vigorous kicking of his little hobnailed boots at the panels of the door. Martha snatched him up and impatiently clapped her hand over the protesting mouth. In the momentary pause that ensued she heard her mother weeping.

"Be that Ally? Oh, my blessed lamb! Oh, dear heart! Oh, oh!" Then in a louder key came the words broken by sobs: "Take en away, Martha, do — take en away, lovey! Somethin' bad might happen else!"

Here Ally, wrenching himself free, burst into a roar of indignation, and his mother, popping him down on the

[20]

ground, threw herself upon the door, and, exerting all her strength, succeeded in bursting it open.

With a wail Ann shrank away from her into the farthest corner of the room, hiding her face against the wall.

"Don't ye come a-nigh me, Martha, don't ye — don't ye! And take the blessed child away! Take him away this minute!"

"I'll do nothin' o' the kind," returned Martha vehemently. "Be you gone crazy, mother? Whatever is the matter?"

"Nay, my dear, I bain't gone crazy — it be worse, a deal worse. I can't tell however it did come about, Martha, but, there, I be turned into a witch! I be evil-eyed, they d' say! There, ye'd never believe the terr'ble things what have a-come about along o' me jist lookin'."

Martha dropped down in a chair and burst out laughing. She was a hale, hearty young woman, who had had a bit of schooling, and took a sane and cheerful view of life.

"God bless us, mother!" she cried, wiping her eyes at last and springing up, "what put such a notion as that in your head? You a witch! You hurtin' things wi' lookin' at 'em! I never did hear such nonsense-talk in my life!"

"But it be true, Martha — it be true!" returned Ann, still hiding her face in her trembling hands. "There, I've seed it myself. Don't you come too nigh, my dear, and for mercy's sake keep the darlin' child away!"

"Nay, but I won't," retorted Martha; and, catching up the child, she advanced with a determined air. "You shall look at us — both of us — that you shall! Kiss grandma, Ally, love — that's it! Pull away her hands,

[21]

and give her a big hug. There, the mischief's done now, if mischief there be. Bain't he growed, grandma? Bain't he a fine boy? There, come an' sit ye down and take en on your knee and feel the weight of en."

Ann could not withstand the spell of the little clinging arms, the kisses rained upon her withered cheek. She suffered the child to climb from his mother's arms into hers, and hugged him back passionately.

"Bless you, my lamb! Bless you, my darlin' little angel! Dear, but he be a fine boy, Martha. Bless you, love! E-es; grandma 'ull find en a lump o' sugar. Ah, Martha, I be a-feared — it do seem a terr'ble risk; but, there, I can't think but what the Lard 'ull purtect the innercent child."

"Now, you come along, mother, and sit ye down, an' don't ye go so trembly. You'll not hurt Ally; he be a deal more like to hurt you, such a mischievous boy as he be. Now, then, whoever has been frightenin' of ye with such talk?"

"My dear, they do all say it," murmured Ann, looking fearfully round.

Brokenly, and with many digressions, she told her tale. Long before she had ended Martha was weeping too — weeping with indignation and with a sense of despair; for, argue as she might, she could not divest her mother of her persuasion in her own fell powers. If Ann herself could not be convinced of the folly of the supposition, what hope could Martha have to do away with the unjust suspicions of the neighbours?

Each fresh proof of the ostracism which had become

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

[22]

her mother's portion added to her wrath and woe. She had not had a bit of meat to her dinner, as was invariably the case on Sunday, not having dared to venture forth to buy it. There was not so much as a drop of milk in the house, the child who usually brought it having declined to perform that office. Ann had not liked even to go out and get herself a few "spuds" — there were so many folks about on Saturdays, she explained. There was no fire in the grate, though the autumn day was sharp, for Farmer Cosser had "dared" her to pick up any more sticks in his field.

"I d' 'low ye'd ha' been dead afore long, if I hadn't ha' come," cried Martha, and then fell a-sobbing again. What was the use of her having come? What good could she do?

The two women were sitting together in very melancholy mood, when Farmer Joyce called to say that he would hitch the horse at six o'clock, and Martha must meet him at the top of the road.

"Hullo!" he cried, breaking off short at sight of their tearful faces, "be you all a-cryin' in here?"

And then Martha, eager for sympathy, made bold to clutch at his stout arm and pour forth her tale. The farmer, leaning against the door-post, listened at first in amusement, afterwards with an indignation almost equal to the daughter's own.

"I never did hear such a thing!" he cried emphatically, as she paused for breath. "They must be a pack o' sammies in this place — and wicked uns, too. Dear heart alive! they've fair gallied the poor wold 'ooman out of

[23]

her wits. Be there any one about? I'll soon show 'em what I think of 'em."

"There's a good few folks just goin' their ways to church," cried Martha, eagerly pointing up the lane.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Then I'll step up and give 'em a bit o' my mind," returned he. "You come along wi' I, Mrs. Kerley — don't ye stop for to put on your bonnet — throw this 'ere 'ankercher over your cap — else we'll not be in time to catch 'em, maybe."

"No, I dursen't do that," protested Ann, plucking away the handkerchief which he had thrown over her head; " 'twas that which did first start the notion. 'Twas a windy day, d'ye see, an' I was going to pick a bit o' scroff, an' I just tied my handkercher round my head — an' when the bwoys did see I, they did pelt I wi' stones and call I witch."

"Young rascals!" ejaculated the farmer who had by this time hauled her out of the house, and was hurrying with her up the lane. "Come on, Martha! Make haste, 'ooman! There be a lot of 'em yonder."

In a few moments he and the breathless women found themselves in the midst of quite a little crowd, for Farmer Joyce had waylaid the first group he came across, and the sound of his stentorian tones, raised in wrathful accusation, speedily summoned others.

"You be a wise lot here, you be!" he cried; "you do know summat, you do. Tell 'ee what — you be the biggest lot o' stunpolls as ever was seed or heerd on. This be your witch, be it? — thikky poor wold 'ooman what have never done anybody a bit o' harm in her life — poor wold

Ann Kerley what was born and bred here, and did get married to a Little Branston man an' all, and what have lived among ye so quiet an' peaceful as a body could do. Why, look at her! Look at the poor wold frightened face of her; d'ye mean for to tell I that's the face of a witch?"

"Well, she did blight our 'taters," growled somebody.

"An' she did overlook Mrs. Clarke's young duck ——"

"Did she?" retorted Farmer Joyce, sarcastically. "Well, she didn't overlook my young duck, and they be dead — the most on 'em — what do ye make o' that? Did ye never hear, you wise folk, as duckling do mostly die in thunder weather? And I'll

warrant you be too wise hereabouts to have heerd that this be a blight-year. A lot o' my 'taters be blighted ——"

"I'm sure," put in poor Martha, eagerly, "our 'taters be blighted too. There, my husband do say 'tis scarce worth while to get 'em up."

"I s'pose," cried Farmer Joyce, looking round with withering sarcasm, "I s'pose this 'ere witch have a-gone and wished ill-luck to her own darter's 'taters. 'Tis very likely, I'm sure. And there's another thing — I did hear some tale o' bees a-dyin' arter they'd a-been put in a new hive."

"That's true enough." " 'Tis true, sure," came one or two voices in reply, not with any great enthusiasm, however; then a man's sullen tones — " 'Tis so true as anything. They was my bees, an' I can answer for't bein' true."

"How much food did ye put in for 'em when ye did shift 'em?" inquired Joyce, fixing his eyes on the speaker.

[25]

"How much food? I d' 'low bees be like to keep theirselves."

"Not when you do take their store off 'em so late in the season. You've a-killed your own bees, good man; they were too weak, d'ye see, to keep wosses off when they did come a-fightin' of 'em. I'd ha thought you'd ha been clever enough to ha' knowed that, seein' what knowin' folks you be in Little Branston. There, you did know poor wold Mrs. Kerley tied her 'andkercher over her head to make herself a witch — 'twas that what made her a witch, weren't it? Now I be a witch, bain't I?"

He whisked off his hat suddenly, and drawing a cotton handkerchief from his pocket threw it over his head and tied the ends beneath his chin. The sight of his large red face with its fringe of grey whisker looking jubilantly out of the red and yellow folds, was irresistibly comic; the bystanders fairly roared. The farmer was quick to follow up his advantage.

"I must be a witch," he persisted, "seein' as I've a-got a witch's head on;" then, seized by a yet more luminous inspiration, he crowned the meek and trembling Ann Kerley with his own broad-brimmed and shaggy beaver.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

"Now, Mrs. Kerley be a farmer. She must be a farmer, sure, for she be a-wearin' a farmer's hat. There be jist so mich sense in the one notion as t'other. Here we be – Farmer Kerley and Witch Joyce!"

The merriment at this point grew so uproarious that the clergyman in his distant vestry very nearly sallied forth to inquire the cause; but it died away as suddenly as it had begun. The sight of poor old Ann's lined face

[26]

looking patiently out from beneath its ridiculous headgear was, on the whole, more pathetic than ludicrous; folks began to look at each other, and to own to themselves that they had been not only foolish, but cruel. Every word that the farmer spoke had carried weight, and he could have employed no more forcible argument than the practical demonstration at the end. He was the very best advocate who could have been chosen to plead for her — a good plain man, like themselves, who thoroughly understood the case. By the time Farmer Joyce had resumed his hat and restored his handkerchief to his pocket, the cause was won. People had gathered round Ann with rough apologies and kindly handshakes, and she was escorted homewards by more than one long-estranged friend.

When little Ally, who had been asleep on the settle, woke at the sound of the approaching voices, and came trotting out of the banned house, rubbing his eyes and calling loudly for "Grandma," the good women nodded to each other meaningly, and said that he was a fine boy, bless him, and he wouldn't be likely to look so well if —— And then somebody sniffed the air, and observed that he shouldn't wonder but what Mrs. Kerley's 'taters was a bit blighted too, and Mrs. Kerley replied that she was sure they mid be, but she didn't know, for she hadn't had the heart to look. And then the expert returned authoritatively that he was quite sure they was done for, which seemed wonderfully satisfactory to all parties.

And then Farmer Joyce bethought him that it was time to hitch the horse, and the rest of Ann's friends remembered

[27]

that “last bell” would soon ha’ done ringing; so gradually the little crowd melted away, and Martha embraced her mother with a thankful heart, and went away likewise, leaving Ally behind, according to the farmer’s advice, who had reminded her in a gruff whisper that the little chap would be more like to take off the wold body’s mind from that there queer notion nor anything else.

So the little house, which had been so desolate a few hours before, was now restored to homely joy and peace; and when Martha looked back from the summit of the lane, she saw her mother standing, all smiles, in the open doorway, shading her eyes from the sun, which was making a glory round the curly head of the child in her arms.

[28]

A RUNAWAY COUPLE.

SUMMER dawn; a thousand delicate tints in the sky above and dewy world beneath; birds stretching drowsy little wings and piping to each other; dumb things waking up one by one and sending forth their several calls. But as yet nothing seemed astir in the old house; the windows, open for the most part, were still curtained; no thin spiral of smoke wound its way upwards from the kitchen chimney. Ruddy shafts of light made cheer, indeed, on the mullioned panes and the moss-grown coping, picked out the stonecrops and saxifrages on the roof, ran along the stone gutter, bathed the old chimney stacks with a glow that would seem to mock at the empty hearths within.

Presently a great clucking and crowing was heard from the poultry-yard at the rear of the house, and a moment or two after a little old lady came trotting along the mossy path behind the yew hedge and picked her way daintily between the apple-trees in the orchard. As she proceeded she looked to right and to left as though in fear, yet her face was wreathed in the broadest of smiles, and every now and then she uttered an ecstatic chuckle. Now out at the wicket-gate and down the lane to the right. Lo! standing outlined against the purple expanse of moor a hundred paces or so from the gate an equipage was drawn up; two

[29]

men were stationed by the horses' heads, one of whom hurried forward to meet her, while the other stiffly climbed up on the box. The first, a tall burly old man, wearing a white top-hat, an old-fashioned embroidered waistcoat, and a spick-and-span suit of broadcloth, beckoned eagerly as he hastened towards her, while the figure on the box waved his whip, and jerked his elbow with every sign of impatience.

"So there be at last, dear!" cried the old gentleman. "Blest if I didn't think they'd catched ye. Come along, hurry up! Let's be off; it's close upon four o'clock."

The lady, who was plump and somewhat short of breath, merely chuckled again by way of rejoinder, and suffered herself to be hoisted into the waiting chaise. It was an extremely old-fashioned chaise with a hood and a rumble; the coachman was equally antiquated in appearance, and wore a moth-eaten livery of obsolete cut and a beaver hat.

"Now off with ye, Jem," cried the old gentleman in a stage whisper. "Let 'em go, my lad. Don't spare the cattle! We must be miles away from here before the folks yonder have time to miss us. But whatever did keep ye so long, Susan?" he inquired, turning to the lady.

"My dear," said she, with a delighted giggle, "I've been to feed the chickens."

Thereupon her companion fell into a paroxysm of suppressed merriment, growing purple in the face, and slapping his thigh in ecstacy. The old coachman turned round upon the box and bent down his ear to catch the joke.

"Missus has been to feed chicken, Jem," laughed his

master. "Ho! ho! ho! — she wouldn't leave out that part, ye may be sure."

Jem grinned. "No, I d' 'low she wouldn't. Missus be a grand hand at feedin' chicken; she've a-had practise, haven't she, Measter? I'll go warrant she have."

"And I've been doing something else too, John," continued she, when the explosion had in some measure subsided. "See here!"

She opened the lid of the little covered basket which she carried, and displayed three nosegays of white flowers.

"I thought we might wear these," she remarked. "I very nearly brought favours for the horses, too, but I was afraid it would excite remark."

"And you were right," said he; "but I think we've; managed pretty well to put 'em off the scent. Jem did drive a good bit along the Dorchester road, and back very quiet over the heath. 'Twas very artful of 'ee, my dear, to be talkin' so innercent-like about Weymouth yesterday — they'll think we've a-gone there, for sure."

The old lady drew herself up with a little conscious air.

"It takes a woman's wit to think of them things," she said. "But I do feel sorry for them all, too. I left just a bit of a line for Mary to say she wasn't to be frightened and we was just gone for the day, and they mustn't think of looking for us. But I can't help thinking it does seem a shame. There, all the poor things will be comin' from this place and that place and bringing the children, and making ready their little speeches, and getting out their little presents ——"

The old man began to chuckle again.

[31]

She looked at him reproachfully, and he laughed louder and rubbed his hands.

" 'Tis very unfeeling of you to laugh like that, John. I'm sure it is. Haven't you got no feeling for your own flesh and blood?"

"If you come to that," said John, "whose notion was it? Says I, 'I do wish,' I says, 'we could 'em all the give slip and spend the happy day quiet by our two selves.' And says you, 'Why shouldn't we, then?' says you. 'Look here,' you says, 'why shouldn't we do it over again, John?' 'What?' says I. 'What we done fifty years ago,' says you. 'Well,' I says, and I say now, 'it takes a woman's cleverness to think o' such things.' So here we be a-runnin' away again, love; bain't we?"

She extended her little mittened hand to him with a gracious smile that had in it a droll assumption of coyness.

"There's the ring, though," said he; "that there ring ought to come off, Susan, else it 'ull not seem real-like."

His gnarled old fingers were already fumbling with the ring, but she jerked away her hand quickly.

"No, indeed!" she cried. "Have it off! I wouldn't have it off for a thousand pounds. It's never been off my finger all these years, John, and I'm certainly not going to have it off to-day."

She pinned the nosegay in his coat, assumed a similar decoration herself, and handed one to Jem. Then they drove onwards with renewed speed. Jem, following his master's advice, was not sparing the cattle; the old chaise rocked from side to side, the horses flew along the road. They had now left the heath behind and found themselves

on the highway; the country was looking its best this fine sunny morning; the hedges were still white with bloom; the leafage of the woods through which they passed was yet untarnished by heat or dust; a spicy fragrance was wafted towards them from the fir plantations; in the villages the folks were beginning to stir; chimneys were smoking; women moving to and fro, here and there a man sauntering fieldwards.

They looked after the rattling chaise with astonishment.

"I hope nobody will set up a hue and cry," ejaculated the old lady nervously. "There's nobody coming after us, is there, Jem?"

"Don't ye be afeared, mum," returned Jem valiantly. "You sit still, Mrs. Bussell; nobody's thinkin' o' sich a thing, an' if they was, we'd soon leave 'em behind. I brought ye safe to Branston this day fifty year ago, an' I'll do the same to-day, dalled if I don't."

"So ye did, Jem, so ye did," exclaimed his master. "Dear heart alive, do ye mind, Sukey, that time we heard such a clatterin' behind us, and you thought all was lost, and Jem turned right into Yellowham Wood. How he done it I can never think. But we crope out of sight and the folks rattled past. And 'twasn't nobody thinkin' of us at all. 'Twas young Squire Frampton drivin' for a wager."

"Yes, my father was looking for us along the Dorchester road," said she, laughing again.

"He! he!" chimed in Jem, "I mind that well. 'Twas my cousin Joe what took yon empty shay. He couldn't for the life of en make out why he were to ride so fast wi' nobody inside. 'Never mind, Joe,' says I, 'ride

[33]

away for your gold piece,' I says. I weren't a-goin' to tell he what was a-goin' on. He weren't to be trusted same as me. He understood about the gold piece right enough, and, dally! he did understand Squire Sherren's horsewhip, too, when he corned up wi' en and couldn't make Joe tell en where he was gone. I d' 'low ye was half-way to Lunnon by that time."

"Poor Joe!" said Mrs. Bussell compassionately.

"Pooh!" exclaimed bluff old John, "a gold piece would mend many broken bones. Well, my dear, I'm gettin' sharp-set, what do ye say to a bit of breakfast? Pull up at the first sheltered place you come to, Jem."

"But let it be somewhere where you can keep a lookout," put in the old lady anxiously. "Don't let's be caught."

By-and-by they arrived at a suitable place, and Jem duly pulled up, and John brought out a well-packed hamper from the rumble, and Mrs. Bussell made tea from a spirit-lamp, and dispensed goodly portions of buttered roll, and ham, and hard-boiled eggs, and John and Jem took turns to act sentry, and little Mrs. Bussell raised an alarm about every five minutes and entered more and more into the spirit of the enterprise. Her husband, setting his white hat rakishly on the back of his head, and looking extremely jocose, endeavoured to throw himself into the part which he had played a half-century before, but did not altogether succeed in representing the trembling young lover, even though he called the old lady by her maiden name, and delivered himself of sundry amorous speeches with a fervour that was occasionally mixed with hilarity.

[34]

"Faith, my dear," he cried when she took him to task, "you must let me talk as I please. I was your lover then, and I am your lover now, for all we've been man and wife this fifty years. What signifies it whether your hair is gold or silver, or whether you are fat or slim? Handsome is as handsome does, I say, and you've a-been the best wife a man could have."

"La! John," said she, and winked away a tear. John put out his rugged old hand and gripped hers.

"The best wife a man could have," he repeated earnestly. "Fifty years! — I wish we mid have fifty years more together."

"I wish we was back at the beginning," said she. "I'd like to go through it all over again, John. I'd take it all and be thankful — the rough and the smooth, and the joy and the sorrow. Except maybe — poor little Ben, you know — I don't think I'd like to live through those years again. How we hoped, didn't we? And he was took at the last."

"Well, ye have the other seven, Susan, my dear, alive and well, and their children. Why, you mid say that one loss has been made up to ye by more than a score of other blessings."

Mrs. Bussell shook her head, but smiled, and presently wondered aloud if John's Annie would bring the baby.

"I'd like to have seen it, too," she added. "I hope Mary will have the sense to keep them. I told her a good many of them would stop the night."

"Somebody's coming!" announced Jem at this juncture.

And then what a bustle and clatter ensued, what hasty packing of the hamper, what tremulous climbing into the

[35]

chaise on the part of the "missus"; with what an air of firmness and resolution did the master straighten his hat and square his shoulders as though preparing to defy all pursuers. And after all it was only the mail cart bowling merrily along; and the driver gave the runaway couple a cheery good day as he passed. Then, though they laughed long and loud over the false alarm, they realised that the time was getting on, and that it behoved them to hasten to their destination.

The little town of Branston was not yet very wide-awake when they did arrive at the Royal George, and Jem pulled up with a flourish, and threw the reins to a gaping stable-boy with as great an air as would have befitted a coachman in the palmy days when the Flying

VNiVERSiTAS STVDii SALAMANTiNi

Stage used to change horses at Branston. The little old lady alighted demurely, her husband supporting her while she planted first one neat little foot, clad in a buckled shoe and clocked white stocking, on the step, and then its fellow, and lifting her off bodily, with much the same tender gallantly as that with which he had doubtless performed a similar office fifty years ago. At his request, Mrs. Bussell was conducted to the best private room; she seemed to have quite identified herself with those bygone days, and clung to his arm fearfully as they mounted the stairs; while in her husband past and present were pleasantly mingled. Thus, when, having deposited his fair charge in the George's largest sitting-room, he strolled down to the lower premises to give certain orders regarding the horses, he made no ado about taking the landlord into his confidence.

[36]

"This 'ere is a runaway trip," he remarked, with a jocular wink. " 'Tis our golden weddin'-day, and the missus and me had a notion o' spendin' it quiet, just by our two selves. They're makin' a great to-do at our place — children and grandchildren comin' from all sides, but we just thought we'd give them the slip, and keep the day here same as we done fifty year ago."

"Ah," put in the landlord, much interested, "I heard somethin' about that. You and your lady run off, didn't ye?"

"We did," returned John. "Her father, ye see, old Sherren — they did use to call en Squire — she was the only child, and he reckoned on her makin' a grand match, takin' up wi' one o' the reg'lar gentry, ye know; but he wasn't a bit better nor the rest of any of us yeoman farmers. Well, I wasn't much of a match in those days — my father had a long family and not much to divide between us; but I liked the maid, and the maid she did like me, so we took the law into our own hands. My missus, she did use to go a-feedin' of her chicken very early in the mornin', so the folks got accustomed to hearin' her get up and go out before daylight almost — and one mornin' she did go out and she didn't never go back."

"I remember," cried the other, "you tricked them wi' an empty post-chaise, didn't ye?"

"To be sure," returned the old farmer chuckling. " 'Twas Joe Boyt did that. He did ride for all he were worth, the wrong way. And me and the maid ran a couple of mile on our own legs, till we come to the high road where Jem was awaitin' for us wi' the very same old

[37]

shay as we did drive over in to-day. I did swear I'd buy it if ever I had the chance, and I'd take, Jem into my service. And I did both."

"The old Squire came round before long," remarked the landlord; "yes, I heard the tale often enough. There's an old chap here as used to be ostler in the old days, and he minds well how you and the lady came here to hide, so to speak, till the coach came up."

"That's it!" cried old John delightedly, slapping his thigh to give emphasis to his words. "The coach took us to Bath and we had the job done there — licence, you know. And the missus and I, d'ye see, had the notion o' stoppin' here to-day in memory of that time, and makin' believe we was doin' it over again. Between you and me," said John, poking the landlord in the waistcoat and winking knowingly, "I d' 'low my old woman does truly believe she is back in the old times again. Women do seem to have a wonderful power of imagination. There, she was a-feedin' her chicken this mornin', if ye please, just as she done the mornin' we made off."

"Well, well," commented the landlord. "You ought to let old 'Neas Bright have a look at ye both. He's up in the almhouse now, poor old chap, through not bein' able to work any more, but he'd hobble down if he was to know ye were here."

"Send for en, then, send for en," cried John eagerly; "but look ye, landlord — keep the secret. Don't ye let the folks know who we are or what we've come for, else maybe the children 'ull catch as yet."

The landlord laughed and promised, and thereupon

[38]

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

John went back to his lady, whom he found peeping cautiously out at the Market Place from behind the window curtain.

"Did you think about ordering dinner?" inquired she.

"No, my dear, I left that to you."

"Oh, John," she cried bashfully, "I feel nervous-like. I don't want to ring the bell and have folks starin' at me. Go down again and order it — at twelve sharp."

"What shall we have?" he inquired.

"There now — to ask such a thing. Why, the same as we had this day fifty year ago, of course."

"And what was that?" asked he.

"Why, John, I never thought you would forget anything about that day. We had a beefsteak-pudding and a boiled fowl with parsley-and-butter sauce, and potatoes in their jackets, and greens."

"So we had," said John.

"And you had cheese and a crusty loaf, and I had a bit o' rice puddin'. And you had a tankard o' best October ale, and I had a glass of sherry wine. Don't you remember, John, you would make me take the wine though I wasn't used to it and was afraid it might go to my head?"

"Yes, to be sure," returned he. "Well, I'll go and order all that."

"And then come back to me — come straight back to me, John. Don't stay gossiping downstairs. I feel quite nervous."

"Do think this was the room we had?" you inquired John, pausing half-way to the door. "It don't look the same somehow."

[39]

"They've spoilt it with this new-fangled furniture," returned she; "but it is the same. I remember this little window at the end looking towards the Market Place.
Oh, John — see here."

"What is that, my dear?"

"Why, look here at the corner of the pane. Here are our very name letters, S for Susan, and J for John, and the true-lovers'-knot on the top. I remember your scratching 'em quite well."

"Why, so I did," cried he. "I'd a glass-cutter in my big knife. Well, to be sure! There they are — and here we are!"

"Here we are," echoed she. "Thanks be to God for all His mercies."

And thereupon she clasped both her little wrinkled hands round his arm and gave it a tender squeeze, and he stooped down and kissed her round, wholesome, pink old cheek.

Well, after John had ordered the dinner, and after old 'Neas Bright had come limping down from the almshouse and had related divers anecdotes, and drunk the couple's health, and gone away rejoicing with a half-crown piece in his pocket, John and Susan sat down behind the screen which cut off one corner of the room from the rest, and gave themselves up to repose and reminiscence.

Perhaps it was because they were so happy and so much absorbed in each other, and also perhaps because they had both of them grown a trifle hard of hearing of late years, that they did not notice a sudden bustle and excitement in the street below.

[40]

Had they looked out they would have seen a string of vehicles of different kinds drawn up just outside — springcarts, gigs, a waggonette, and last but not least, a waggon drawn by a team of splendid farm-horses and filled to overflowing with country people. All the occupants of these conveyances were dressed in holiday attire, all wore enormous white nosegays, while the horses' blinkers and the drivers' whips were alike decorated with snowy streamers. The door opened suddenly, and some one ran round the screen.

"Why, there they are!" cried a child's jubilant voice. "There's grandpa and grandma a-sittin' hand-in-hand." And then from the staircase, and from the hall, and from the street arose a sudden deafening cheer.

"I d' 'low they've caught us!" cried John, with a whimsical glance at his spouse; but she was already engaged in fondling the child and scarcely heard him.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

A moment afterwards the room was crowded with the descendants of the old folks —
three generations of them: middle-aged prosperous-looking sons and daughters; rosy grandchildren and even one great-grandchild, for young John's Annie had brought her baby, which proved to be the finest child of its age that had ever been seen, and to have "come on wonderful" since Mrs. Bussell last beheld it. And there was such a kissing and hugging and scolding and laughing as had surely never before been heard in that staid, respectable old room, and grandma was very arch and coy on being reproached for her unkind notion, and grandpa chuckled boisterously, and rubbed his hands, and Mary, the only unmarried daughter, related how her

[41]

suspicions had at first been aroused on discovering that the chickens had been fed so early —all the family knowing the history of that bygone ruse by heart; and how, though she did at first fancy they might have gone to Weymouth, she had made inquiries in the neighbourhood, and had ascertained that a chaise with three people wearing white nosegays had been seen driving Branston way very soon after daylight. And then John, the eldest son, took up the tale, and related how they had settled to wait till all the family had arrived, and how he had declared that the labourers and their wives should not be baulked of their share of merry-making, and how the whole party was come to keep the golden wedding at Branston.

"The folks are waiting for you outside now," he concluded; "you'd best show yourselves to them, else they'll never forgive you."

So over to the window marched the bridal couple, and there they stood arm-in-arm, the illusion being a little damaged by the presence of the baby which grandma would not relinquish, and by the background of laughing folk, all of whom bore so strong a family likeness to their progenitors that their relationship could not be doubted.

A rousing cheer went up once more, and John waved his hat in reply, and Susan laughed and nodded, and was suddenly taken by surprise by a dimness in the eyes and a choking sensation in the throat.

"I don't know however I could have had the heart to run away from them," she murmured.

And then when the speeches had been made, and the presents delivered, and the wedding-feast, supplemented

by many substantial additions, set forth upon the table, and when she sat down with John the elder on her right and John the younger on her left, and Annie's baby sound asleep in her lap, and looked round at the kindly happy faces, she surreptitiously squeezed her husband's hand: —

"You and me was very happy this time fifty year," she said, " but after all — I don't know — I d' 'low this is best."

POSTMAN CHRIS.

IT was about four o'clock of the afternoon when Postman Chris set forth on his second round. He swung along at a rapid pace, looking about him with the pleased, alert air of one for whom his surroundings had not yet lost the charm of novelty.

He had, indeed, that very morning entered on his duties as postman for the first time, though he had served his country in another way before. For Postman Chris Ryves had been Trooper Chris Ryves in a previous state of existence. He had had his fill of warfare in South Africa, and had indeed been wounded at Graspan; the left breast of his brand-new blue uniform was decorated with a medal and quite a row of clasps. Though Postman Chris walked at ease he held himself with the erectness due to military training, and his straw hat was perched at the rakish angle which in earlier days, when he had paraded at Knightsbridge Barracks, had caused the heart of more than one artless city maiden to flutter in her bosom.

But for all these past glories of his, Postman Chris was an eminently pleasant and affable person; at any chance salutation of a passer-by the white teeth would flash

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

out in that brown, brown face of his with the most good-humoured of smiles; he delivered up his letters with an

[44]

urbanity of demeanour that was only surpassed by his soldierly promptitude, and he was willing to exchange the news of the day with any pedestrian who cared to march a short distance in his company.

The bag which he carried was not unduly heavy, nor his way fatiguingly long; it was a six-mile round in fact — starting from Chudbury-Marshall, proceeding through Riverton and Little Branston to the market town of Branston and so back again.

It chanced that as Chris approached Little Branston Schoolhouse on this particular day, his attention was attracted by a hubbub of voices and laughter proceeding from the adjoining field. Pausing a moment in his rapid progress he looked through a gap in the hedge. A feast was evidently in progress; some of the children still sat in rows on the grass, armed with great cups of sickly-looking tea and munching vigorously, buns or hunches of bread-and-jam; others, having finished their meal, were already at play.

Here "Blind-man's-buff" was going on, there "Drop Handkerchief". In the corner of the field directly under the postman's observation a game of Forfeits was proceeding. The schoolmistress, who sat facing him, was holding up one object after the other over the blindfolded head of a pupil-teacher, a bright little girl who had left school recently enough to enter still with almost childish zest into such amusements.

"Here's a Fine Thing and a very Fine Thing; what is the owner of this Fine Thing to do?" cried the schoolmistress. She had a pleasant, clear voice, and though she sat back

[45]

upon her heels like many of her pupils, there was something particularly graceful about figure and attitude.

"That's a shapely maid," remarked Postman Chris to himself; "yes, and a vitty one too."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

It will be seen that Chris Ryves was a Dorset man, as indeed his name betokened; he came in fact from the other side of the county.

The face which he looked on was as pretty as the figure, its fresh bloom enhanced by the darkness of eyes and hair.

"What is the owner of this Fine Thing to do?" she repeated.

"She must bite an inch off a stick," responded the pupil-teacher, with a delighted giggle.

The owner of the forfeit, a peculiarly stolid-looking child, came slowly up to redeem her pledge, and, after a mystified but determined attempt to obey the mandate literally, was duly initiated into the proper and innocuous manner of accomplishing it. Then the performance was resumed.

"Here's a Fine Thing and a very Fine Thing; and what must the owner of this very Fine Thing do?" chanted the schoolmistress.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" asked the blindfolded oracle.

"Boy," responded the schoolmistress.

"Then he must bow to the wittiest, kneel to the prettiest, and kiss the one he loves best."

A little round-faced urchin came forward to claim his cap, and, after much prompting and not a little pushing, was induced to carry out the prescribed programme.

[46]

He duly pulled a forelock to the pupil-teacher, bent his knee to a small person with a necklace and a profusion of corkscrew ringlets, and bestowed a careless salute on the chubby cheek of a smaller and still more round-faced female edition of himself — evidently a sister.

"Well, I'm dalled!" said the postman. "Them children ha'n't got no eyes in their heads."

And with that he stepped back from the hedge, hitched up his bag a little higher on his shoulder, and strode off towards Branston.

The next day at the same hour Ruby Damory, the schoolmistress, was standing on the threshold of the schoolhouse with a copybook in her hand. She sometimes

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTINI

lingered after school had broken up and the pupil-teacher had made things tidy and betaken herself homewards, to look over the children's exercises before returning to her lodgings; and as the interior of the house was close and stuffy she preferred to accomplish this task in the porch. The school-yard was as dusty and bleak as such places usually are; but by some strange chance the rosetree which was trained over the porch remained uninjured by the constant passing of little feet and contact of little persons. It grew luxuriantly, and its clustering blossoms formed a pretty setting to the slim figure which stood propped against the wall beneath.

All at once Ruby raised her eyes from her book; a rapid step was advancing along the footpath from the direction of Riverton; over the irregular line of hedge she could see a straw hat set at a knowing angle on a head of bright red hair. It was the new postman from Chudbury

[47]

— she had seen him go past that morning before she had yet left her room.

Now he was opposite the schoolhouse gate, but instead of passing it he stood still, wheeled about with military precision, and took off his hat with a flourish.

"I bow to the wittiest," said Postman Chris.

Then, before she had time either to respond or to turn away, he was marching on again, and soon disappeared behind the tall hedge on the other side of the school precincts.

"Well, to be sure!" said Ruby, and she laughed to herself; "he must have noticed our game yesterday. He was very complimentary, I must say, though I don't quite know how he could find out I was witty. I suppose he thinks I must be because I'm the schoolmistress."

And thereupon she returned to the exercise.

But in spite of herself her thoughts kept wandering to Postman Chris and his odd proceedings, and she said to herself that, though his hair was red it was not at all an ugly colour — in fact when he took off his hat it flashed in the sun like burnished copper. The phrase took her fancy for she liked a fine word or two when opportunity offered; and she was pleased too with the aptness of the simile, for she possessed a little copper

tea-kettle which she only used on great occasions, and which was, she fancied, precisely the colour of the new postman's hair in the sunshine. He had a nice smile, too, and such quick, bright, brown eyes. And then that medal, and those clasps and orders — decidedly Postman Chris appeared to the schoolmistress somewhat in the light of a hero.

[48]

All the evening she thought of his brown face and his pleasant voice, and of how his hair had flashed in the sun. On going home she got down the copper teakettle and looked at it, turning it about in the lamplight — yes, it really recalled the glow of the new postman's hair.

When, on the next day, Ruby heard the regular and rapid steps approaching, she stood for a moment in doubt; should she go indoors, or should she give the man a civil good-day as he passed.

She chose the latter alternative, but as she opened her lips to speak the words died on them, for Postman Chris, once more pausing in front of the gate, dropped on his knees and bowed his head. Their eyes met as he raised it again, and he said emphatically: "I kneel to the prettiest".

Then, springing to his feet, he was gone before Ruby had time to recover from her astonishment. She went inside the larger schoolroom and sat down on the nearest bench, trembling from head to foot.

What did the man mean? Was he laughing at her? No, the brown eyes had looked into hers with as earnest and straightforward a gaze as was to be found in the eyes of man. Was he courting her then? It looked like it, but what a strange way to set about it. No preliminaries — no permission asked — not even a question exchanged between them. Did he intend to carry out the third part of the programme with the same speed and decision with which he had set about fulfilling the first two?

Ruby blushed hotly to herself, and then tossed her head. She was not to be won without due wooing, and after all

[49]

was she, in any event, to be won by this man? She knew nothing of him except that he was a reservist with a small pension, and that he was a postman — a village postman. Was it likely that a girl of her education and position would throw herself away on a fellow like that — even if he had a kindly face, and a nice way of looking at one, and hair the colour of a copper tea-kettle? Besides, he should know better than to approach her with so light a spirit.

The next day when Postman Chris came swinging along the Branston road the schoolhouse porch was empty, the door bolted and barred. For a full moment he stood gazing towards it, and Ruby, peering cautiously out at him from behind the sheltering blackboard, saw his expression change from the eager tenderness which had for the fraction of a second almost made her wish that she were indeed standing in the porch, to one of hurt and proud surprise.

He wheeled about without delay, and the sound of his steps fell like a knell upon her heart.

Acting upon an unaccountable impulse she flung open the door and darted to the gate, but Postman Chris never turned his head.

On the next day she again watched from behind the blackboard, and saw the postman march past, without so much as a glance either to right or to left. On the day after, strange to relate, Miss Ruby Damory, the schoolmistress, happened to be correcting exercises in the porch when the postman from Chudbury-Marshall walked by; but Postman Chris never caught sight of the schoolmistress. He was whistling as he walked, and held a

little cane in his hand with which he switched at the hedge. When he passed the school-gate he tapped it with his cane, and subsequently drew it along the railings which bordered the yard; but he never turned his head.

There was no afternoon post on Sunday, but Postman Chris was at Evening Church, and there Ruby saw him with the light of the stained-glass window falling on his uncovered head and making a very nimbus of his hair.

When Monday afternoon came she was standing, not in the school porch but at the gate, and when Postman Chris drew near she accosted him in a small voice which did not sound like hers. Indeed, she felt at the time as though it were not she herself who was thus laying aside maidenly dignity, but some wicked little spirit within her, who acted for her against her will.

"Good-day, postman," said Ruby, or the demon within her.

Postman Chris brought his heels together and saluted — not having yet learnt to lay aside this habit — but his face wore an expression of surprise.

"Have you got a letter for me, to-day?" went on the voice.

"Name?" said Chris succinctly.

"Miss Ruby Damory," came the hurried answer.

The postman shook his head.

"I'm expecting a letter," went on Ruby confusedly. "Perhaps you may have left one at my lodgings in Little Branston? I live at Mrs. Maidment's at the corner of Green Lane."

The postman looked at her with an expression which

[51]

would seem to indicate that Ruby's place of abode was a matter of supreme indifference to him.

"If any letter comes as is directed there, of course it will be left there," he said, with a coldly business like air.

"You didn't leave one for me, to-day, I suppose?" faltered Ruby.

"Not as I know on," returned Chris stolidly.

Tears rushed to the girl's eyes; she felt wounded, insulted by this sudden change from warm admiration — admiration which possibly might have ripened to something else — to complete indifference. She hastily turned away her head to conceal them, but not before she had caught sight of a kind of gleam in the postman's brown eyes.

"Are ye so terrible disappointed?" he inquired roughly, not to say harshly.

"I — oh, yes, of course I am."

She spoke truly enough, poor girl, though her disappointment arose from another cause than the ostensible one.

Chris eyed her sharply.

"Well, it'll come in time, I suppose!" he remarked, still in the same surly tone, "and when it do come, you shall have it."

And thereupon he saluted, hitched up his bag, and walked away.

Ruby went back to the school-porch, with a scarlet face and a mist before her eyes: —

"He's a rude fellow," she said; "I'll think of him no; more."

[52]

But she was in a manner forced to think of him.

It was an unkind Fate, indeed, which decreed that Postman Chris Ryves' beat should bring him under Ruby Damory's notice twice in the day. Early in the morning, while still in her little lodging at the corner of Green Lane, she heard his brisk step ring out beneath her window, and looking down, as indeed she sometimes did from beneath the corner of her blind, she caught a glimpse of a blue uniform and a red head; but Postman Chris never looked up, and no letter was ever left for Miss Ruby Damory, care of Mrs. Maidment.

Then as the church clock struck half-past four a tall figure was always to be seen swinging along behind the green hedge, which drew near the school-gate, and passed by the school-yard without a single glance at the mistress correcting exercises in the porch.

It was out of pure contradictoriness of course that Ruby Damory learned to listen for that step and to watch for that figure. She grew thin and pale, slept brokenly, and dreamt frequently about Postman Chris; and Mrs. Maidment averred almost with tears that Miss Damory seemed to have no relish for her victuals, and could indeed be scarce persuaded to eat a radish with her tea.

One day the girl took herself seriously to task. "I am a fool and worse," she said. "I must make an end of it. The man does not care a snap of his fingers for me — I'll try to forget he's in the world."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

Therefore she refrained from peeping out from behind her blind on the following morning, and, in the afternoon, she locked up the schoolhouse directly the children had left,

[53]

and proceeded homewards with the exercise-books under her arm. But whether because Postman Chris was more punctual than usual that day, or because Ruby Damory walked slowly, this manoeuvre did not have the desired effect, for, strange to say, the postman overtook her on the road.

Ruby had heard him coming, and had made valiant resolution not to look round, but when he came up with her she could not resist turning towards him, and their eyes met.

"Did you speak?" said Postman Chris.

"No — I — I —" She stopped short; her heart was thumping so violently, indeed, that she could scarcely breathe.

"I thought you might have a letter for me," she murmured at last, in the frantic endeavour to cover her confusion.

"Not I," said the postman.

He made as if he would pass on, but wheeled round again. "What have you been doing to yourself?" he asked sharply.

"I? Oh, nothing."

"Ye bain't half the maid ye was," insisted Chris, eyeing her with severe disapproval. "Been frettin' about summat?"

If Ruby had been pale before, she was rosy enough now.

"What do you mean?" she stammered; "what makes you say that?"

"I thought you mid be disapp'inted-like about that letter," responded the postman.

[54]

"Oh, the letter. Yes — 'tis very strange it doesn't come."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

“Well, it’s none o’ my fault,” retorted Chris roughly. “Ye needn’t look at me like that. I’d bring it to ye fast enough if ’twas there.”

“Well, of course — I never thought you wouldn’t. I’m sure I never said anything — —” cried poor Ruby, more and more agitated.

“Ye shouldn’t go frettin’ yourself though,” he remarked. “That won’t make it come any faster. And you shouldn’t blame me.”

“I don’t blame you,” gasped the girl. “I don’t — indeed I don’t” — but here, in spite of herself, her voice was lost in a burst of sobs.

Postman Chris set down his bag and produced a khaki pocket handkerchief — a relic no doubt of South African days. This he tendered very gallantly to Ruby, who, if truth be told, was at that moment at a loss for one, having used her own to wipe out a particularly impracticable sum from a small pupil’s slate.

She accepted the offering in the spirit in which it was meant, dried her eyes, and returned the handkerchief to the postman with a watery smile. At that smile Chris changed colour, but he tucked away the handkerchief in his sleeve without a word, respectfully saluted, and departed. He never looked back at the girl, but as he walked away he said to himself: “That there maid, she be all I thought her. ’Tis a pity I didn’t see her afore she took up wi’ t’other chap. I wouldn’t ha’ left her a-pinin’ so long, and a-waitin’ and a-waitin’ for a letter what never comes. But she’ll stick to him — ah, sure she’ll stick to him.”

[55]

And with that he heaved a profound sigh, and turned off in the direction of the post-office.

The former mode of procedure was now changed. Ruby locked up the schoolhouse every day after lesson-time and Postman Chris regularly overtook her on the way home. By mutual consent they avoided the painful subject of the letter and conversed on indifferent topics; and more than once when Chris walked away he muttered to himself: “She be the prettiest, and she be the wittiest, and she be — ah, ’tis a dalled pity I weren’t on the field first.”

One day when the well-known step came up behind Ruby it was accompanied by a shout: —

“Hi!” cried Postman Chris; “hi! Miss Damory! I’ve a-got summat for ye at last.”

Ruby turned towards him without any very great elation, for, if truth be told, a letter from her only correspondent had never caused her heart to beat one tittle faster than its wont. But as Chris came up with an excited face she felt she could do no less than simulate great delight at his news.

“At last!” cried she, holding out her hand for the letter. But Chris did not deliver it up at once. He looked up the road and down the road — it was indeed little more than a lane, and at that hour solitary enough; there was a strange flash in his eye.

“This’ll be the end of all between you and me, I suppose?” said he. “Ye’ll have got your letter, and ye’ll not care for seein’ me come no more. I’ve a mind to make you pay for it.”

[56]

Ruby’s extended hand dropped by her side, and she started back.

“Here’s a Fine Thing,” said Postman Chris, still with that gleam in his eye as he held up the letter. “Here’s a Fine Thing and a very Fine Thing; what’s the owner of Fine Thing to do?”

“What do you mean?” whispered Ruby.

“ ’Tis your turn to pay the forfeit now!” cried he. “I’ve bowed to the wittiest and knelt to the prettiest; I’d have finished the job if you’d ha’ let me. ’Tis your turn, I say; I’ll let you off all but the last.”

“I don’t know what you take me for, Chris Ryves,” cried Ruby tremulously. “I think you should be ashamed of yourself. You ought to know enough of me by this time to see that I’m not that kind of girl.”

“Well, I be that kind o’ man,” returned Chris obstinately. “This here’s the end — this here’s my last chance. If you want your precious letter, you must pay for it.”

“How dare you?” cried Ruby, turning as white as a sheet. “You are very much mistaken, Mr. Ryves. I’d rather die — than — than ——”

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Than have anything to say to me," he interrupted fiercely. "Oh, I know that very well, Miss Damory; you're not for the likes o' me, as you did show me plain enough at the beginning of our acquaintance. But a chap isn't so very bad if he does ask for a crumb before the whole loaf is handed over to another man. Give me one, Ruby — just one!"

Ruby backed away from him against the hedge.

"This is an insult," she cried.

[57]

"An insult!" he repeated, suddenly sobered. "Oh, if you look on it that way. There's your letter," he went on, dropping his voice. "There's your letter, Miss Damory; I hope it'll give ye every joy and satisfaction."

And with that he handed the disputed document to the schoolmistress, took off his hat with a flourish, and marched away quick time. Not so quick, however, but that a little petulant cry fell upon his ears, and, wheeling involuntarily, he saw that the letter had been flung upon the ground, and that Ruby Damory was leaning against the hedge with her face buried in her hands.

Chris came back at the double.

"There!" he cried penitently. "I'm a brute beast. I beg your pardon, my maid. I'm truly sorry — truly, I am."

"Oh," sobbed Ruby, "how could you be so unkind?"

"I'm sure I don't know how I came for to forget myself like that," he returned ruefully; "but I'll never offend again, Miss Damory — never."

"To expect me — to — to do that," faltered Ruby, "when you'd never said a word of love to me — when you'd never even asked to walk with me."

The postman's brown face assumed a puzzled air; he drew a step nearer, and picked up the letter.

"But," said he; then paused, and once more tendered the document to the schoolmistress.

"Oh, bother!" cried she irritably. "It'll keep."

Chris's countenance lit up suddenly.

"Will it, indeed?" cried he. "That's a tale — a very different tale. There, when I was comin' along wi' that letter, 'twas all I could do not to bury it or to drop it into

[58]

a ditch. I mastered myself, ye know, but I were terr'ble tempted, and that was why," he added with a sly glance, "I did look for some reward."

"But why did you want to destroy my aunt's letter?" asked Ruby.

"Your aunt!" exclaimed Chris. "Your aunt! Well, that beat's all."

He took off his hat and waved it; he danced a kind of jig upon the footpath; he threw himself sideways against the hedge, laughing all the while, so that Ruby stared in amazement. Suddenly he composed himself.

"That be another tale, indeed, my maid," said he. "I were a-thinking all the time 'twas your young man you was expectin' to hear from. But why was you always so eager on the look-out for me?"

"I'm sure I wasn't," said Ruby, and she blushed to the roots of her hair. She dared not look at Chris for a full moment, but at last was constrained to raise her eyes to his face, and there, lo, and behold! he was blushing too. And looking at her — yes — with that very self-same expression which she had seen in his eyes on the morning when she had first hidden herself behind the blackboard. He came a step nearer, and his blue-coated arm began to insinuate itself between the hedge and her trim waist.

"Then why, my maid," he began gently — "that there game, ye know — why didn't you let me finish?"

"Why," said Ruby, between laughing and crying, "because you hadn't begun."

He whistled softly under his breath.

[59]

"Shall us begin now?" said he. "You and me — we'll do it proper this time."

"Begin courting?" said she innocently.

“Yes, we’ll play the game right. Here’s a Fine Thing and a very Fine Thing — that’s you, my dear — now what’s the owner of this Fine Thing to do? The owner that’s — me — why — this ——”

He accompanied the word with appropriate action.

“For shame!” cried she, in a tone which nevertheless was not displeased, “you’ve begun at the wrong end after all.”

“Not at all,” he retorted, “ ’tis the proper way to start a courtship. I’ll tell ye summat, Ruby, my maid. We’ll have the banns put up on Sunday.”

[60]

KEEPER GUPPY.

“LARD ha’ mercy me! What be doin’, Jan? You that’s only jist out o’ your bed! Whatever ’ud Doctor say? Boots too! Where be goin’?”

Old John Guppy cast a lowering glance at his spouse, and continued to button his gaiters in silence. This task concluded, he stretched out his hand and pointed imperatively to the gun slung over the chimney-piece.

“Reach that down,” he commanded.

“Ye’re never goin’ out! You as has been four month and more on your back! What’s the use on’t? There’s a new keeper yonder — new ways, and strangers pretty nigh everywhere. I’d ha’ had a bit more sperrit nor to go up there where I bain’t wanted.”

“I be goin’, woman. Squire do pay I money, an’ I’ll give en his money’s worth. I must have an eye to things, or they’ll be gettin’ in a reg’lar caddle up yon. New keeper, he’ll not know so very much about the place, and Jim — he were always a terr’ble sammy — he never did seem to see what was under his nose wi’out I were there to rub it into it.”

“Well, but Jan, the bit o’ money what Squire gives ’ee is a pension — same as what soldiers an’ sick-like do get i’ their ancient years. Squire don’t expect ’ee to

[61]

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

do no more work for en now, and ye be so fearful punished wi' the rheumatics, an' all. No — 'Mrs. Guppy,' says Squire to I, so considerate as could be, 'Mrs. Guppy,' he says, 'Jan have served I faithful nigh upon two score year — now he can take a bit o' rest,' he says; 'I've a-made sure as he'll be comfortable in 's old age. The pension 'ull be paid reg'lar so long as he do live,' says he, 'or so long as I do live,' he says, laughin' cheerful-like, 'for 'pon my word, I do think your Jan 'll very likely see I down — he be uncommon tough, so old as he mid be,' says Squire. 'And if I do go first, my son 'll see as he wants for nothin' in his time,' he says. So let I light your pipe, Jan, my dear, and sit 'ee down sensible like, i' the chimbley corner — 'tis the best place for 'ee, good man."

"You can light my pipe, if you like," said John, still gloomily, "but I be goin' up-along all the same. Things 'ull be goin' to ruin if I don't tell 'em how they used to be carried on i' my time."

"Id' 'low ye'll not get so far," said Mrs. Guppy; "but of all the obstinate men — well, there, 'tis a good thing as the A'mighty made half the world o' womenfolk, else everythin' 'ud be fair topsy-turvy."

John wedged his pipe firmly in the corner of his mouth, put his gun under his arm, and, taking his thick stick from the chimney corner, set forth, without vouchsafing any answer; he limped painfully as he walked, and Mrs. Guppy, looking sorrowfully after him, opined that he'd have had enough of it afore he'd gone half a mile. But though she had been wedded to John for thirty-five years,

[62]

she had not yet learned the quality of his spirit; he uttered many groans as he shambled along, and lifted the poor limb, which had so long been well-nigh useless, with increasing effort, but he held bravely on his way until he reached his destination, a vast stretch of land, half park, half down, peopled by innumerable rabbits and furnished with copses and plantations, which no doubt afforded cover to game of every kind. Here John paused for the first time, turned his head on one side, clicked his tongue and jerked forward his gun with a knowing air as a rabbit crossed his path.

"If 't 'ad ha' been loaded I'd ha' made short work o' thee, my bwoy," he remarked. "There don't seem to be so many o' you about as there did used to be i' my time, though — not by a long ways. That there noo chap 'ull ha' let ye go down, I reckon. There bain't many like poor old Jan Guppy — nay, I'll say that for ye, Jan. You was worth your salt while you were about — 'e-es, and so long as ye be above ground Id' 'low you'll make it worth Squire's while to keep ye."

Having delivered this tribute to himself with a conscientiously impartial air, he proceeded on his way, and presently came in sight of the keeper's cottage, or rather lodge, set midway in the long avenue which led to the Squire's mansion, and smiled to himself at the sudden outcry of canine voices which greeted his approach.

"There they be, the beauties! That's Jet — I'd know her bark among a thousand. Id' 'low she knows my foot," as one voice detached itself from the chorus and exchanged its warning note for a strangled whine of rapture. "She'll

[63]

break that chain o' hers if they don't let her loose. 'Ullo, Jet, old girl! Hi, Rover! Pull up, Bess!"

All the barks had now ceased, and a pointer came scurrying to the gate, followed by a large retriever.

"There ye be, my lads — too fat, too fat. Ah, they be feedin' o' them too well now — not so good for work, Id' 'low! Poor old Jet! Ye be tied up, bain't ye? There, we'll come to ye."

Passing through the wicket-gate, he was limping unceremoniously round to the back of the cottage, when the door was thrown open and the astonished figure of the keeper's wife appeared in the aperture.

"Mornin', mum," said John, lifting his hand halfway to his forelock, which was his nearest approach to a polite salutation when in parley with folks of Mrs. Sanders' degree. "I be Mr. Guppy, what was keeper here afore your master. I be jist come to take a look about."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Oh, indeed," said Mrs. Sanders, who was a very genteel and superior person; "my husband would have had great pleasure in taking you round, Mr. Guppy, but he's out just at present."

"No matter for that, mum, I'll go by myself. What, Jet! There ye be, my beauty; dear, to be sure, a body 'ud never think 'twas the same dog. She do seem to ha' fell away terr'ble, mum."

Jet, a curly-coated black spaniel, was at that moment straining wildly at her chain, and wriggling her little black body in such spasms of ecstasy at the sight of her old master that it would have needed a very sharp eye to detect

[64]

any alteration in her appearance, if, indeed, such existed; but John spoke in a tone of conviction.

"She bain't half the dog she were. What do you feed her on, mum? Jet, she did used to be dainty — didn't ye, Jet? Her coat do stare dreadful, mum, now don't it? A prize dog didn't ought to have its coat neglected like that. When I had the charge o' she, dally! if I didn't comb and brush her mom an' night, same as if she'd been a young lady. Be dalled if I didn't! Where be your master, mum?"

Mrs. Sanders' face, always somewhat frosty in expression, had become more and more pinched and supercilious during the colloquy, and she now replied extremely distantly that she couldn't say for certain where Mr. Sanders might be, but that very likely he was looking after the young pheasants.

"Ah!" commented John, with interest; "and where mid he ha' got them this year?"

"On this side of the North Plantation," returned the lady unwillingly.

"A bad place, mum, a very bad place; no birds 'ull ever do well there. If he'd a-come to I, I could ha' telled en that. They'll never thrive up yon in that draughty place — no, that they won't; and it'll be too cold for 'em. I'm afeared he'll have a bad season. The North Plantation — dear, some folks doesn't know much! Well, I'll go and have a look at 'em, and if I do see your husband, I mid be able to gie en a word or two o' advice."

"Ho! no need for that, I think," cried Mrs. Sanders wrathfully. " 'Tisn't very likely as my husband, wot 'as

lived in the fust o' families, and been keeper to a markis, 'ud want to take advice from an old gentleman like you, Mr. Guppy, as has never left the one place all your life."

"I could have advised en agen the North Plantation, anyhow," said John stolidly. "Well, I'll wish 'ee good day, mum. I'll be goin' my ways up-along."

And he hobbled off, muttering to himself as he went: "The North Plantation! The chap must be a fool! . . .

They poor dogs, they was glad to see I! — jist about; but bain't he a sammy! There he do go and feed up the shooting dogs so as they be for all the world like pigs, and Jet, what we used to keep same as a little queen, he do seem to take no more notice of nor if she was a cat!

Poor Jet! How she did cry to get to I! Well, well! I may be able to put things straight a bit."

Proceeding at his slow pace, the pilgrimage to the North Plantation was a matter of considerable time, and it was noon before he halted at length beside the enclosure where hundreds of tiny pheasant chicks ran in and out of their several coops, with a venturesomeness much deplored by their distracted hen foster-mothers.

A tall, middle-aged man was walking about amid the pens, with a proudly proprietary air which announced him to be the head-keeper.

Guppy wiped the sweat of weakness and fatigue from his brow and uttered a quavering "Hullo!" Mr. Sanders turned and walked majestically towards him.

"What do you want," he inquired briefly.

"I be jist come up-along to have a look round," announced John. "I'm Mr. Guppy, what was here afore

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

you. You be in my shoes now, I mid say, but I don't bear 'ee no grudge for 't — no, I don't bear 'ee no grudge," he repeated handsomely.

"Right," said Sanders, who was a good-humoured fellow enough, if a little puffed up by the dignity of his position. "Glad to see you, Mr. Guppy. We've got a nice lot here, haven't we?"

" 'E-es," agreed Guppy, with a note of reserve in his voice; " 'e-es, a tidyish lot; but you'll not bring up the half o' them."

"Won't I, indeed?" retorted Sanders, somewhat warmly. "What makes you say that?"

"I could ha' telled 'ee as this here weren't a fit place for young pheasants," returned the ex-keeper, not without a certain triumph. "If you'd ha' come to I, I could ha' telled ye. I've a-been thirty-nine year and nine month i' this place, and I've never put the young pheasants here once — never once. What do you say to that?"

"Well, I say as every man has his own notions," returned the other. "You might have a fancy for one place, as very likely I'd take agen, and, on the other hand, you seem to have some notion agen this 'ere place, as I think most suitable."

"Well, ye'll find out your mistake, I d' 'low," said Guppy unflinchingly. "Done pretty well wi' eggs this year?"

"Yes, pretty well on the whole. We had to buy a few hundreds, but, as I told Mr. —"

"Buy 'em! Buy eggs! You must ha' managed wonderful bad. I've a-been here nigh upon farty year, and never bought so much as one — not one. Dally! 'Twill

come terr'ble expensive for Squire if ye do carry on things that way."

"Something had to be done, you see," cried Sanders, who was now beginning to be distinctly nettled. "You seem to have been such a stick-in-the-mud lot — there was hardly any game about the place that I could see when I come."

"Oh! and weren't there?" retorted John sarcastically. "Ye must ha' poor eyes, Maister Sanders. There, 'twas what I did use to say to a cousin o' Squire's as used to come shooting here twenty-five years ago, and couldn't hit a haystack. 'There don't

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

seem to be anything to shoot, keeper,' he'd say; and I'd answer back, 'Ye must ha' wonderful poor eyes, sir.' Ho, ho! he were a stuck-up sort o' gentleman as were always a-findin' fault and a-pickin' holes, but I mind I had a good laugh agen him once. 'Twas a terr'ble hot day, and we'd walked miles and miles, and I were a bit done-up at the end, and thankful for a sup o' beer. And he comes up to I, and says, laughin' nasty-like, 'Well, Guppy, you don't seem much of a walker. Now, I could go all day.' ' 'E-es, sir,' says I, 'and so can a postman. Id' 'low your bags 'ad much same weight at the end o' your rounds.' "

Sanders vouchsafed no comment on this anecdote, and John, propping his stick against the paling, proceeded with much difficulty to climb over it, and to hobble from one pen to the other, stooping stiffly to inspect the young birds and the arrangements made for their comfort.

"They big speckly hens is too heavy for these here delicate little fellows," he remarked. "Game hens is the

[68]

best – 'twas what I did always have. 'Tis more in nature as the game hens should make the best mothers to young pheasants. They be a poor-looking lot, Maister Sanders. I did use to have 'em a deal more for'ard at this time o' year. What be feedin' 'em on?"

"Now look 'ere, I'm not going to stand any more o' this," thundered the keeper, fairly losing his temper. "I'm not going to have you poking and prying about this place no longer. You've got past your work, and I'm doing it now. If the Squire's satisfied, that's all I need think about. If he isn't, he can tell me so."

"Ha! no man likes bein' found fault with," returned Guppy sententiously; "but sometimes 'tis for their own good. Now you take a word o' advice from I, what was workin' here afore you was born or thought of very like."

"I'll not, then!" cried the other angrily. "Get out o' this, you old meddler, or I'll report you to the Squire!"

"You did ought to thank I for not reportin' of you," returned John firmly. "The Squire do think a deal o' I — a deal; but I'd be sorry to get a man into trouble as do seem to be meanin' well. You mind my words, keeper, and you'll find as they'll come

true — ye'll have a bad season this year, and maybe ye'll be a bit more ready to take advice from them as knows more nor you do. 'Tis the first year, so I'll not be hard on ye."

He had now recrossed the wire, repossessed himself of his stick, and with a nod of farewell at his irate successor, turned his steps homewards.

He spent the rest of that day lamenting the direful changes which had taken place since his own withdrawal

[69]

from active life, and privately resolved to be astir early on the morrow in order to proceed further with his tour of investigation.

With the first dawn, therefore, of a lovely spring morning he left his bed cautiously, dressed in silence, and made his way out of doors. The cottage which he had occupied since his resignation of the keepership was situated at the very end of the village, and as he glanced up the quiet street he could detect few signs of life. No smoke was yet stealing upwards into the still air, no cows lowing in the bartons; the pigeons, indeed, were astir, preening themselves somewhat sleepily, and cooing in a confidential undertone, and the clucking of hens was audible here and there, while more musical bird-voices resounded from trees and hedgerows. The dew lay heavy on the long grass by the roadside as John set forth. The morning mists had not yet disappeared, and the glamour of dawn still enfolded the world. The dew-washed leaves seemed to be on fire, as they caught the rosy rays of the morning sun; every little wayside pool gleamed and glittered. The air was full of sweet scents, the delicate, distinctive odour of the primrose being predominant, though here and there a gush of almost overpowering perfume greeted the old man's nostrils, as he passed a wild apple-tree. A kind of aromatic undertone came forth from damp moss, trunks of fir-trees, springing young herbage, yet the exquisite fragrance of the morning itself seemed to belong to none of these things in particular, but rather to emanate from the very freshness of the dawn.

Old John, however, plodded onwards, without appearing

[70]

to take heed of his surroundings; once, indeed, he paused to sniff with a perturbed expression; a fox had passed that way. His eyes peered warily into the undergrowth, over the banks, beneath the hedgerows; he paused in traversing a copse, stooped, uttering an exclamation of astonished disgust, and some few moments later emerged from the brake with a bulging pocket and an air of increased importance.

Jim Neale, the under-keeper, had not long started on his morning beat when he was hailed by a familiar voice, and turning beheld his former chief.

"Hullo, Maister Guppy, I be pure glad to see you on your legs again. You be afoot early."

John surveyed him for a moment with an air of solemn indignation.

" 'Tis jist so well I were afoot a bit early, Jim. You do want I at your back, I d' 'low. Which way have you been a-goin'?"

"Why, same as usual — across the big mead, from our place, and up-along by top side o' the park."

"Jist what I did fancy. You do seem to use your eyes wonderful well, Jim — jist so well as ever. D'ye mind how I used to tell 'ee 'some folks has eyes and some has none'?"

"Why, what be amiss?"

John, without speaking, put his hand in his pocket, and drew forth a number of rabbit snares, sticks and all, which he had picked up and secreted in the copse before-mentioned.

"Oh!" said Jim. "Humph! I wonder who could have put them there?"

"Why, Branstone folks what be always a-hangin' about seekin' what they can pick up."

"Well, 'twas a good job ye did chance to come along, Mr. Guppy. I d' 'low they didn't have time to catch nothin'. There weren't no rabbits in 'em, was there?"

"There was a rabbit in one of them though," retorted John triumphantly; "I've a-got en here i' my pocket."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Oh, and have ye?" queried John, eyeing the pocket in question somewhat askance. "Well, it's lucky I've a-met ye — ye can hand en over to me i'stead o' going all the way up to Sanders."

"I can hand en over to you, can I? Thank ye kindly, Maister Jim 'findins' is keepins' — or used to be i' my day. Well, of all the cheek! 'Hand en over', says he to I what has been his maister, I mid say, for fifteen year and more. Hand en over, indeed!"

Jim, temporarily abashed, pushed his hat a little to the back of his head, and stared for a moment or two in silence; then his features relaxed into a slow grin.

" 'Pon my word, if it do come to cheek, be dalled if I could say which of us has the most of it! Ye bain't keeper here no longer, Mr. Guppy, and I don't know as Squire 'ud be altogether pleased if he was to catch you a-pocketin' one of his rabbits."

John laughed derisively.

"Squire 'ud know a bit better nor that," he remarked, as soon as he had sufficiently composed himself. "Squire 'ud know better than grudge I a rabbit arter all them hundreds as I've a-had the years and years as I were here. Be ye a-goin' on now?"

[72]

" 'E-es I be," returned Jim, somewhat sulkily.

"Then look sharp, else you'll very like miss a good few more things what be under your nose."

Jim walked away growling to himself that he wasn't a-goin' to have two masters if he knew it, and that it was enough to be at one man's beck and call without being hauled over the coals by folks what had no right to be there at all.

John, leaning on his stick, watched the receding form, still with an air of lofty sovereignty, till it had disappeared, and then took his way homewards, feeling that he had done a good morning's work.

It was marvellous how one so decrepit as he could manage to be as ubiquitous as he thenceforth became. His bent figure and wrinkled face were perpetually turning up in most unexpected quarters, to the wrath and occasional dismay of Mr. Sanders and his underlings, his small keen eyes frequently detecting some small error or omission which his quavering voice was immediately uplifted to denounce and reprehend. Matters

reached a climax when, one sunshiny morning, he discovered the eldest hope of the Sanders family in the act of climbing a tree in search of a bird's nest, and, not content with boxing the urchin's ears as soon as he descended to earth again, hauled him off by the collar to the parental abode. The boy's outcries brought his father to the door, accompanied by Jim, who had chanced to call in for orders.

"See here what I've a-caught your bwoy a-doin' of. His pocket be chock-full o' eggs — pigeon eggs. He ha'n't a-got no right to go into the woods arter pigeons' eggs.

[73]

I've brought en to 'ee, Maister Sanders, so as ye may gie en a dressin'. I be too old to do it myself. Nay, nay, at one time I could ha' fetched him a crack or two what 'ud ha' taught en manners. But I bain't strong enough for that now."

"Let go of him — let go at once, I say," shouted the indignant parent. "Who gave you leave to interfere? The lad's my lad, and it's none o' your business to go meddlin' with him. Come here, Philip-James; go into your mother, boy. He's mauled you fearful."

"Well, you must be a soft fellow," ejaculated John in atone of deep disgust. "I could n't ha' believed it! If I had a-caught a bwoy a-trespassin' i' my woods when I was here, I'd ha' thrashed him well for 't — let him be my son twenty times over."

"Trespassin' indeed! You're a trespasser yourself," cried the keeper. "You've no business in these woods at all; you've no business to come near the place. I'll summons you, see if I don't."

"Well, that is a tale!" exclaimed John, leaning against the gate-post that he might the better indulge in a kind of crow of ironical laughter. "Trespass — me trespass; me what was keeper here for nigh upon farty year. Lard ha' mercy me! What'll ye say next?"

"Well, but it be trespassin', you know, Maister Guppy," remarked Jim, thrusting his head round the lintel of the door; "it be trespassin' right enough. If you was head-keeper once, you bain't head-keeper no more. You ha'n't got no call to be here at all. It be trespassin'."

"You hold your tongue, Jim Neale," retorted John

[74]

fiercely — "hold your tongue! Who asked you to speak — you as did ought to be ashamed of yourself for neglectin' the ferrets same as you do. The big dog-ferret have a-got the mange terr'ble bad. You bain't the man to give a opinion, I d' 'low."

Jim, incensed at this sudden home-thrust, uttered a forcible exclamation, and proceeded with much warmth: "You've a-got a wrong notion i' your head altogether, Maister Guppy; you be a-trespassin' jist the same as you was a-poachin' t' other marnin'."

"Poachin'!" cried John, his face purple with wrath and his voice well-nigh strangled — "poachin'! Dall 'ee, Jim, I'll not stand here to be insulted. There, I've a-passed over a deal — a deal I have. I've overlooked it on account of the many years as we've a-worked here together, but this here be too much. I'll report ye, Jim Neale, see if I don't; and I'll report you too, Maister Sanders, for insultin' of I same as you've a-done. There's things as a body can't overlook, let him be so good-natured as he mid be, and there's times when a man's dooty do stare en i' the face. I'll report ye this very hour."

"That's pretty good," laughed Sanders. "Upon my word, that's pretty good. Maybe Jim an' me will have something to report to the Squire too. You'd best come along with me, Jim, and we'll see who the Squire listens to."

"Come along then," cried John valiantly, before Neale had time to answer. "Come along; we'll see. I bain't afeard o' the Squire. The Squire do know I so well as if I was his own brother. Come on, if you be a-comin'."

[75]

The three set out, walkin' shoulder to shoulder in grim silence, the younger perforce accommodating their pace to the slow gait of the old man, who hobbled along between them, leaning heavily upon his stick, his face set in resolute lines.

They were kept waiting for some little time until the Squire had finished his breakfast, but were presently admitted into the billiard-room where they found him

smoking by a blazing wood fire, for he was of a chilly temperament, and though the morning was sunny, the air was still sufficiently sharp.

"Hallo, Guppy!" he cried cheerily, as his eyes fell on the old man. "What! you're about again, are you? You're a wonderful old fellow! You'll see me down, I'm sure, though there are twenty years or so between us."

John pulled his forelock and then laid his gnarled hand in the Squire's outstretched palm.

"You're a splendid old chap," said his former master, as he shook it warmly. "I must own I never thought to see you on your legs again after that stroke, coming as it did on the top of the rheumatics. How are the rheumatics, John?"

"Very bad, thank ye, sir. There, I can scarce turn i' my bed, and when I do try for to walk my limbs do seem to go all twisty-like. I be fair scraggled wi' it, Squire."

"Well, men, what brought you here?" inquired their master, turning for the first time to the keepers, and addressing them with some surprise.

"Why, a rather unpleasant matter, sir, I am sorry to say," returned Sanders respectfully, but a trifle tartly.

[76]

" 'Tis a bit difficult to explain, seein' as you seem so taken up with Mr. Guppy here. I understood, sir, when I accepted your sitooation as I was to have a free hand. I didn't look for no interference from anybody but you yourself, sir."

"Well, haven't you got a free hand? I'm sure I don't interfere," replied the Squire, with a shrug of his shoulders.

" 'Tis Maister Guppy what be al'ays a-meddlin', sir!" put in Jim, with a pull at his forelock. "He do come up-along mostly every mornin', a-horderin' and a-pickin' holes here, there, and everywhere. Mr. Sanders and me do find it terr'ble ill-conwenient."

"I was just going to say, sir," resumed Sanders, "when Neale interrupted me" — here he paused to glare at his inferior — "as it was what I was never accustomed to — outside people comin' and pokin' and pryin' and fault-findin' and interferin' ——"

"Oh, dear, how much more!" exclaimed the Squire, looking from one to the other in affected dismay, mingled with a little real vexation. "Guppy, what's all this about?"

"Playse ye, sir, I couldn't a-bear to see you a-treated same as ye be treated by them as ye puts your trust in. Everythin' be in a reg'lar caddle all over the place — everythin' be a-goin' wrong, sir, and when I sees it, I tells 'em of it. I can't do no different — 'tis my dooty. You do pay I by the week reg'lar, and I bain't a-goin' to eat the bread o' idleness — 't 'ud stick i' my in'ards — 'e-es, that it would. 'So soon as I do get upon my legs,' says I, 'I'll have a look round;' and I did have a look round, and what did I find? Every blessed thing a-goin' wrong — so

[77]

I sarces 'em for 't. I wasn't a-goin' to hold my tongue, and see you tricked and abused. I was easy wi' 'em — a dalled sight too easy — I did ought to have reported of 'em before, but to-day I couldn't stand it no longer; when I did speak to 'em they up and insulted me, both on 'em. 'E-es, they did. They insulted of I shameful."

"I am sorry to hear that ——" the Squire was beginning, when Mr. Sanders, losing patience, interrupted him.

"Begging your pardon, sir, 'tis more than flesh and blood can stand; 'tis got to be him or me — that's all I can say. Nobody could put up with it. I found things in a very bad state when I came, and I'm getting them better gradual, sir, and doing my dooty in all respects as well as I can; but if Guppy is to be allowed to come pryin' and spyin' after me, and findin' fault with all my arrangements ——"

"He did call I a trespasser," broke out John, who had been ruminating over his private woes, without taking heed of the keeper's indictment. "He did call I a trespasser; he did say I was trespassin' when I told en I'd a-been walk in' through the Long Wood yonder where I did catch his little rascal of a son a-bird's-nestin' so bold as you playse. And Jim there, what did ought to know better, up and said I was poachin' last week. Me poachin'! Me what brought him back that very day a dozen o' snares what I had picked up i' the hedge as he went gawkin' past without taking a bit o' notice of."

" 'E-es, but you found a rabbit in one and popped it into your pocket!" cried Jim irefully. "Popped it into your pocket and walked off wi' it, let I say what I would."

[78]

"In course I did," retorted John, with great dignity, "in course I did. 'Tweren't very likely as I'd leave it wi' you. As I telled 'ee at the time — says I grudge me a rabbit now arter all the hundreds as I've a-had while I was keeper up yonder.' "

The Squire covered his mouth with his hand, but telltale wrinkles appeared about his eyes, and the points of his moustache curled significantly upwards. After a moment he recovered himself sufficiently to desire the keepers to withdraw, announcing that he would have a quiet talk with John Guppy, and that no doubt the matter could be arranged.

"So you had hundreds of rabbits while you were in my service, John," he remarked, crossing one leg over the other, and looking at the old man with a smile. "Didn't you get very tired of them?"

"Well, sir, my old woman be wonderful with the cookin', and she did do 'em up in a many different ways. 'E-es, we did use to have a rabbit for dinner four days out of seven."

"Did you indeed?" returned his former master, much interested in these revelations. "Do you suppose, John, the other men had hundreds of rabbits every year, too?"

"Well, sir, it be a matter o' taste. Some folks doesn't fancy rabbit; but, of course, they can take so many as they do want."

"Of course," agreed the Squire.

" 'E-es; keepers takes rabbits same as gardeners helps theirselves to cabbages. I knowed you'd never begrudge me that there little un."

[79]

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

"No, to be sure; but we mustn't be too hard on Jim. Jim was doing what he thought to be his duty. Now, you know, no matter how many rabbits a keeper may take for himself, he is not supposed to allow other people to take any."

"Nay, sir, nay; I wouldn't expect it — not other folks. But I d' 'low it be different wi' I, what was head over en for so many year. He didn't ought to ha' gone and insulted of I."

"No, no, of course not; but then, you see, you had vexed him. He was too angry to discriminate between poaching and — just helping yourself."

"And t' other chap, 'ee telled I I was trespassin'!" resumed John wrathfully.

"Well, my dear John, we must consider the point of view. Every man has his own, you know. As a matter of fact, I'm afraid, from Sanders's point of view, you were trespassing.

John's face was a study.

"I never thought to live to hear you say that, Squire."

"I only said from his point of view," cried the Squire, hastily. "He's naturally, perhaps, a little jealous; you were here so many years, you know, and of course, like all young men —young men will have foolish notions, John — he thinks his way is the best way. We old fogies must just give in for the sake of peace and comfort."

"Noo ways," agreed the old man, sorrowfully; "noo folks and noo ways."

"As you heard me say just now," resumed his master, "I don't interfere with him, and, upon my life, I think it's

better you shouldn't interfere, John. I fancy it would be wiser if you could just keep away for a little bit — then no one could say you were trespassing, you know."

"I'll keep away, Squire," said John. "No fear; I'll keep away. Ye'll not have to tell I that twice."

"You and I are free to have our own opinions, of course," urged the Squire, smiling, "but we'll keep them to ourselves — these young folks you know ——"

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

But John did not smile in return; his head, always bent, drooped almost to his breast, his lips moved, but uttered no sound. After a moment or two, he pulled his forelock, scraped his leg, and turned to depart.

"You're not going, John?"

" 'E-es, sir, I be goin', I bain't wanted here no more. As you do say, noo times ——" "Now, now, I can't have you going away offended. Don't you see how it is, John?"

"Nay, sir, I don't see nothin' but what you've a-gone and thrown over a old servant for a noo un. That be all as I can see. You didn't check en for insultin' of I, and you'll never be troubled wi' I again. I'm fit for nothin'. I be a-eatin' of your bread and a-takin' of your money and doin' nothin' for 't. Eatin' the bread o' idleness! Id' 'low it 'ull fair choke I."

The Squire, vexed and perplexed, in vain sought to soothe him, but he waved aside all attempts at consolation, and made his way slowly out of the room and out of the house.

The Squire watched him as he went tottering down the avenue. "What's to be done?" he said to himself. "The

[81]

poor old chap is past his work; it would be cruelty to allow him to attempt it. Sanders is an excellent fellow, on the other hand — more go-ahead than dear old John, and, it must be owned, a better keeper. He would certainly have given notice if I had allowed John to continue his visitations here. It is the only thing to be done, but I can't bear to see the poor old fellow so cut up."

As Guppy passed the keeper's lodge the dogs ran forward, leaping upon him and whining. He patted them absently, and then pushed them off. "Down, Rover, down! There, Bessie, off wi' you; you should learn a lesson fro' your betters. Stick to the noo folks, and get rid of the wold. Poor beasts! they be fain to see I, I d' 'low. Dogs bain't like Christians. They don't seem to know when a man be down. They be faithful, all the same; they haven't a-got no sense, poor things."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

He was spent and trembling when he arrived at his own home, and sank down in his chair by the hearth.

"There, missis, put away my gun; I'll not want it no more; I be done wi' it — I be done wi' everythin'. I could wish that there stroke had a-carried I off. I bain't no use i' this world as I can see. It do seem a strange thing as the Lard 'll leave ye to live on and on when folks be tired o' ye, and be a wishin' of ye under the sod. I wish I were i' my long home — aye, that I do."

Mrs. Guppy was at first alarmed, then affected, and finally burst into tears.

"I'm sure I never did hear a man go on the same as you do, Jan; there, I be all of a tremble. What's amiss? What's come to ye? What's it all about?"

[82]

"Gi' I my pipe," said John; "there's things a woman; can't understand."

Not another word could she extract from him till dinnertime, when she summoned him to table.

He gazed at the food sourly. "All charity!" he murmured. "Charity, woman. I be eatin' what I haven't earned. I may jist so well go to the Union."

A few days later the Squire's dogcart drew up at the little gate, and the Squire himself descended therefrom, carrying a couple of rabbits which he extracted from under the seat.

"Good-day, John; good-day, Mrs. Guppy. Well, John, how are you? Cheering up a bit, I hope."

John shook his head slowly.

"I've brought you a couple of rabbits," continued the Squire. "It never struck me till the other day how you must miss them. I'll send you some every week. There are enough, Heaven knows."

"I don't want no rabbits," growled Guppy; "I bain't a-goin' to eat of 'em."

"John!" gasped his wife, hardly believing her ears.

"Put 'em back i' the cart, woman," he continued; "I bain't a-goin' to eat no rabbits what they chaps up yonder have a-ketched."

"Why, John," said the Squire, sitting down beside him, "can't you get over it? I thought you would be all right by this time."

"I bain't all right, Squire, and I can't get over it. Nay, look at it which way I will, I can't. Here be I, John Guppy, a bit scram and a bit wambly; but so sound i' the

head as ever I was, whatever my legs mid be. Here be I, anxious for to do my dooty, and able for to do my dooty, and you won't let I do it. You do give me money what I haven't earned; you do want I to sit here idle when I'm as ready for a day's work as any o' they new-fangled chaps what you've a-set up yonder i' my place."

The Squire sighed and looked hopelessly at Mrs. Guppy, who stood with her hands folded limply at her waist, and a most dolorous expression on her countenance, shaking her head emphatically at every pause in her husband's speech. After a few further attempts at consolation, the Squire rose and went to the door, followed by his hostess.

"What is to be done, Mrs. Guppy?" he inquired, when they were out of earshot. "I positively can't have him back up there — he isn't fit for it; and he has been setting all the other men by the ears."

"He's fair breakin' 'is 'eart," murmured Mrs. Guppy dolefully. "He thinks he bain't o' no use — and he bain't — and it's killin' 'im. If he could even fancy he was doing summat and ockipy hisself in any way he'd be a different man. 'Tis the thought as nobody wants en what do cut en so."

The Squire cogitated, and then a sudden light broke over his face.

"I have it," he cried. "I have thought of a job for the old fellow! We'll put him to rights yet, Mrs. Guppy — see if we don't!"

He re-entered the cottage, and approached the inglenook where John still sat, leaning forward, and slowly rubbing the knees of his corduroys.

"John," he said, "I was almost forgetting a most important thing I wanted to say to you. Sanders and Jim have got their hands pretty full up there, as you know."

"I d' 'low they have," agreed Guppy; "they're like to have 'em too full, seein' as they don't know how to set about their work nohow."

"Yes, yes. Well, Sanders is very busy all day and Jim has a wide beat. Neither of them ever find time to go near the river. It's my private belief, John, that that river is dreadfully poached. We've next to no wild duck, you know."

"We never did have none, sir," interrupted Guppy.

"Just what I say," agreed his master; "we never had the chance. You had your hands pretty full when you were head-keeper, hadn't you?"

"I weren't one what 'ud ever ha' let 'em get empty," growled Guppy.

"Well, I was thinking, now that you haven't very much to do, you might undertake the control of those meadows down there by the river, if you feel up to it, and it's not asking too much of you."

"Oh! I could do it," returned John, in a mollified tone; "I could do it right enough if I was let."

"I should be very much obliged to you," resumed the Squire, "very much obliged indeed. All that part of the property has got shamefully neglected. I imagine the people think they've got a right-of-way."

"Very like they do," agreed John, whose countenance was gradually clearing; "but I can soon show 'em whether they have or not."

[85]

"Just so. Well, will you undertake to look after that part of the estate for me? It will be a great relief to my mind. Don't overtire yourself, you know; but any day that you are feeling pretty fit you might stroll round, and just keep a sharp look-out."

" 'E-es, I could do that," said John, after considering for a moment; "I could do it all right, Squire. I will look into the matter."

"That's right. Thank you very much, John. I shall feel quite satisfied about it now."

He nodded, and went away, John looking after him with a satisfied expression.

"I never did mind obligin' the Squire," he remarked to his wife, "and I'm glad to do en a bit of a good turn i' my ancient years. 'Tis true what he do say, that there bit down by the river have a-been fearful neglected. I myself could never make time to go down there, and 't ain't very likely as these here chaps 'ull go out of their way to look round. I'll put it to rights, though."

"I'm sure it's very good o' you, John," said Mrs. Guppy, who had listened to the foregoing colloquy with a somewhat mystified air. "I shouldn't ha' thought that there was anything worth lookin' arter down there. Why, the town boys do bathe there reg'lar i' the summer."

"They'll not bathe there any more," returned her lord resolutely. "I'll teach Mr. Sanders a lesson — I'll larn 'em how to see arter a place as it did ought to be looked arter! Reach me down that gun, woman!"

He sallied forth that very hour, drawing up his little,

[86]

bent form to as close an approach to straightness as he could manage.

His first care on reaching his destination was to examine the gates that gave access to this stretch of meadow-land. He pursed his nether lip and shook his head disapprovingly at their shaky condition, making a mental resolution to repair them at the earliest opportunity, and moreover to see that they were provided with padlocks. After diligently hunting in the neighbouring wood, he discovered a half-defaced board, which had at one time borne the
legend, "Trespassers will be prosecuted," and, with a sigh of satisfaction, placed it in a more prominent position.

His joy was extreme when, late in the afternoon, he discovered an honest labouring man in the act of climbing a gate, which, owing to the rickety condition of its hinges, could not be opened without risk of falling flat upon the ground.

"Where be goin' to?" inquired John, sternly.

"Why, jist home-along," returned the other, with a good-humoured smile; " 'tis a bit of a short cut this way."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

"There's to be no more short cuts here," cried John, with a certain almost malignant triumph. "These here meadows belongs to Squire. They'm his private property."

The man's jaw dropped. "That'll be summat noo," he said doubtfully, but still good-humouredly.

" 'Tis noo times all round," replied Guppy, with an odd contraction of the face, "but these 'ere reg'lations 'ull be carried out strict. You jist turn about, my bwoy."

"I be three parts there now," protested the other.

[87]

"Then you'll have to step back three parts, that's all," responded Guppy unmoved.

The man scratched his head, stared, and finally recrossed the gate, and walked away, grumbling to himself, Guppy looking after him with a sense of well-nigh forgotten dignity. He had vindicated the majesty of the law.

All hitherto unconscious trespassers had thenceforth a bad time of it under the reign of the new river-keeper. Would-be bathers, small boys on bird's-nesting intent, tired women with market-baskets, labourers on their way to and from their daily work, were ruthlessly turned back by old Guppy, whose magisterial air carried conviction with it. The other keepers, laughing perhaps in their sleeves, let him pursue his tactics unmolested, and the Squire was careful to congratulate him from time to time on the success of his labours. John Guppy's greatest triumph was, perhaps, when he actually did discover a wild duck's nest amid the sedges of the now tranquil river. How tenderly he watched over it; how proudly he noted the little brood of downy ducklings when they first paddled from one group of reeds to another in the wake of their mother; with what delight he imparted his discovery to the Squire, and with what supreme joy did he invite him to set about the destruction of these precious charges when they were sufficiently grown! Almost equal rapture was his when, having struggled along the avenue with a brace of ducks dangling from each hand, he encountered the head-keeper in the shrubbery.

"Those are fine ones," remarked Sanders, good-naturedly;

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

[88]

he was a good-hearted fellow in the main, and did not grudge the old man his small successes.

"I should think they was," returned Guppy, swelling with pride. "They be uncommon fine uns, Maister Sanders; they be the only wild duck what was ever seen on this here property. I be glad to hear," he added, condescendingly, "as you've done pretty well wi' the pheasants, too. Squire was a-tellin' me about the good season ye did have."

"Yes," rejoined the keeper, with a twinkle in his eye; "they didn't turn out so bad, you see, Mr. Guppy."

"I be very glad on 't, I'm sure," said John, still condescendingly; "of course it be easy to rear a good few pheasants if you do go in for buyin' eggs; it bain't so very easy to get wild duck to take to a place where they never did come afore."

"No, to be sure," agreed Sanders affably. "It was a wonderful piece of luck, that was."

"It wasn't luck, Maister Sanders," said John impressively, "it was knowledge."

And he walked on, with conscious pride in every line of face and figure, leaving his successor chuckling.

[89]

THE WORM THAT TURNED.

"WHERE be goin', William?"

"Oh, I be jest steppin' up to the Pure Drop."

And William Faithfull brought back his abstracted gaze from the horizon, where it habitually rested when it was not required for practical purposes in the exercise of his profession, and fixed itself somewhat shamefacedly on his interlocutor.

He was a tall, loose-limbed man, of about forty, with an expression of countenance chronically dismal, except at such times when he was employed in some particularly genial task, such as making a coffin, or repairing the church trestles, when his neighbours averred that he became quite lively, and even whistled as he worked.

His crony now returned his glance with a jocular one, and slapped his thigh ecstatically.

"Well, I never seed such a chap! Faithfull by name and faithful by natur' — ah, sure you are. Why, 'tis nigh upon twelve year, bain't it, since ye started coortin' Martha Jesty?"

"Somewhere about that," replied William; and his countenance, already ruddy in the sunset glow, assumed a still deeper tint.

"Well, I never!" returned the other with a shout of

[90]

laughter. "She be gettin' on pretty well, now — I d' 'low she'll be a staid woman by the time you wed her."

William shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"Well," he said, after a pause, "I d' 'low she be worth waitin' for. She be wonderful clever, Martha be — an' that sprack! No, I don't regret it — not at all I don't."

"Bain't the wold man anyways comin' round?" inquired his friend with his head on one side.

"No," returned Faithfull gloomily. "Not at all. But he be so terr'ble punished, poor wold chap, one can't expect rayson off he."

" 'Tis the rheumatics, bain't it?" was the next query in a commiserating tone.

" 'Tis the sky-attics," replied the carpenter, not without a certain pride in his pseudo-father-in-law's distinguished ailment. "There, he be so scraggled as anything — all doubled up by times. Martha do say he goes twisty-like same as a eel, when it do take en real bad."

"Lard, now!" ejaculated the other.

" 'E-es,"said William, shaking his head — "that's how it do take en. So, as Martha do say, ye can't expect the onpossible. 'If my father,' says she, 'be so scram-like in his out'ard man, how can ye look for en to act straightforrard? He've a-set his mind again' the notion of us gettin' wed, so we must just wait till he be underground. And then,' says she, 'I'll not keep 'ee waitin' a minute longer.' "

"Well, that's handsome," agreed the friend, "but I'm afeard, William, that there complaint bain't like to carry en off very soon — no, not so very soon. Nay, I've a-knowed

[91]

folks keep on a-livin' in a way that 'ud surprise ye, as was fair bent in two wi' pains in all their j'ints. I reckon you'll very like go first yerself, William."

After a pause of deep depression the carpenter's face lighted up.

"The sky-attics, d'ye see, Tom," he explained condescendingly — "the sky-attics is a new-fayshioned ailment, an' a deal dangerouser nor the wold rheumatiz an' new-ralgy and sich. Why, when I did mention to Parson t'other day about wold Jesty's sky-attics he did laugh. 'Sky-attics,' says he. 'Then he'll be like to afore go up'ards very long,' says he. Well, so long, Tom; I must be steppin' up-along now."

"Ye'll find the wold fellow a bit tilty," remarked Tom; "whether them there 'attics was troublin' en or not I can't say, but he was a-shoutin' an' a bally-raggin' o' that poor faymale while I was drinkin' my drap o' beer jist now, till I wonder she wasn't dathered."

William's recent elation disappeared; he vouchsafed no comment on the unwelcome news, however, but with a sidelong nod at his crony, shambled away, swinging his long limbs as though every joint of them was loose.

The Pure Drop was situated a stone's throw from the village, and stood at the junction of four cross-roads; a most excellent position, which enabled it to waylay, as it were, not only the inhabitants of the hamlet as they set forth for or returned from their day's vocations, but to capture most of the travellers who journeyed that way — cyclists galore, wagoners, dusty pedestrians. It must be owned that the aspect of the little place was inviting

[92]

enough to tempt even a teetotaller; the low red-brick house overgrown with creepers, the mullioned windows winking brightly in the sun in summer, and in winter letting

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

streams of ruddy firelight flow forth. It was so clean and airy, so cosy and trim, that those who went thither for the first time vowed they would return again, and old customers nodded knowingly, and declared that the place had not its like in the country. The liquor was good, while prudent folk who called for tea might have it, and a crusty home-baked loaf into the bargain, and a roll of fresh butter of Martha's making.

Then Martha herself — though she was no longer in the first bloom of youth, she was a tidy, clean-skinned, pleasant-looking little body; and if her eye was sharp and her tongue ready, she was none the less popular on these accounts; every one got hauled over the coals from time to time, and when it was not your turn it was pleasant enough to see other folks made to look foolish.

Miss Jesty was standing in the open doorway when her lover came up, and immediately made a warning sign to him.

"Ye mustn't come in to-night, William. Father — there! he's something awful this evenin', an' he've a-been on the look-out for ye, so to speak, ever since dinner-time. Whenever the door do go, 'There,' he'll cry, 'is that that good-for-nothin' William Faithfull?' Or if there's a knock, ' 'Tis that sammy o' thine, for sure,' he'll say."

"Oh, an' does he?" returned poor William, with a deeper expression of melancholy. Martha nodded portentously.

"Ye mustn't come in to-day," she said with decision; "no, not even for a minute. Father, he did say to I jist now, as whatever happened he wouldn't have no cwortin' here. 'If ye can have the heart to think about cwortin' when I'm so bad as I be,' says he, 'I'll take an' alter my will.' So there's nothin' for it but for you to turn about an' go home again."

"I weren't so much thinkin' o' cwortin' this evenin', Martha," said the swain very meekly. "I wer' lookin' for a drap o' beer — I be terr'ble dry."

Martha hesitated for a moment, and in this interval a kind of bellow sounded from the interior of the house.

"That's him," she cried in terror. "No, William, ye can't have no beer to-night. I dursen't stay another minute. Go home-along, do, an' if ye be so thirsty as that comes to, can't ye get a bottle o' 'pop' off Mrs. Andrews?"

William gazed at her blankly, but before he could protest his charmer had disappeared within the house, and he was forced very dolefully to retrace his steps. He did indeed purchase the bottle of "pop," but found it by no means exhilarating; in fact, as he laid his head on the pillow that night he was tempted to think he might pay too high a price even for the hope of becoming one day Martha's husband.

When on the following Sunday evening, however, he walked in the shady lane hand in hand with his sweetheart, he forgot how irksome was this time of trial, and listened with the melancholy satisfaction which was his nearest approach to cheerfulness (on ordinary occasions)

[94]

to the glowing picture with which she depicted the reward earned by his constancy.

"I do r'alely think as poor father be a-breakin' up," she remarked consolingly. "When winter comes I reckon he'll not be able to hold out. Well," she added piously, " 'tis what comes to us all, soon or late, an' I'm sure he be well prepared, for I don't think he've a-had a day's health this twenty year. 'Twill be a mercy when he do go, poor wold man. An' the winter 'ud be a very nice time for us to get married, William; 'twould suit us very well, wouldn't it?"

"Ah, sure," said William, with a slow smile.

"We shouldn't be so busy then, d'ye see," resumed Martha. "The harvestin' 'ud be done an' the potato-gettin'; an' there wouldn't be so many by-cyclists — there's not so much goin' backwards an' forrards in winter-time. We shouldn't be at much loss if we was to take a holiday."

"Ah," said William, with mournful rapture, "you was thinkin' of us takin' a holiday, was ye, Martha?"

"I thought we mid go to London," cried Miss Jesty triumphantly. "I have always longed to go to London an' see the sights there, an' go to the theayters. There! Susan Inkpen as wed Miller Dewey did go up to London for her honeymoon."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"For her what?" interrupted Faithfull.

"For her honeymoon — her weddin' journey — the jaunt what folks do take when they gets wed."

"Oh, to be sure," said the carpenter. "An' you an' me be to go to London for our honeymoon, be we?"

" 'E-es," cried Martha with a chuckle. "We'll have a

[95]

rale week's pleasuring you an' me. If 'tis winter-time — as most like 'twill be, on account o' poor father's sky-attics, you know — the pantomines 'ull be goin' on. Susan Dewey did go, an' she said they was the wonderfullest things, wi' fairies an' mermaids, an' sich-like, an' Clown an' Pantaloon a-knockin' of each other about. There, she an' her husband did fair split their sides wi' laughin'."

William appeared to survey this prospect stolidly, and made no comment, and Miss Jesty continued eagerly: —

"Then there'd be the Waxworks, an' the Zoo, where all the wild beasts is kept; an' we'd go an' see the Tower o' London, where all the king's jools an' suits of armour is set out, an' we'd go to Westminster Abbey ——"

"What's that?" inquired Mr. Faithfull dubiously.

Martha was taken a-back for a moment.

"Susan went to see it," said she hesitatingly, "so I s'pose 'tis worth lookin' at. 'Tis a wold ancient church."

"A wold church?" repeated William, shaking his head. "Id' 'low I shouldn't care so much to see that. I'd sooner wait till 'twas done up fresh-like. I never cared at all for goin' into our church till the Rector had it cleaned and painted-up so good as new. I think 't 'ud be a foolish kind o' thing to go trapesin' off to yon — what-d'-ye-call-it — Abbey till they get it repaired."

"Maybe not," agreed Martha cheerfully; "there's plenty more to be seen wi'out that. Well, I hope the Lord 'ull spare father so long as it be good for en, poor dear man, but if he was to be took, I hope as it maybe in the winter, William."

William, who had been trailing beside her arm-in-crook,

[96]

suddenly stopped short and faced her with a determined air.

"Whether he do go in winter or whether he do go in summer, Martha," said he, "you an' me must be called home so soon as he be laid under ground, mind that."

And having come to the turn in the lane where they usually parted, William went his way, leaving Martha somewhat in doubt whether to be pleased at this proof of ardour or indignant at the sudden display of spirit.

A wilful woman is proverbially supposed to have her way, yet it sometimes happens that, even when she proposes, Heaven disposes events otherwise than she would have had them. Thus, though Martha Jesty had made arrangements for her father to depart this life in the winter — a time when business should be conveniently slack — that worthy old gentleman was removed from this earthly sphere in the very height of summer, when the harvest was in full swing, and more than an ordinary number of tourists halted daily for refreshment at the Pure Drop.

Tidings of this melancholy event were imparted to William by a group who entered his yard on the morning of the occurrence, each eager to be the first to tell the news. That old Mr. Jesty was gone was an incontrovertible fact, but none of the newsmongers could agree as to the precise ailment which had carried him off. He had had a bit of a cold for a day or two, but while some said it had turned to "browntitus," others were sure it was "poomonia," and one shrill-voiced old lady delivered it as her opinion that nothing short of an "apple-complex" could have carried him off that sudden.

[97]

Beyond sundry "ohs" and "ahs" and grunts indicative of surprise and sympathy, William made no remark, though when one facetious bystander observed that it would be his turn next — a somewhat obscure phrase, which might be interpreted in a variety of ways — he grinned appreciatively.

No sooner had the gossips departed, however, than he went indoors and assumed his coat, and immediately betook himself, not to the Pure Drop, but to the Rectory.

"The Reverend," as his parishioners frequently called him, was sitting in his study, tranquilly reading his Times, when William Faithfull was ushered in.

"You'll have heard the noos, sir," he began abruptly; "old Abel Jesty up to the Pure Drop, he's gone at last."

"Oh!" said the Rector, looking rather startled; "that's sudden, isn't it?"

" 'E-es," said William, with a wooden face; "sudden but not unprepared. Martha has been a-lookin' for en to go this ten year."

"Oh!" said the Rector again, this time a little uncertainly.

" 'E-es," resumed William; "I thought I'd call an' tell ye, so as ye need lose no time in settling things."

"About the funeral, I suppose you mean?" put in the clergyman as he paused.

"No," said William, who was gazing not only over the Rector's head, but apparently through the wall at some distant sky-line; "about the weddin' — mine an' Martha's. Ye mid call us over on Sunday."

"Really, William, I think that is too sudden," said the Rector; "why, the poor old man won't have been dead a week!"

[98]

"He be so dead as ever he'll be," returned William, still gazing impenetrably at that far point in an imaginary horizon. "Martha an' I have a-made it up years ago, an' settled as she'd not keep me waitin' no longer after her father was took. I'll thank ye to call us home, sir."

And with that he scraped a leg and pulled his forelock and withdrew, leaving the Rector, half-scandalised, half-amused, murmuring to himself as the door closed something about "funeral baked-meats," which William set down as a "bit o' voolishness".

He found Martha plunged in the most praiseworthy grief, thereby much edifying the neighbours who had gathered together to condole with her; but William, who could

only see the other aspect of the affair, immediately beckoned her on one side and informed her of the step he had taken.

"Lard!" cried she, genuinely taken aback, "whatever made ye do that? Why, father 'ull only be buried o' Thursday. You shouldn't ha' done it wi'out axin' me. 'Tis too sudden. The folks 'ull say we've no decency."

"Let 'em say what they like," returned William firmly. "I'll keep to my 'greement, an' I expect you to do the same. 'Twas drawed out ten year ago an' more. I've stuck to my word, an' you must stick to your'n."

" 'Twill be a very onconvenient time," said Martha reflectively. "Three-week come Monday — the middle of August that'll be, jist when we do take more money nor any other month in the year."

William cracked his finger joints one after another with great decision, but made no verbal reply.

[99]

"There, I've a-been lookin' forward to our honeymoon all these years," complained Martha, fresh tears rushing to her eyes; "it'll be a shame, I declare, if we have to give it up! I've never took a holiday, no, not since mother died. I don't see how we can get away then, William."

"I don't care so much about gettin' away," said Faithfull resolutely. " 'Tis the weddin' I do want. I'll not have no shilly-shally. I've a-told ye hundreds of times as I wouldn't wait a day longer nor I could help — an' I won't wait. You'd best make up your mind to it."

"Why, whatever's come to ye?" cried Martha, really angry. " 'Tis downright indecent to go upsettin' me like this in the midst o' my trouble. 'Tisn't for you to be namin' the day either. Jist you keep a civil tongue in your head, William, an' have a bit o' patience — maybe about Michaelmas ——"

"Michaelmas!" ejaculated the carpenter, catching up his hat and fixing it firmly on his head. "I'll tell you summat, Martha — I'm goin' to get married o' Monday three-week, whatever you mid be. If ye can't make up your mind to it there's them as will. I'll go warrant my cousin Sabina, over to Sturminster, 'ud have me if I was to ax her. Her

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

an' me was always very thick. Gully, that's her husband, left her very comfortable, an' she has but the one little maid."

Martha thereupon came round in a twinkling, and flinging herself into his arms, promised to agree to everything he wished. A tender scene ensued, at the end of which William suggested that he had better go upstairs to measure the poor old man for his coffin.

[100]

When he came down again he found Martha in the midst of her cronies, to whom she had imparted, with a kind of regretful elation, the extreme pressure which William had brought to bear upon her with regard to their approaching nuptials, all her hearers being much impressed and edified by the recital.

She turned to her lover as he was about to leave the house: —

"Ye'll not be chargin' me nothin', I shouldn't think," she remarked with mournful archness.

William, who had not hitherto considered the matter, hesitated for a moment, and then observed handsomely: —

"Nothin' but the price of the wood, my dear. You shall have the labour free."

"Lard bless the man!" cried she, with some irritation. "I believe he's goin' to make out a bill for it. Why, don't ye see, William, if we're to be man an' wife in three week, 'twill be but takin' the money out o' one pocket to put it in the other?"

"And that's true," agreed the friends in chorus.

After a pause, during which the carpenter had thoroughly mastered the situation, he turned to his intended, and, with a sudden burst of generosity, informed her that he would make her a present of the whole thing.

"I haven't gied you so very much afore now," said he, "but I'll make you a present of this, my dear, an' welcome."

And he walked away, while Martha, looking after him through her tears, observed that there wasn't a better-natured man in the whole of England.

[101]

William, indeed, was in such good humour at the approaching fruition of his hopes that Martha found him more amenable than ever to her views.

Therefore, when, a day or two after the funeral, she encountered him on his way to the tailor's, where he intended, as he informed her, to order his wedding-suit, she was emboldened to lay her hand on his arm and beseech him tearfully to be married, like her, in "deep".

" 'Twill show proper feelin'," said she. "All the neighbours 'ull know that you are showin' respect to poor father; an' since ye'll be jist comin' into the family, 'twill be but decent as you should wear black for him what's gone."

William, who had been dreaming of a certain imposing stripe which had dazzled him, days before, in the tailor's window, among the pile labelled "Elegant Trouserings," now dismissed with a sigh the alluring vision, and promised to appear in mourning as requested.

But when later on Martha unfolded to him another plan, he gave in his adherence to it with some reluctance. It was no less a proposition than that they should take their honeymoon by turns.

"You see," she explained, "it just falls out that the weddin's the very week o' the Branston show — the house 'ull be full from morn till night for three days or more; an' we turn over enough that week to pay the year's rent, very near. 'Twouldn't do for us both to be away."

William gazed at her with a more rueful face than she had ever yet beheld in him.

"Dear now! don't you take on," urged Martha. "I thought, d'ye see, I'd just pop up to London for a few

[102]

days by myself, an' you can stop an' mind the house, an' maybe some time in the winter we mid both on us take a few days together somewhere."

William gazed at her reproachfully.

"Ye didn't ought to want to go a-pleasurin' wi'out I," said he.

"No more I would, my dear," returned his future better-half, "if it could be helped. But 'twas yourself as named the day, an' if ye won't have it put off ——"

The carpenter, with a vigorous shake of the head, intimated that he certainly would not have it put off.

"Well, then," summed up Martha triumphantly, "ye must agree to let me have a bit o' honeymoon. 'Tis what every bride expects, an' 'tis the one thought what have kept my heart up all these years. I've always promised myself this holiday afore I settled down to wedded life."

William stared at her gloomily, but made no further opposition; and she informed him in a cheerful tone that he need not fear her staying away too long.

"We'll have the weddin' o' Monday mornin'," said she, "quite private-like. The neighbours all know we can't have a great set-out here, on account o' poor father. An' you can carry my bag to the station directly we leave church, an' I'll be back again Saturday night, so as we can go to church together Sunday mornin'. Will that do ye?"

" 'Twill have to do me, I s'pose," returned William, still with profound melancholy.

" 'Tis by your own wish, ye know," said the bride; "if you hadn't held out for us to be married all in such a hurry, I'm sure I should have been glad for us to take our

honeymoon together, my dear. But ye can't have everythin' in this world."

"No," agreed Faithfull, with a groan; "no, that ye can't. Twould ha' been more nat'ral-like to go on our honeymoon together; but what must be, must be."

On the Monday morning the much-discussed wedding took place; bride and bridegroom were alike clad in new and glossy black, Martha's blushing countenance being scarcely visible beneath her crape "fall".

The villagers were all much impressed; there is nothing indeed that the rustic mind so thoroughly appreciates as the panoply of woe, and to find this mourning ceremonial united with marriage pomp was felt to be a rare privilege, and, as such, productive of sincere admiration.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

When the wedded pair left church, their friends and neighbours hastened to offer congratulations, attuned to a becoming note of dismalness, which intimated that condolence lay behind; and it was a rude shock for all when William was suddenly hailed in a tone of most discordant cheerfulness. A tall, black-eyed woman had suddenly rushed forward and seized him by the hand.

"There, now! So I wasn't in time after all! I made sure I'd get here soon enough to see the weddin'. I did always say I'd come to your weddin', didn't I, William? I thought it very unkind of ye not to ax me."

" 'Twas very private-like, d'ye see, Sabina," said William, who had been energetically pumping her hand up and down. "Martha, here — I mean Miss Jesty, no, I mean Mrs. Faithfull — she did want it private, along of her father being dead."

[104]

"Have ye been a-buryin' of en to-day?" interrupted the newcomer with an awe-struck glance at his sable garb. "No, no — of course not. But why did ye go for to get married in deep?"

"My 'usband," said Martha repressively, "thought it but right to show respect to them that's gone, Mrs. Gully — I think ye said your cousin's name was Gully, William; I s'pose this is your cousin?"

" 'E-es, to be sure," agreed the owner of that name, cheerfully. "Half-cousin, if ye like it better — our mothers was two brothers' daughters."

"Indeed," said Martha stiffly. "I must wish 'ee good-day now, for William an' me be in a hurry to catch train."

Mrs. Gully's jaw dropped, but the carpenter, after hastily explaining that they weren't having any party along of the mourning, invited her to come home and take a bite o' summat with him and his wife before they went to the station.

A frown from Martha intimated that she considered this hospitality ill-timed, but William stuck to his point, and they all three turned their steps together towards the Pure Drop.

"I think I'll hurry on an' change my dress," remarked Martha, after stalking on for some moments in silence.

She was not going to travel in her best black and get the crape all messed about with dust.

"Don't mind me, William, my dear," said Sabina, when the bride had left them. "If you're wanting to change your deep, ye'd best hurry on, too, maybe."

"I've no need to change my suit," returned William sorrowfully. "I bain't a-goin' on the honeymoon."

"What!" cried the widow, in astonishment. "She's never goin' to leave ye on your weddin' day?"

"She be," said Mr. Faithfull slowly. "It do seem a bit hard, but we couldn't both on us leave the house, an' she haven't a-had a holiday for twenty year. Ye see, it fell out this way —"

And he proceeded to explain the circumstances, already related, on which Mrs. Gully animadverted with much warmth.

They were still discussing the matter when Martha rejoined them in the private room of the Pure Drop, where a slight refection had been set forth.

This was partaken of hastily, and for the most part in silence, and at its conclusion Mrs. Faithfull jumped up and took a ceremonious farewell of her new cousin. William shouldered his wife's bag and set forth beside her. Martha beguiled the walk to the station by a variety of injunctions, all of which the new landlord of the Pure Drop promised to heed and obey. It was not until she had actually taken her seat in the railway carriage that she found time for sentiment, and then, embracing her husband, she expressed the affectionate hope that he would not be lonely during her absence.

William clambered out of the compartment and carefully closed the door before he answered: —

"Well, I shan't be altogether that lonely. Sabina — she be a-comin' to keep I company till ye come back."

"Never!" cried Mrs. Faithfull, thrusting a scared face

out of the window. “You don’t mean to say ye took on yerself to ax her to stop in my house?”

The whistle sounded at this juncture, but William walked beside the train as it slowly moved off.

“I didn’t ax her. ’Twas she herself as did say, when she heerd you were a-goin’ for to leave I all by mysel’, says she, ‘I’ll tell ’ee what, Will’um; I’ll take a holiday, too, an’ ——’ ” A loud and prolonged shriek from the engine drowned the remainder of the sentence, and the train steamed away, the last sign of the new-made bride being the agitating waving of a protesting hand from the carriage window.

The carpenter was smoking a ruminative pipe, about four o’clock on that same afternoon, in the doorway of the snug little hostelry of which he now found himself master, when he was suddenly hailed by a distracted voice from the road.

“William! for the Lard’s sake, William, do ’ee come and ketch hold of this here bag!”

William removed his pipe, stared, and then wedging the stem firmly in the corner of his mouth, rushed down the path and up the roadway.

“Bless me, Martha, be ye corned back again? Tired o’ London a’ready?”

“No, my dear, I didn’t ever get so far as London,” cried Martha, thrusting the bag into his hand, and throwing herself in a heated and exhausted condition upon his neck. “I didn’t go no further than Templecombe. There, I’d no sooner started nor I did feel all to once that I couldn’t a-bear to leave ’ee. I fair busted out a-cryin’ in the train.”

“Did ye?” said Faithfull, much gratified.

[107]

“I did indeed,” resumed his wife. “ ‘Oh,’ says I, ‘how could I ever treat en so unfair’ says I, ‘arter all them years as him an’ me was a-walkin’? Oh,’ says I, ‘when I think of his melancholy face, an’ this his weddin’ day an’ all.’ So I nips out at Templecombe, an’ gets another ticket, an’ pops into the train as were just startin’ Branston way — an’ here I be.”

“Well, an’ I be pure glad to see ye,” cried William heartily.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

They had by this time reached the house, and Mrs. Faithfull, still breathless with fatigue and agitation, stared anxiously about.

"Where is she?" she inquired in a whisper.

"Who?" said William, setting down the bag.

"Why, your Cousin Sabina!"

"Oh, her!" said William, with something like a twinkle in his usually lack-lustre eye; "she be gone home-along to fetch her things an' lock up her house. She says she'll come back to-morrow mornin' first thing."

"Well, but we don't want her now, do we?" cried Martha, trembling with eagerness. "I was thinkin' maybe after all, ye'd fancy a bit of a holiday, William. Ye might drop her a bit of a line an' say ye was goin' to take the first honeymoon yerself. I fancy ye'd like London very well, William. You should have the first turn, by right, the man bein' master; an' I mid be able to run up for a couple o' days at the end o' the week. Here's my ticket, d'ye see; you could catch the last train, you know, an' then, as I tell 'ee, I'd come an' j'ine ye."

"That won't do," said William firmly; "nay, 'twon't do."

[108]

"Why not?" gasped Martha.

"Ye may pop that ticket in the fire," said William, speaking slowly, and suffering his countenance to relax gradually. " 'Tain't no manner of use to I. I — be — a-goin' — for to stop — an' keep — my — honeymoon — here — along of 'ee."

[109]

OLF AND THE LITTLE MAID.

OLF drove the cows up from their pasture by the river, whistling all the way as was his wont. It was not a particularly tuneful whistle, for he had no ear for music; nevertheless, blending as it did with the morning ecstasies of a particularly early lark, with the chirp of the newly awakened nestlings in the rambling hedges, with the drone of the first bee, with the thousand and one other sounds of the summer dawn, these vacillating notes

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

added something to the general harmony. As his troop of cows plodded tranquilly in front of him, they made green tracks in the dewy sheen of the fields, the silvery uniformity of which had hitherto been unbroken save for the print of Olf's own footsteps, large and far apart, where he had stridden forth half an hour before to gather together his charges.

Arrived at the open gate, the cows passed solemnly through, crossed the road and turned up the narrow lane which led to Farmer Inkpen's premises, made their way to the shed at the farther end and took possession each of her own stall.

The farmer had just emerged from the house, and was in the act of tying the strings of his white "pinner"; his wife and daughter, each carrying the necessary three-legged stool, were walking slowly towards the scene of

[110]

their morning labours. Another female form was already ensconced on a similar stool at the very farthest end of the shed, and edged itself a little sideways as the leading cow stepped past it to her accustomed place. In a few minutes the whole herd had ranged itself, and the rhythmical splash of milk falling into the pails was soon heard.

According to custom, Olf's next proceeding should have been to "sarve" the pigs, but instead of directing his steps towards the adjacent styes, he stood embracing one of the posts which supported the shed, and gazing at his master with a vague smile on his habitually foolish face.

"Well, Olf?" inquired the farmer, dropping his horny fingers from the bow which he had just succeeded in tying in the middle of his portly waist.

"Well, maister!"

The farmer glanced at him in amazement.

"Anything wrong?"

The smile on Olf's face expanded into a grin. Clasping the post still more firmly with one hand, he swung himself round it to the full length of his arm, then swung himself back again and became suddenly serious.

"Nay, sir, nay, there's nothin' wrong. I thought I mid just so well show you this 'ere."

Down went his hand into the depths of his pocket, from which, after producing sundry articles of no particular interest to any one but their owner, he drew forth a piece of paper, folded small, and soiled with much fingering. This he handed to his master, his face now preternaturally solemn, his eyes round with an expression which might almost be taken for one of awe.

[111]

Farmer Inkpen smoothed out this document and read it, his jaw dropping with amazement when he had mastered its contents. He stared at Olf, who stared back at him with palpably increasing nervousness.

"Whatever is it?" cried Mrs. Inkpen, thrusting her head round from behind the dappled flank of her particular cow. "No bad noos, I hope."

"Bad noos!" ejaculated her husband, recovering his wits and his voice together, "what d'ye think? Olf there has come into a fortun'!"

"Never!" exclaimed Mrs. Inkpen, craning her neck as far as she could round her charge, but not ceasing for a moment in her occupation. "You don't say so!"

"However did ye manage that, Olf?" cried Annie Inkpen. And the "spurt spurt" of the milk into her pail ceased for a moment.

" 'Tis a prize drawin'," explained her father, speaking for Olf, who was notoriously slow with his tongue. "He've a-been an' took a ticket in one o' them Dutch lotteries."

"Four on 'em," interrupted Olf, with unexpected promptitude.

"Eh?" inquired his master, turning round to look at him.

"I say I did take four on 'em!" repeated Olf. "They was a-talkin' about it in the town, an' they said two tickets gave ye a better chance nor one, an' four was the best of all. So I did settle to take four."

"Well, what have ye got? How much is the prize?" cried the "missus," now mightily excited, and feeling more

[112]

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

at leisure to gratify her curiosity, as the time had come for “stripping” her cow.

“A thousand pound, no less,” shouted her lord before Olf could open his mouth. “Why, Olf’s as good as a gentleman now. Lard, I never had the layin’ out of a thousand pound in my life. Why, ye can take a bigger farm nor this if ye do like, an’ ye can stock it straight off wi’out being beholden to anybody.”

Olf, who had again been swinging himself round the post, now paused to digest this astonishing piece of information.

Mrs. Inkpen cackled as she picked up her stool and proceeded to operate on the next of the long row.

“Why, he’ll be settin’ up so grand as you please,” she cried. “He’ll be gettin’ married first off, I should think. Tain’t no use tryin’ to work a farm wi’out a missus.”

At this juncture light steps were heard pattering over the cobble-stones, and Maggie Fry, from the village in the “dip,” came up, jug in hand, to fetch the milk for her father’s breakfast.

“What do you think?” shouted Annie, raising herself a little from her seat in order to judge of the effect which her announcement would produce upon Maggie, who was a crony of hers. “What do you think, Maggie? Here’s Olfred Boyt come into a fortun’. He’ve a-been an’ won the thousand pound prize in one of them Dutch bank drawin’s — he is a rich man this mornin’!”

“He is,” chimed in her mother, with a crow of laughter. “I am just tellin’ him he’ll have to look out for a wife first thing. Mr. Farmer Boyt must have a missus to look after the grand noo property he be a-goin’ to buy.”

[113]

“Ah, sure he will,” cried the farmer.

Olf swung himself round the post once more, and then slowly regaining his former place, gazed thoughtfully at Annie, whose fair, curly head was delicately outlined against the golden-red flank of her cow.

“I’d as soon have you as any one, Annie,” he remarked hesitatingly.

“Me!” cried Annie, jumping up and knocking over her stool. “Of all the impudence! Me, Olf? Your master’s daughter?”

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

Her pretty face was flushed to the temples, her eyes were flashing fire. Her mother and father burst into loud laughter, in which Maggie joined.

"I d' 'low he isn't very slack once he do make up his mind," cried the farmer, wiping his eyes. " 'Tis a bit strong, I will say, 'tis a bit strong, Olf."

"I'll be a master myself now," explained Olf, looking from one to the other, "an' I'd as soon have Annie as any one," he added with conviction.

"Well, I'd a deal sooner not have you," ejaculated Annie, picking up her stool, and sitting down again with a suddenness that betokened great perturbation of mind. "I think 'tis most awful cheeky of you, Olf, to ask me, an' I don't see as it is any laughing matter."

Thereupon she fell to work again, the milk falling into her pail in a jerky manner, which, while relieving her own feeling, was not altogether satisfactory to her meek charge, whose horned head came peering round as though to ascertain the cause of this unusual disturbance.

Olf, after contemplating for a moment the resolute

[114]

outline of the back presented to him so decidedly, slowly turned his gaze upon Maggie, who still stood by, laughing and dangling her jug.

"Will you have me, Maggie?" he inquired pleasantly.

"Dear heart alive!" ejaculated the farmer, while his wife once more gave utterance to a shout of laughter.

It was now Maggie's turn to flush and look disconcerted. "I'm not goin' to put up wi' Annie's leavings," she cried indignantly. "The idea! I s'pose you reckon any maid is to be picked up for the axin', Olfred Boyt. You think you have nothin' more to do nor just p'int your ringer at the first one you fancy an' she'll have you straight off. A pretty notion!"

"A pretty notion indeed," cried Annie, "and a pretty figure he'd be to go out a-coortin'!"

" 'E-es," resumed Maggie, with ever-increasing indignation, "a pretty figure, I d' 'low. Tell ye what, Olf, next time you go a-coortin' ye'd best wash your face first."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Ah! 'tis true. 'Twould be a good notion," laughed the farmer. "Ye bain't exactly the kind o' figure a maid 'ud jump at."

Olf raised a grimy hand to his sunburnt face as though to ascertain what manner of appearance it presented. It was true he had not washed it that morning, but there was nothing surprising in that. It would indeed have been a manifestly sinful waste of soap and water to perform one's ablutions before "sarving" the pigs. In fact, according to established custom, Olf's toilet was accomplished at a late hour in the afternoon when his labours were concluded. The condition of his chin would have at once announced

[115]

to any experienced observer that it was then the middle of the week; from the appearance of his garments he might have recently effected a change with a tolerably respectable scarecrow. Altogether, after a moment's reflection, Olf felt that Maggie's point of view was justified, and that he was not precisely the kind of figure to go courting at such short notice. Presently he remarked reflectively, "Ah! 'tis true, I mid 'ave washed myself a bit afore axin' the question. I will next time."

Then he held out his hand to the farmer for the paper, pocketed it, and went shambling across the yard towards the corner where the pig-bucket stood.

Except for the clatter of the cans, and the sound of the spurting milk, silence reigned in the shed for a moment after his departure. The farmer stood scratching his chin meditatively, while the women-folk appeared also lost in thought.

By-and-by Mrs. Inkpen's voice sounded muffled from behind her cow. "A thousand pound, mind ye, isn't to be picked up every day".

"It bain't," cried her husband.

Annie tossed her head. "He be a regular sammy," she remarked.

"And 'tisn't as if a maid hadn't plenty of other chaps to walk with," chimed in Maggie.

From the farthest comer a little voice suddenly sounded, "He be a very kind man, Olf be. He be a very kind man."

"Do you think so, Kitty?" called out the farmer good-naturedly. "Hark to the little maid! You think Olf be a kind man, do ye, Kitty?"

[116]

"Don't talk so much and mind your work, Kitty," said Mrs. Inkpen severely. "Nobody axed your opinion. The idea," she continued, in an angry undertone to her husband, "of a little chit, the same as that, puttin' in her word. What does she know about Olf, or what kind of man he is? You will have to be lookin' out for somebody else to take Olf's place, that's what I'm thinkin'," she remarked presently to her husband. " 'Tis a pity. Olf be a bit of a sammy, as Annie do say, but he is a good worker and never gives no trouble. I could wish somebody else had won the fortun'."

The two girls were now gossiping together and interchanging various opinions derogatory to Olf, and eulogistic of sundry other youths with whom it would appear they "walked" by preference. By-and-by the milking was concluded, and the farmer and his women-folk went into breakfast, Maggie having taken her departure some minutes before.

As the cows began to troop pasturewards again, Olf, standing by the yard-gate, noticed a girl's figure come darting forth from the obscurity of the shed. It was Kitty, a workhouse-bred orphan, whom Mrs. Inkpen had engaged as general help in house and dairy. She was a little creature, small and slight, with a round freckled face and red hair. I say "flaming" advisedly, for it seemed to give forth as well as to receive light. Her face, habitually pink and white, was now extremely pink all over as she paused opposite Olf; a dimple peeped in and out near the corner of her mouth, and her teeth flashed in a smile that was half-shy and half-mischievous.

[117]

"Please, Olf," said she, "if you are lookin' for a wife, I'm willin' to have ye."

Olf, who had been about to pass through the gate in the rear of his charges, wheeled about and faced her, scratching his jaw meditatively.

"Oh, an' are you, Kitty?" said he.

"E-es," said Kitty, nodding emphatically.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

Olf eyed her thoughtfully, and then his eyes reverted to the cows, which, after the perverse manner of their kind, were nibbling at the quickset hedge over the way.

"Who-ope, who-ope," he called warningly, and then once more glanced at Kitty. "We'll talk about that 'ere when I come back," he remarked, and sauntered forth pulling the rickety gate to after him.

Kitty paused a moment with a puzzled look, and then, being a philosophical young person, picked up her pail and betook herself indoors.

She had finished a somewhat perfunctory breakfast, and was on her knees scrubbing the doorstep when Olf returned. She heard his footfall crossing the yard, but did not look round, neither did she glance up when his shadow fell upon the sunlit flags. After the necessary pause for adjustment of his ideas, Olf broke the silence.

"You'd be willin' to take me?" said he.

"E-es," returned Kitty, without raising her head.

Olf paused a moment, then — "You'd like to marry me, would ye, Kitty?"

"E-es," said Kitty again.

"They two other maids wouldn't so much as look at me," pursued Olf, in a ruminative tone. "I wonder what makes ye think you'd like to marry me, maidie?"

[118]

Kitty sat back upon her heels and contemplated him gravely, mechanically soaping her scrubbing-brush the while.

"You did carry my pail for I t'other day when 'twas too heavy," she replied presently, "and you did black my shoes on Sunday when I was afraid I would be late for church. And besides," she added, "I think 'twould be nice to get married, and there — I be so sick of scrubbin' doorsteps and cleanin' pots and pans!"

"That's it, be it?" said Olf. "But you mid still have to clean pots and pans after we was married, Kitty," he added with a provident eye to the future. "The missus, she do often do a bit of cleanin' up, if she be the missus."

"That would be different," returned Kitty. "I shouldn't have no objections to scourin' my own pots and pans."

"True, true," agreed Olf.

Kitty dropped on all-fours again. “Well, I have told ye I’d be willin’,” she observed in somewhat ruffled tones, “but of course ye needn’t if ye don’t like.”

“Who says I don’t like?” returned Olf, with unexpected warmth. “I d’ ’low I do like. I do think it a very good notion, my maid.”

Kitty gave a little unexpected giggle, and continued to polish her doorstep with an immense deal of energy. Olf stood by for a moment in silence. Then to her surprise, and it must be owned, dismay, he turned about and walked slowly away.

If Kitty had been unwilling to turn her head a few moments before, no earthly power would have induced her

[119]

to glance round at him now; she began to sing blithely and carelessly to herself, and made a great clatter with her pail and scrubbing-brush. Not such a clatter, however, but that after a moment or two she detected the sound of vigorous pumping on the opposite side of the yard, and guessed, from certain subsequent sounds, that Olf was washing his face.

Louder than ever sang Kitty when he presently crossed the yard again and bent over her. But a wave of colour rushed over her downcast face, and even dyed her little white neck. She could hear Olf chuckling, and presently a large finger, moist from recent ablutions, touched her chin.

“Look up a minute, my maid,” said Olf.

Kitty looked up. Olf’s sunburnt face was scarlet from the result of his late exertions, and was imperfectly dried, but it wore so frank and kindly a smile that the little maid smiled back with absolute confidence.

“So we be to start a-coortin’, be we?” inquired Olf pleasantly.

“I d’ ’low we be,” responded Kitty.

“How’s that for a beginnin’, then?” inquired Olf. And thereupon he kissed her.

At this moment Mrs. Inkpen appeared on the threshold, and soon her penetrating tones announced to the household that Olf was at last suited with a bride. A good deal of jesting and laughing ensued — not perhaps altogether good-natured, for in some unaccountable way both

Mrs. Inkpen and Annie felt themselves slighted by this sudden transfer of Olf's affection — but the newly-engaged couple submitted to their raillery with entire good humour,

and presently resumed their interrupted vocations as though nothing particular had taken place.

Towards evening, however, Olf found a moment for a word with his little sweetheart.

"I be a-goin' over to take this 'ere bit of writin' to the bank to-morrow," said he. "Maister says 'tis the best thing to do. He says they'll keep it and give I money when I do want it. I were a-thinkin', Kitty, I mid make ye a bit of a present — 'tis all in the way o' coortin', bain't it? I wonder now what you'd like?"

"Oh!" cried Kitty, her eyes dancing with excitement, "that's real good o' ye, Olf. I can't call to mind as anybody ever gave me a present. I do want a new hat terrible bad."

"A new hat," repeated Olf, "that's easy got. Wouldn't ye like summat a bit grander — a real handsome present? What would you like best in the world, Kitty?"

"O-o-o-h!" cried Kitty again, and this time her eyes became round with something that was almost awe. "What I'd like best in the whole world, Olf, would be to have a gold watch. I did dream once that I did have a real gold watch o' my own, and I never, never, never thought that it mid come true. O-o-o-h! if I was to have a gold watch!"

"Say no more, maidie," exclaimed Olf, with doughty resolution, "you shall have that there gold watch so sure as my name be Olfred Boyt. There now! And you can show it to Annie and Maggie Fry, and they can see for theirselves what they mid ha' had if they had been willin' to take me."

Kitty pouted. “You don’t want to marry them now you be a goin’ to marry I, do ye?” she inquired pettishly.

“No more I cried do,” cried Olf, “but they mid ha’ been a bit more civil.”

Kitty agreeing to this statement, harmony was at once restored, and the pair parted with complete satisfaction.

Next day Olf duly conferred with his banker, and in an extremely bad hand, and with difficulty, accomplished the writing of his first cheque. It was for £5 — a sum of money which he had never in all his life hoped to possess at one time. In fact, he was more elated at the sight of the five golden sovereigns than he had been in contemplating his thousand pound bond. He expended a certain portion of this new wealth on his own personal adornment — having his hair cut at a barber’s for the first time in his existence, and investing in a new suit of clothes, the pattern being a check of a somewhat startling description. He also purchased a hat for Kitty with a wreath of blue flowers, supplemented, at his particular request, by a white feather.

“We do not generally use feathers with flowers,” expostulated the shopwoman.

Olf considered. “I think I will have the feather all the same,” said he; “feathers is more richer-like.”

“I did not want for to grudge ye nothin’, ye see,” he subsequently explained to Kitty, “and this ’ere is the gold watch.”

Kitty positively gasped with rapture. It was a very fine watch certainly, extremely yellow, and with a little diapered pattern on the case.

[122]

“It cost thirty-five shillin’,” explained Olf, with modest triumph. “ ’Tis rolled gold, so you may think how good that must be.”

Kitty gasped again. Farmer Inkpen possessed a gold watch of turnip shape and immense weight, but she felt quite sure it was not rolled gold, and in consequence a highly inferior article. She turned towards Olf with a sudden movement and clasped both her little hands about his arm — “I do like ye, Olf,” she said, “I do. I do think ye be the kindest man that ever was made. I’ll work for ye so hard as I can when I be your missus.”

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

There being no reason to delay the wedding, preparations were made at once for that auspicious event. On the following Sunday the banns were put up; Kitty and Olf paid several visits to the upholsterer's in the neighbouring town and selected sundry articles of furniture, Olf giving orders right and left in a lordly fashion which quite dazzled his future bride. Farmer Inkpen made inquiries with regard to a certain farm which he thought might possibly suit his former assistant, and was moreover good enough to promise help and advice in the selection of stock. All, in fact, was proceeding merrily as that marriage bell which they both so soon expected to hear, when there came of a sudden a bolt from the blue. The manager of the local bank sent a peremptory message one evening to Olf requesting, or rather ordering, him to call without delay.

The poor fellow obeyed the summons without alarm, without even the faintest suspicion that anything was wrong, and it was indeed with great difficulty that the

manager conveyed to him the astounding fact that the precious bond, which was to have been the foundation of his fortune, was so much waste paper; the prize-drawing had been a swindling concern, and the thousand pound prize did not exist.

"But I thought you told I that 'ere bit o' paper was a thousand pound," expostulated Olf, when for the fortieth time the manager had explained the state of the case.

"That bit of paper represented a thousand pounds," returned that gentleman, with diminishing patience, "but when we came to collect it, the money wasn't there."

Olf scratched his head and looked at him. "And what be I to do now?" he inquired.

"Why, nothing, I am afraid. I don't suppose you would be able to prosecute, and even if you had the money to carry on your case, it would not do you much good to get those swindlers punished. You will just have to grin and bear it, my poor fellow. We will give you time you know — we won't be hard with you."

"Time?" ejaculated Olf, staring at him blankly.

"Yes. We have let you have £5 on account you know. That will have to be paid back, of course, but we won't press you. You can let us have it little by little."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Oh!" said Olf, "thank ye," and he went out, absently stroking the check sleeve of the beautiful new suit which had cost him so dear.

He shambled back to the farm and paused by the gate, across which Mr. Inkpen was leaning.

"Hullo, Olf, back again?"

" 'E-es," said Olf, "I be back again, maister. Ye bain't suited yet, be ye?"

"Not yet," said the farmer, "but ye can't be married afore another fortnight, can ye? I s'pose you'll lend me a hand until you shift?"

"I bain't a-goin' to shift. I bain't a-goin' to get wed, I bain't —" He paused, his lip trembling for a moment piteously like a child's. "It is all a mistake, maister — there bain't no money there."

"Dear to be sure," cried Farmer Inkpen.

Olf stood gazing at him. There was a dimness about his eyes, and he bit his lips to stop their quivering.

Mr. Inkpen's loud exclamation caused the women-folk to appear on the scene, and in a moment the entire household was assembled and plying Olf with questions.

"There is nothin' more to tell ye," he said at last. " 'Tis a mistake. There bain't no money there I can't take no farm. I must ax the folk o' the shop to keep that 'ere furniture and things — I haven't made no fortun', I be just the same as I was 'afore, 'cept as I have a-got to pay back a matter of £5 to the bank."

Little Kitty stood by, growing red and pale in turn, and fingering the watch in her waistband. All at once she gave a loud sob and rushed away.

"Ah! she be like to feel it," said the farmer, whose heart was perhaps more tender than that of his wife or daughter. "She'll feel it, poor little maid. Sich a chance for her — and now to go back to her scrubbin' and cleanin' just the same as 'afore."

Olf heaved a deep sigh. "Well," he said, "I'll go home

and take off these 'ere clothes, and I'll come back and finish my work, maister."

He then turned away, a very low-spirited and drooping figure, his shoulders round under that astonishing plaid, his head sunk almost on to his chest. After a little more talk the family separated, Mrs. Inkpen feeling some irritation on discovering that Kitty was nowhere to be found.

"She's run off to cry," said Annie. "However, don't ye take no notice of her for this once, mother; 'tis but natural she should be a bit down, poor little maid."

Olf had finished his work and was going dejectedly homewards that night when, in the narrow lane which led from the farm towards the village, he was waylaid by a well-known figure. It was Kitty. Her eyes were filled with tears, her face very pale, yet nevertheless there was a note of triumph in her voice.

"I've been to the town, Olf," she cried. "I didn't want ye to be at a loss through me, and the folks was kind. They took back the watch all right and gave me the thirty-five shillin' for it. They wouldn't take back the hat at the shop where you got it, along 'o my wearin' it you know. They did tell me of a place where they buy second-hand things, and they gave me seven shillin' for it there. So that won't be so bad will it? You can pay that much to the bank straight off."

Olf looked at her dejectedly. "There, my maid," cried he. "I wish ye hadn't done that. I could wish ye had kept them two things what I did give ye — 'twas all I could do for ye. We can never do all we'd like to do now."

Kitty sobbed.

[126]

"I take it very kind o' ye to be so feelin'," said Olf. "I could wish we could have got wed, my maid. I'd ha' been a lovin' husband, and I d' 'low you'd ha' been a lovin' wife."

"I would," sobbed Kitty.

"But there, 'tis all over, bain't it? I be nothin' but a poor chap earnin' of a poor wage. You be a vitty maid too good for the likes o' me. I'll never have a wife now."

"I don't see that," said Kitty, in a low voice. She was hanging her head and drawing patterns with the point of her shoe in the sandy soil.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

Olf stared at her, and then repeated his statement. “A poor man earnin’ of a poor wage, Kitty. I’ll never have a wife.”

“Why not?” said Kitty, almost inarticulately. “Many poor men get wed, Olf.”

Olf caught his breath with a gasp. “Kitty,” he cried, “Kitty, do ye mean you’d take me now wi’out no fortun’, and just as I be? You’d never take me now, Kitty?”

“I would,” said Kitty, and she hid her face on his patched shoulder and burst into tears.

“Then I don’t care about nothin’,” cried Olf valiantly. “If you would really like it, Kitty, say no more.”

“I would,” said Kitty again. And then raising her head, she smiled at him through her tears. “But don’t tell nobody I axed ye,” said she.

[127]

IN THE HEART OF THE GREEN.

WHEN the new keeper and his wife took possession of their cottage, deep in the heart of Westbury Chase, summer was still at its height. Jim Whittle’s real responsibilities had not yet begun — a little breathing space was, as it were, allotted to the young couple before settling thoroughly into harness. So Betty thought at least, though Jim frequently reminded her that summer was as anxious a time as any other for a man in his position.

“What with folks expectin’ the young birds to be nigh full-growed afore they was much more than hatched out; and what wi’ the fear of there being too much wet, or too much sun, and varmint an’ sich-like, I can tell ye, Betty,” said he, “I’m as anxious in summer as in winter, very near.”

Nevertheless, he found time to do many little odd jobs for her which he could not have accomplished in the shooting season: knocking together shelves, digging in the garden, chopping up the store of wood which she herself collected as she strolled out in her spare hours. Betty was as happy as a bird in those days. Their new home had been put in order before their advent, and was spick and span from roof to threshold; the fresh thatch glinted bravely through the heavy summer foliage; the flowers in the little garden made patches of bright colour

[128]

amid the surrounding green. Betty herself in her print dress and with her hair shining like polished gold, Betty carrying her six-months-old child poised on her round arm, was an almost startling figure to those who came upon her suddenly in the leafy aisles about her home. Brown and grey and fawn and russet are the tones chiefly affected by forest people; yet here were the mother and child, wood creatures both of them, flaunting it in their pinks and yellows before autumn had so much as crimsoned a leaf.

What wonder that the shy folk in fur or feather peered at them with round astonished eyes, ere scuttling to cover or taking to flight.

Dick Tuffin, the woodman, looked up in surprise from the faggot he had just bound together, when Betty and her baby-boy came towards him one sunny morning from one of the many shadowy avenues which abutted on a glade cleared by his own hands. As she advanced, he sat back upon his heels amid the slender sappy victims of his axe, and frankly stared at her.

He was a young man, dark as a gipsy, muscular and lithe, with quick-glancing eyes and a flashing smile.

"Good day," said Betty, pausing civilly.

"Good day to you, Mum. Id' 'low you be new keeper's wife?"

"Yes, I am Mrs. Whittle," said Betty. "Are you cutting down my husband's woods?" she added, smiling.

"Ah! your husband's woods 'ud not be in sich good order as they do be if it wasn't for I an' sich as I," returned the man. "I do cut down a piece reg'lar every year, an' then the young growth comes, d'ye see, twice so

[129]

thick as before, so that the game can find so much shelter as they do like."

"And what are you going to do with all these poor little trees?" inquired Betty. "They are too green for firewood, aren't they?"

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Well," said Dick, with his infectious smile, "I make hurdles wi' 'em for one thing, an' some of 'em goes for pea-sticks, an' others is made into besoms. They mid be green," he added reflectively, "but folks do come here often enough a-pickin' up scroff for burnin'."

Here the child on Betty's arm began to whimper, and she nodded to it and dandled it, her own person keeping up a swaying, dancing movement the while.

Dick Tuffin watched her, at first with a smile; but presently his face clouded.

"You have a better time of it, Mrs. Whittle," said he, "nor my poor little 'ooman at home. You do see your husband so often as you like; but there, I must bide away from home for weeks and months at a time. I mid almost say I haven't got a home; and Mary, she mid say she haven't got a husband."

"How's that?" inquired Betty, pausing, with the now laughing child suspended in mid-air, to turn her astonished face upon him.

"My place is nigh upon fifteen mile away from here. I go travellin' the country round, cuttin' the woods and makin' hurdles; an' 'tis too far to get back except for a little spell now and then. I didn't think o' wedlock when I took up the work, an' now I d' 'low I wouldn't care to turn to any other. But 'tis hard on the 'ooman."

[130]

"She oughtn't to let you do it!" cried the keeper's wife firmly. "Ha' done, Jim; ha' done, thou naughty boy! I'll throw thee over the trees in a minute!"

The child had clutched at her golden locks, pulling one strand loose; she caught at the chubby hand, made believe to slap it, and then kissed the little pink palm half a dozen times.

"Your wife ought to make you get your livin' some other way," she added seriously.

"It couldn't be done now," said the woodman. "I have done nothin' but fell trees an' plesh hurdles since I was quite a little 'un. I couldn't do naught else," he added somewhat dreamily; "I fancy I couldn't bide anywhere except in a wood."

"Well, 'tis a fine life," said she, willing to say something civil.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Yes, pleasant enough," he agreed. "If I could tole my missus about I'd never complain; but, there! it can't be done."

He tossed the faggot on one side, and began to collect materials for another. Betty noticed a great rent in his fustian waistcoat, and, commenting upon the fact, volunteered to mend it.

" 'Tis awkward for ye having no one to sew for ye," she added, as Dick gratefully divested himself of the garment in question.

" 'Tis that," agreed Tuffin. "I do move about so often the folks where I lodge do never seem to take a bit of interest in I. My wife, she do fair cry at times when she do see the state my things be in. Come, I'll hold the youngster for ye, Mum."

[131]

"Oh, he'll be all right on the soft grass here!"

"Nay, I'd like to hold 'en if ye'll let me. I want to get my hand in, d'ye see. There'll be a little un at our place very soon."

"I do call it unfeelin' of ye to leave your wife alone at such a time," remarked Betty reprovingly.

"Her mother's wi' her," returned Dick. "I'll go home for a bit in a fortnight or so, but I must be back in October."

He chirruped to the child, swinging him high in the air, till Baby Jim crowed and laughed again. Soon Mrs. Whittle's task was accomplished, and she handed back the waistcoat to its owner, receiving his profuse thanks in return. As she walked away through the chequered light and shade Dick looked after her.

"Some folks is luckier nor others," he said. "Keeper can live in the woods and have wife and child anigh him, too; but I, if I be to live at all, must live alone."

Then he thought of the little brown wife in that faraway village, and wondered with a sudden tightening of the heart-strings how she was getting on; but presently he whistled again, in time to the rhythmic strokes of his axe, as he pointed the sowels for his next lot of hurdles.

On the following morning when Betty was sweeping out her house a shadow fell across the threshold, and, looking up, she descried the woodman.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

"I've brought ye a new besom," said he, with a somewhat shamefaced smile. "One good turn do deserve another, Mrs. Whittle."

"Thank ye kindly, I'm sure," returned Betty, with a

bright smile. "I never thought of your making any return for the few stitches I set for ye. The besom is a beauty, Mr. Tuffin."

"Glad ye like it," said Dick, turning to take his leave.

"If ye've any other bits o' mending, Mr. Tuffin," Betty called after him, "I'd be pleased to do 'em for ye."

"Nay, now, I don't like puttin' too much on your good nature, Mrs. Whittle," said Dick, glancing over his shoulder with a sheepish smile.

But the keeper's wife insisted; and presently Dick confessed that there were a good few socks lying by at his lodgings in sore need of repair.

On the morrow he brought them, with the addition of a large basket of "scroff," or chips, for firing.

Keeper Jim was much amused at this exchange of civilities; but was so far moved with compassion for Tuffin's lonely wife that he contributed a couple of nice young rabbits to the little packet of comforts which Betty sent her when Dick went home for his brief holiday; and he was both touched and gratified when little Mrs. Tuffin sent a return tribute of new-laid eggs and fresh vegetables to the woman who had befriended her Dick.

Autumn came, scarcely perceptible at first in this sheltered spot; little drifts of yellow leaves strewed Betty's threshold of a morning; there was a brave show of berries amid the undergrowth; maple bushes lit cool fires here and there; and travellers' joy and bryony flung silver-spangled tendrils or jewelled chains across a tangle of orange and crimson and brown. The delicate tracery of twigs, the gnarled strength of boughs, became ever more perceptible as the

leafage thinned; Jim could see more of the thatch of his house as he tramped homewards, and could mark through the jagged outline of the naked boughs how the blue smoke-wreaths blew hither and thither as they issued from his chimney.

There was a growing sense of excitement in the woods; their silence was often broken by startled cries and the whirring of great wings. Soon the glades would echo to the sound of the beaters' sticks; dry twigs would crack beneath the sportsmen's feet; shots would wake the slumbering echoes; and then a cart would come and bear away the rigid bodies erstwhile so blithe. Betty almost cried as she thought of the fate that awaited the pretty birds which she had so often fed with her own hand and which the baby had loved to watch; but Jim chid her when she said she hoped many of them would escape.

"Tell 'ee what," he remarked sternly, "if the gentry don't find more pheasants nor in the wold chap's time they'll say I bain't worth my salt. There, what be making such a fuss about? 'Tis what they be brought up for. D'ye think folks 'ud want to be watchin' 'em an' feedin' em an' lookin' arter 'em always if 'twasn't that they mid get shot in the end? They must die someway, d'ye see; and I d' 'low if ye was to ax 'em, they pheasants 'ud liefer come rocketin' down wi' a dose o' lead in their innards nor die natural-like by freezin' or starvin or weasels or sich."

Jim grew more and more enthusiastic as the time drew nearer for the big shoot, which was, as he expected, to establish his reputation. This was not to take place till late in November, so as to allow time for the trees to be

[134]

fully denuded of their leaves. The keeper often talked darkly of the iniquities of certain village ne'er-do-weels, who, according to him, thought no more of snaring a rabbit than of lying down in their beds.

"If they only kept to rabbits," he added once, "it wouldn't be so bad; but when those chaps gets a footin' in these woods there's no knowin' where they'll stop. But they'll find I ready for them. They'll find I bain't so easy to deal wi' as wold Jenkins."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Dear, to be sure, Jim, I wish you wouldn't talk so!" said Betty. "You make me go all of a tremble! I shall be afeard to stop here by myself when you're away on your beat if you 'fray me wi' such tales. I don't like to think there's poachin' folk about."

"There, they'd never want to do nothin' to a woman," said Jim consolingly; " 'tis the game they're arter. They'll not come anigh the house, bless ye!"

"Well, but I don't like to think they mid go fightin' you," she whimpered.

Jim bestowed a sounding kiss on her smooth cheek.

"Don't ye fret yoursel'," he cried; "they'll run away fast enough when they do see I comin'. Why, what a little foolish 'ooman thou be'est! There, give over cryin'. I didn't ought to ha' talked about such things."

Betty's pretty eyes were still somewhat pink, however, as she came strolling into Dick's quarters that afternoon; and her lip drooped when in answer to his questions she divulged the cause.

"Afeard o' poachers!" exclaimed the woodman, with a laugh. "Bless ye, Mrs. Whittle, poachers bain't no worse

[135]

nor other folks! Dalled if I can see much harm in a man catchin' a rabbit or two when there's such a many of 'em about! The place be fair swarmin' wi' 'em o' nights.''

Betty was much shocked; and returned reprovingly that it couldn't ever be right to steal. "And poachin' is but stealin'," she summed up severely.

"Stealin'!" echoed Dick; "nay, ye'll never make me believe that. I d' 'low the Lard did make they little wild things for the poor so well as for the rich. Pheasants, now,' he continued, ruminating, "I won't say as any one has a right to take pheasants except the man what owns the woods. I'd as soon rob a hen-roost, for my part, as go arter one o' they fat tame things as mid be chicken for all the spirit what's in 'em. I'd never ax to interfere wi' a pheasant," he continued reflectively, "wi'out it was jist for the fun o' the thing. But settin' a gin or two — wi' all these hundreds and thousands o' rabbits runnin' under a body's feet — ye'll never make me think there's a bit o' harm in it."

"Don't let my husband hear such talk!" said Betty loftily.

The woodman laughed again. "I wouldn't mind speakin' out plain to his face," said he. "Him and me is the best o' friends — I do like en very well," continued Dick handsomely; "better nor I ever thought to like a gamekeeper. As a rule, I don't hold with folks what goes

spyin' about, a-tryin' to catch other folks in the wrong. I never could a-bear a policeman, now — 'tis my belief they do more harm than good."

"Gracious!" ejaculated the scandalised Betty. "I don't know how you can go for to say such things."

[136]

"Well, d'ye see, 'tis this way," explained Dick. "If a man do want for to get drunk, drunk he'll get if there be farty policemen arter him. If he's willin' to make a beast of hisself, and to ruin his wife and family, and to get out o' work an' everything, for the sake of a drap o' drink, 'tisn't a policeman that 'ull stop him. And if a chap do want to fight another chap — his blood being up, d'ye see — he'll fight en — ah, that he will! and give no thought at all to the chance o' bein' run in for it. And jist same way — if a body has a notion to trap a rabbit, trap it he will, keeper or no keeper."

Here Dick selected a sapling and began to trim it leisurely, pursing up his lips the while in a silent whistle.

"I'll not tell Whittle all you've said," remarked Betty with dignity, as she shifted her baby from one arm to the other, and prepared to walk on. "He mid think you was a poacher yourself."

"You may tell him if you like," retorted Dick, and then he whistled out loud and clapped his hands at the baby, which thereupon laughed ecstatically, and almost sprang from its mother's arms. The keeper's wife relaxed, and mentally resolved to make no allusion to Dick's unorthodox sentiments in conversing with her husband. Jim himself had said that it wouldn't be so bad if folks only kept to rabbits, and Dick had intimated that he would never care to touch anything else. A body should not be too hard, she reflected, on a poor fellow who had no home, so to speak; why, he was almost like a wild creature of the woods himself, living out in all weathers, sleeping often under the stars, picking up a chance meal as he best could

[137]

— there was no great wonder if he had become as lawless as the four-footed “varmint” against whom the keepers waged such fierce war.

One evening, shortly before the great shoot was to take place, Jim came home to tea in a state of contained excitement. When the meal was over he went to the door, and began, to his wife’s surprise, to examine the fastenings carefully.

“ ’Tis a good stout bolt,” he remarked, “and the lock be a new ’un. I d’ ’low if house was shut up you wouldn’t be afeard to bide alone in it?”

Betty immediately demonstrated the presence of mind which she would be likely to display under such circumstances by uttering a loud scream.

“Oh, Jim, Jim!” she cried, “why be goin’ to stop out all night? I do know so well as if you did tell me that you be goin’ into danger.”

“Danger!” cried the keeper, thumping his great chest, “not much fear o’ that! There, don’t ye be so foolish. Me and Stubbs be a-goin’ over t’other side o’ the park down to the river to see to that ’ere decoy for duck, as squire be so set on puttin’ to rights. ’Tis five mile away; we be like to be kep’ late, very late — till daybreak, most like; but do you make the house fast, old ’ooman, and no harm ’ull come to either of us.”

Had Betty not been so much absorbed in the main issue, she might have detected something improbable about the keeper’s story; but, as it was, her fears for him were almost lost in the horror of being left all night alone in that desolate spot.

[138]

Jim, however, jested at her terrors, and himself made the round of the cottage, fastening the casements and securing the seldom-used front door. He stood outside the threshold while she drew the bolts and locked the back one.

“Get to thy bed early,” he called to her. “Go to sleep so fast as thou can; and first thing thou knows thou’lt hear me knockin’ to be let in.”

But somebody else knocked before Betty had any thought of going to bed; before, indeed, she had finished washing up the tea-things.

"Who's that?" cried she, thrusting a scared face out of the window.

"It's me, Mrs. Whittle — Dick Tuffin. I've a-brought ye back your hamper what I promised to mend for ye. Why, ye be shut up very early, bain't ye?"

"Whittle's gone travellin' off a long way," she answered with a scarcely perceptible sob. "There, he be gone to the river — 'tis a good five mile off, he do say. I'm frightened to death here by myself."

She heard him laugh in the darkness.

"How 'ud ye like to be my little wife," he asked, "as bides alone night after night, wi' nobody but the little 'un, now her mother have a-left her? I wouldn't be afeard, Mrs. Whittle. Your house be so safe as a church; and there's Duke — he's big enough and strong enough to guard ye. Hark to en barkin' now, the minute he do hear my voice!"

"Well, and that's true," agreed Betty in a more cheerful tone. "Thank ye for mendin' the hamper, Mr. Tuffin. I'll open the door in a minute."

[139]

"No, don't ye bother to do that," said Dick. "The hamper'll take no harm out here till morning. Good-night to ye."

"Good-night," said Betty, closing the window.

She heard the sound of his footsteps die away, and then the loneliness of the forest night seemed to close in upon her. Jim had often been out as late as this, and later, but the mere knowledge that he did not intend to return till daybreak made her more nervous than she had ever been. When the logs crackled or fell together she started violently; the moaning of the wind in the branches without filled her with dread, though often, when she and her husband sat by the hearth, they had declared the sound made them feel more snug. More than once she opened the window and listened; a fine, close rain was falling, making a dull patter upon the thatched roof, dripping from the eves; but besides these sounds there were many others, strange, unaccountable, terrifying — creakings and crackings of boughs; now what seemed to be a stealthy tread, now

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

whispering voices. She chid herself for these fancies, knowing well that they must be without foundation, since Duke remained silent; nevertheless her flesh crept and the dew of terror started to her brow.

At length, making a strong resolution, she went up to her attic bedchamber, undressed, and, taking the child into her arms, crept into bed. But she lay there for a long time, quaking, and staring with wide-open eyes into the darkness; until, overcome by sheer fatigue after a long and busy day, she fell asleep.

She woke up suddenly, and sat for a moment vainly

[140]

endeavouring to disentangle the confusion of sound which filled her ears. Her heart was beating like a drum, the blood surged in her brain — a dream-panic was still upon her, and yet there were certain other unmistakable noises to be heard without. Duke was barking in frenzied fashion and straining at his chain; men were shouting at no very great distance, and now — what was that? A single shot!

"It's the poachers!" exclaimed Betty, with chattering teeth. "Pray God they don't come here!"

In the midst of her anguish of fear she felt a sudden rush of gratitude. Jim was safe out of the way, thanks be! Jim would not be back till the folks had got off with their spoil. But now Duke was whimpering and crying in a most eerie and heartrending manner, and presently uplifted his voice in long-drawn howls which jarred upon Betty's overwrought nerves beyond endurance. She jumped out of bed and ran to the casement. It had ceased raining, and though the moon rode between piles of angry clouds, she sent forth at that moment an extraordinarily clear light. Betty could see the skeleton branches of the trees all wet and shining as they tossed against the sky; the little paved path glimmered white; yonder stood a dark patch — Dick's hamper. She could see Duke pacing round and round his kennel, at the utmost length of his chain; now sniffing the ground, now lifting up his head for another howl.

She rapped at the pane and called to him sharply; and the dog looked up at her window, and suddenly wheeled in the opposite direction, pricking his cars.

Steps were heard approaching — slow, lagging steps —

[141]

and presently two figures came staggering together out of the wood. Betty screamed as they emerged from the shadow, and then leaned forth, paralysed with dread; for as the two slowly advanced into the moonlit path she recognised Stubbs, the under-keeper, and saw that he was supporting, almost carrying, his companion.

"Be that you, Mrs. Whittle?" cried Stubbs. "Come down, Mum, come down this minute! This be a bad night's work!"

The man leaning upon him raised his head with an inarticulate attempt to speak, and Betty saw that it was Jim — her own Jim — her husband! But, oh! what tale was that told by the drawn features and glassy eyes?

She had screamed at the unknown terror, but she uttered no sound now. Before they reached the door she had mechanically thrown on her dress over her nightgown, and had come downstairs, pattering with her bare feet. She flung open the door, and put her arms round her husband, almost as if she grudged him any support but hers.

"My poor little 'ooman!" said Jim brokenly; "I d' 'low I'm done for."

With Stubbs' aid she stretched him on the sofa, and unfastened coat and waistcoat. She drew out her hand from his bosom suddenly, and locked at it with a shudder: it was red!

"Ah, he's got the whole charge in en somewhere," groaned Stubbs. "There was a lot of 'em out to-night, and we catched one of 'em; he fought like a devil, he did — 'twas in wrestling wi' him poor Whittle's gun went off. Dear to be sure, 'tis awful to think on. His own gun!"

[142]

"Where's the man?" asked Betty sharply; her face was as white as a sheet — her lips drawn back from her gleaming teeth.

"Oh, he made off, ye mid be sure," returned the other. "I don't know who he was. 'Twas in the thick o' the trees yonder we come on 'em. Moon had gone in and 'twas as dark as pitch."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

"Do you think my husband will die!" gasped Betty.

"Ah! 'tis a bad job — 'tis surely," responded the other, almost whimpering; "and the worst on't is we be nigh six mile from a doctor."

"Oh, Mr. Stubbs," cried the keeper's wife earnestly, "let's do everything we can, any way! Will ye go for the doctor for me? Do! I'll — I'll give ye every penny in the house if ye will!"

"Lard! my dear 'ooman, I don't want no pay for doin' what I can at sich a time. I'll go, to be sure, an' make so much haste as I can; but — won't ye be afeard to bide here all alone — and him so bad?"

Betty saw that he expected her husband would die before his return, but she did not flinch.

"I will do anything in the world so long as there's a chance of saving him!" she cried. "Run, Mr. Stubbs, run! Make haste — oh, do make haste!"

Stubbs drew his arm from beneath the wounded man's shoulder, and hastened away without another word. Betty went to her linen-drawer, and found an old sheet, which she tied round Jim's body to staunch the bleeding; he seemed to have received the charge chiefly in his right

[143]

side. He opened his eyes and smiled at her faintly, and then she dropped on her knees beside him.

"Jim," she whispered, "you never went away arter all?"

He shook his head feebly. "I meant it for the best," he said; "I heard these chaps would be up to their tricks to-night, and I thought me and Stubbs 'ud catch them."

"Oh, Jim," said Betty, "ye told me a lie!"

"I meant it for the best, my dear," he returned faintly. "I didn't want ye to be frayed —poor little 'ooman! Ye mustn't be vexed."

Betty stooped and kissed him, and he closed his eyes.

"I reckon I'm goin'," he said. "Well, I done my dooty. But what 'ull ye do, my dear?"

"I'll manage," said Betty.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

Her voice had a harsh note quite unlike its own; she sank down in a heap on the floor, staring before her. She knew what she would do if Jim died. She would first of all find the man who had killed him, and then — oh, he should pay for it!

Jim had fallen into a kind of drowsy state, and presently his hand slipped down and unconsciously touched hers: it was very cold. Betty, rousing herself, went towards the hearth, drawing the embers together. There was not enough fuel, however, to make much of a fire; and, softly opening the door, she went out to the woodshed, her bare feet making no sound on the damp stones. As she was returning with her burden the wicket-gate swung open, and Dick Tuffin come up the path.

"Mrs. Whittle! Mrs. Whittle!" he called pantingly.

She turned and confronted him. The moon had dipped

[144]

behind the trees and she could not distinguish his face, but something in the aspect of the man struck her with a lightning-like intuition.

"Come in," she said hoarsely.

Dick followed her into the house, starting back at sight of the prostrate figure on the couch. Betty dropped her wood on the hearth and came swiftly across to him with her panther-like tread. There was an expression on her face which might have recalled the beast in question. She placed both her hands upon his breast, and he, giving way before them, stepped backwards a few paces.

"Look at him," said Betty; " he is dying! Dick Tuffin, it is you who have killed my husband!"

"I swear I didn't know it was him," faltered Dick. "I'd no thought of harm. I went out with the others for a frolic. You yourself did tell I your husband was miles away."

She had told him! He would make out that she had delivered him into their hands! A red mist came before her eyes.

"Even when he did catch I," went on Dick, "I didn't know who 'twas. But somebody told me jist now that Stubbs was runnin' for the doctor for en, so I come — I couldn't rest, ye see. I had to come. Mrs. Whittle, I don't know what you'll say to me."

Betty said nothing at all, but the steady pressure of her hands upon his breast increased, and, as before, Dick recoiled beneath it. Her eyes were blazing in her white face; her dishevelled fair hair fell about her shoulders. Dick gazed at her remorsefully, suffering her unresistingly

[145]

to push him the length of the little room and through an open doorway. He imagined her to be ejecting him from the house, but all in a moment she threw her whole weight upon him with such violence that he stumbled and fell. Before he could recover he found the door closed upon him and bolted. He heard hasty steps in the inner room and the dragging across the floor of some heavy piece of furniture, which was presently pushed against the door.

"Mrs. Whittle!" he called out, "what are you doing? Are you mad?"

Then came Betty's voice, harsh and broken: "I've got ye, Dick Tuffin! Ye can't get out; there's no window and no other door. I've got ye and I mean to keep ye! Ye've killed my husband — ye've made me a widow and my child an orphan — an' I'll not rest till I do the same by your wife and your child."

And then something else came battering up against the door. Dick had no doubt but that the barricade was now complete. He felt about him in the darkness, identifying shelves, one or two small barrels, a crock: he was in the buttery most likely. He might possibly force his way out; the bolt was in all probability not very strong, and once the door was opened he could soon do away with all other obstacles; but then he would have that fierce woman to encounter. He could not escape without doing her some hurt, and the awful face of the wounded man would again meet his gaze. Besides, of what use would it be to attempt to escape? He was well known in the place, and the police would soon track him.

He sat down, therefore, with the resignation of despair,

[146]

shivering from time to time, and straining his ears for every sound in the next room. He heard poor Jim groan now and then, and Betty speak to him in a voice of such yearning tenderness that it was scarcely recognisable as the same which had threatened himself a little while before. He thought of Betty as she had first come upon him, so young and gay in her pink dress, and with her yellow hair glancing in the sun, and of the child which he had so often dandled in his arms. Widow and orphan! Widow and orphan! And all because Dick Tuffin had gone out with a few idle chaps for a night's frolic. And then he thought of his own little woman at home: he seemed to see her in her "deep". And the little one, who would never be able to hold up his head because they hanged his father.

Thus did he muse very sorrowfully until slumber overtook him in that inexplicable fashion with which it will sometimes come upon the weary and anxious of heart. And he slept until the grey light of morning began to creep through the chinks of the barricaded door.

He heard voices in the adjoining room — men's voices, and Betty's; then the tread of feet walking in unison. The little stairs creaked; the heavy footfalls now tramped in the room overhead, then descended again, and crossed the kitchen. Now the folks were leaving the house; he could hear them clattering down the path, and caught the swing of the gate.

"It's all over," he said to himself, "they've carried the poor chap upstairs."

A sudden numbness came upon him: it was true, then, and not a bad dream. Poor Jim Whittle was dead, and

[147]

he, Dick, had killed him; and now Betty would give him up to the police, and he would be tried and convicted and hanged.

Dick was not very learned in the statutes of his country, and had no manner of doubt that since the keeper had been killed in struggling with him — by his hand, it might be said, for the gun had gone off owing to Dick's endeavour to wrench it away — he would have to pay the full penalty of the law. To be hanged by the neck until he was dead. He put his hand to his throat, and drew a long sobbing breath.

After what seemed an interminable time, he heard once more the sound of voices in the kitchen — a man's voice and Betty's — then a quick firm step crossing the room to the house-door, and finally the retreating sounds of a horse's feet. Then there was a scraping and bumping of furniture; the rim of light which had been perceptible but half-way down the door suddenly lengthened, the bolt grated in its hasps, and in another moment Betty stood before him.

Dick had been so long imprisoned in the darkness that at first he could hardly bear the flood of wintry light which burst upon him. And there, in the midst of it, was the woman, with so bright a face that he could scarce credit his eyes. She stretched out both hands to him and cried: —

"He be to live! Doctor says he be to live!" Her voice faltered and broke, the tears leaped from her eyes. "Thank God!" she cried. "Oh, thank God! He'll live! My Jim's to live!"

[148]

Dick came staggering forth from his cell. His brown face was blanched to a sickly pallor; he trembled in every limb. Choking back her sobs, Betty again extended her hand to him, and he wrung it; but, turning from her, he leaned against the wall, hiding his face. His shoulders were heaving.

"Doctor says he'll not die," pursued Betty betwixt laughing and crying. "He's young and strong, he says, and he'll get over it. 'We'll get as much lead as we can out of him,' says doctor, 'and he'll carry the rest quite comfortable, as many another has done before him.' "

She laughed a feeble, wavering laugh that ended in a sob. "He said we'd best get him upstairs and put him to bed," continued Betty. "Stubbs and another man come up from the village, so they carried him up; and doctor's been with him a long time, and he's sleepin' now."

She told her tale brokenly, with a little gasp between each word; but Dick made no comment. Presently he turned round again, his face still working.

"Mrs. Whittle," he said unsteadily, "I'd like ye to hear me say so solemn as I can, as I'll never lay another finger on any creature in the woods. I'll never touch another
feather ——"

"Oh, it's all right, it's all right!" interrupted she quickly. "I'd like ye to hear me say summat too. I was mad last night, but I bain't so hard-hearted as I made out. Even if my Jim had died I wouldn't never ha' — I wouldn't ha' made a widow of your poor wife, nor yet an orphan o' the baby."

[149]

THE WOLD STOCKIN'.

FARMER HUNT stood leaning over his farmyard gate with the reflective, and at the same time pleasantly expectant, expression of the man who awaits at any moment a summons to dinner. To him, picking her steps cautiously down the muddy lane which led to his premises, came old Becky Melmouth, her skirts tilted high and an empty basket on her arm. Farmer Hunt nodded at her good-humouredly, and hailed her as soon as she was within hearing.

"What!" cried he. "Have ye brought me another of 'em?"

"I've a-brought ye two," returned Becky triumphantly. "But maybe you're too busy to attend to me just now," she added, with a glance that was half apologetic and half appealing.

"Oh, I can spare a minute for that," said the farmer good-naturedly. "Brewery hooter's not gone yet, and we don't have dinner till one. Step in, Mrs. Melmouth."

He preceded her into the house, and led the way to a small parlour, empty save for a large yellow cat which lay curled up on the hearthrug. With a mysterious air which assorted with the cautious glance thrown round by Becky as she closed the door, he proceeded to unlock a large oak

[150]

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

chest, and thrusting in his hand, drew forth a faded worsted stocking. As he handed this to the old woman the contents chinked with a portentous sound. Mrs. Melmouth's eyes glistened, and her rosy wrinkled face wreathed itself with smiles, as she slowly undid the knot at the upper end, and thrust in her hand. A further chinking sound ensued, and she looked jubilantly up at the farmer.

"There be a lot on 'em now," she remarked.

"Ah, sure!" he agreed. "An' you be bringin' two shillin' more, you do say?"

"Two shillin' an' a thruppenny bit," corrected Becky gleefully. "I be doin' uncommon well wi' my eggs an' chicken jist now."

"Dear heart alive! Keep the thruppence, 'ooman!" cried Mr. Hunt, with a certain amount of impatience. "It 'ull maybe buy you a relish of some sort as 'ull make ye fancy your victuals more. I reckon you do scrimp too much."

Becky pursed up her lips and shook her head.

"I'd sooner save it," said she. "Can I have the book, sir."

"Ah, sure ye can," returned the farmer, and, after rummaging a moment in the chest, he produced a small account-book with a pencil attached to it by means of a much-worn bit of string.

Becky meanwhile had been fumbling for her spectacles, and having now assumed them, she proceeded to enter the sum she had so proudly mentioned, to her banking account.

[151]

"How much does that make?" she added, peering up at Mr. Hunt through her glasses; her toothless gums parted in a smile which was already rapturous.

"Let me see," returned he, taking the book from her hand; "last time I reckoned it up there was forty pound in it, an' you've a-been here twice since — and again to-day. You've got in that there wold stockin', Mrs. Melmouth, forty pound four shillin' an' ninepence. It do do ye credit," he added handsomely; "ah! that it do. 'Tisn't a many hard-workin' body same as yourself would put by half so much. Ye've put in over nine pound since I took charge of it for ye."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"An' that's ten year ago come Michaelmas," said Becky, with modest pride. "But Melmouth an' me had been savin' for thirty year afore that."

"An' you yourself 'ull go on savin' for another thirty year, I shouldn't wonder," said Mr. Hunt, with a jovial laugh. "There ye be so strong upon your legs as ever you was, an' never sick nor sorry, be ye?"

"Well, not to speak on, thanks be," responded Becky. "But I could feel a deal easier-like in my mind if I could settle who it's all to go to when I be gone. I be puzzled what to do — ah! that I be. Thicky wold stockin' do lay upon my heart jist same as a lump o' lead."

"It didn't ought to be such a trouble to ye," said Mr. Hunt. "Divide it, Mrs. Melmouth. Divide it fair and square among your nevvies and nieces."

"No," cried Mrs. Melmouth, shaking her head vehemently and sucking in her breath at the same time. "No-o-o, sir, 'twouldn't never do, that wouldn't. It must

[152]

go all in a lump. Melmouth and me settled it that way years an' years ago. He'd save a shillin', d'ye see, an' I'd scrape together another to put to it, an' so we'd go on — for a rainy day, he'd say – but no rainy day ever did come ——"

"And what a good thing that was," chimed in the farmer; "there isn't many folks can say the same."

"Very like there bain't. Thanks be, as I do say, Mester Hunt; thanks be for all mercies! But there 'tis, d'ye see." Here her face assumed an anxious expression and she dropped her voice cautiously. "Who's it to go to? Rector do tell I, I ought to be makin' my will."

"True enough," said Mr. Hunt judiciously; "so you ought, Becky, so you ought."

"Well, but," resumed Mrs. Melmouth, "who's to have it? Melmouth, he wer' set on its going in a lump. Says he often an' often, 'Let it go in a lump, Becky, whatever you do do. Settle it as do like' — he did say — 'for the dibs belongs to both on us equal. Let Simon (that's my nevvy) have 'em, or let 'em go to Rosy' — Rosy be his sister's oldest maid — 'but don't divide 'em,' says he; 'let 'em go in a lump.' "

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

Here Becky paused, and the farmer looked at her in silence, scratching his jaw in a non-committal manner.

"Sometimes," resumed Becky, "it do seem as if 'twould be right to leave it to Simon, him bein' a man an' my own flesh-an'-blood. That there bit o' money — 'twas me first had the notion o' puttin' it by, and, as Melmouth did often use to say, there couldn't be no savin' done in the house wi'out I put my shoulder to the wheel. But, there! Rosy

[153]

— Melmouth was oncommon fond o' Rosy's mother, and o' Rosy herself when she was a little maid."

"Ah! you haven't seen Mrs. Tuffin an' her family since they shifted to Sturminster?" put in the farmer as she paused.

Mrs. Melmouth shook her head.

"I often wish I could," she said; "but 'tis so far."

"An' have ye seen Simon?" inquired the farmer. "He be a dairy chap, bain't he? — 'tis some time since he went to service."

"Ah! he've a-got a very good place t'other side o' Darchester. He do write beautiful letters to my sister at Christmas. There, they be jist same's as if they come out of a book."

"P'r'aps they are out of a book," suggested Mr. Hunt. "There did use to be a book about letter-writin' when I was a young chap; but what it wanted to say was never same as what I wanted to say, and my mother — poor soul! couldn't spell the long words, so I did give up using it. But since ye haven't seen either of these two young folks for so long, Mrs. Melmouth, why not ax 'em both to come and stop wi' ye, an' see which ye do like the best? You'd soon find out then what they was both made on, an' I'd pick out the one as did please ye most to leave the stockin' to."

"Well, there, that's a notion," said Becky reflectively. "I mid do that, I mid very well do that. Easter week, Simon mid very well get a holiday — an' Rosy — I mid ask her mother to spare her to me at the same time."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Do!" said Farmer Hunt encouragingly. "I'll reckon ye'll find 'tis a very good notion."

[154]

"I reckon I will — and thank you, Farmer, for puttin' it into my mind. There, I should never ha' thought on't."

"Two heads is better than one, ye see," said Mr. Hunt.

And then he locked up the stocking again, handed Mrs. Melmouth her basket, and betook himself to his midday meal with the comfortable sensation which follows on a good-natured act that has cost nothing.

Mrs. Melmouth left the house and trudged homewards, revolving the new idea in her mind. Simon could have the back bedroom, and Rosy could sleep with her; 'twas a very good notion to have 'em both together; a man always gave a deal o' trouble in a house, and Rosy could help a bit. Not but what Simon must make himself useful too. His aunt privately resolved to hold over the setting of the potatoes until he came; the bit o' work he might do then would go a good way towards his keep, reflected the thrifty soul.

With much thought and care she penned her invitations that afternoon; they were brief and to the point, intimating in each case the writer's wish to become better acquainted with the young relative in question.

Rosy's answer came by return of post, written in a beautiful, round, clear hand which did credit to her schooling, and accepting with rapture. Simon's reply did not come to hand for two or three days. It was ill-spelt and ill-written on a somewhat dirty piece of ruled paper, which looked as if it had been torn off the bottom of a bill: —

"Dear Ant," it said, "i don't know if i can be spaired, but if the bos is willin i will cum. Yours truly nevew, S. FRY."

[155]

His aunt pursed up her lips as she perused this document.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"He mid ha' taken a bit more pains," she said to herself; "he ha'n't got this out of a book, anyhow."

It was possible, indeed, that even The Complete Letter-Writer did not contain a missive from a young man who had been asked to spend his holidays with an aunt in the country, and that Simon, in consequence, was thrown on his own resources.

"But he don't seem so very anxious to come," she thought. "He mid ha' said 'Thank ye', too — Rosy did seem to be far more thankful. But Simon — p'r'aps he means better nor what he says."

With this charitable reflection Becky laid aside the letters and went to feed her chickens.

Rosy, who was living at home, and in consequence not tied down to any particular date, arrived a day before the other guest. She was a pretty girl of the dark-haired, clear-skinned type so often to be seen in Dorset; her eyes were brown like her hair, and her complexion matched her name to a nicety. The carrier dropped her and her tin box at the corner of the lane which led to Mrs. Melmouth's cottage, and she came staggering down to her aunt's door bent in two beneath the weight of her belongings. Mrs. Melmouth stood on the threshold and watched her.

"That's right," she remarked, as the girl set down her trunk and straightened herself, breathless and laughing, "I be main glad to see ye. Ye be sich a handy maid, my dear. There, I declare ye've just come in nice time to get the tea."

[156]

Now Rosy, who was tired and thirsty after her long jolting in the carrier's van, had half-expected to find tea ready. She felt a little bewildered and slightly annoyed on being sent first to the well and then to the wood-shed, and then having to reach down the best china from the top shelf, and, moreover, to dust it, conscious all the time of wearing her best frock with sleeves too tight at the wrist to turn up comfortably. It was a very crestfallen Rosy indeed who finally sat down to partake of that particularly well-earned cup of tea.

But Mrs. Melmouth was radiant.

"To-morrow," said she, "I'll get ye to make that there back room ready for my nevvy."

"Your nephew?" echoed Rosy, somewhat taken aback. It had been well enough surmised by the Tuffin family that Aunt Becky had a tidy sum put by, though they were as ignorant of the precise amount as of the receptacle in which she had stored it. The invitation to Rosy had awakened certain half-formed hopes in the girl's own breast, as well as in those of her parents, and she looked very blank at the announcement that a rival aspirant was so soon to come upon the scene.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Melmouth, stirring her tea vigorously, "my nevvy, Simon Fry. He be comin' to spend his hollerday here. That room 'ull want a good doin' out," she continued placidly, "an' there's a lot o' wold things there as 'ull have to be shifted afore you can get to work. But ye can get up pretty early — it'll be ready time enough, I dare say. He'll not be here much afore tea-time."

Rosy had formed certain private plans as to the disposal

[157]

of her Good Friday; there were friends of her mother's to visit, old playmates of her own to look up — these, being of the same age as herself, would doubtless have some little jaunt in view. And now the whole day was to be spent in cleaning up for Simon Fry. Simon, who was nephew by blood to Aunt Becky, while she was only niece by marriage — there could not be much doubt as to who would prove the favourite. Rosy felt she had been inveigled from her home on false pretences; it was not out of affection that Mrs. Melmouth had sent for her, but simply to secure her help with the housework and to make her wait upon Mr. Simon Fry.

Her aunt glanced at her sharply as she flushed and bit her lip, but made no remark; and presently Rosy regained her good-humour.

For was it not the sweetest of spring evenings, and were not the thrushes singing in the wood just behind the cottage, and were there not primroses in bloom on either side of the path that led to the gate? Rosy could see them through the open door and fancied she could smell them, and the breeze that lifted her curly hair from her brow was refreshing after her stuffy drive and recent labours. She had come from a back

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

street in Sturminster, where the air was not of the same quality, and the surroundings far less inviting.

“ ’Tis nice to live in the country, aunt,” said she with a bright smile.

Next morning she rose with the lark, and being strong and capable had got Mr. Simon’s room into excellent order before breakfast. As she made the bed she could not resist giving a vicious thump or two to the pillow.

[158]

“Set ye up, indeed,” she murmured. “Ye may make your own bed arter this, Mr. Dairy Chap!”

If she had hoped that her matutinal labours would leave her free for the remainder of the day she was disappointed. Mrs. Melmouth gave her a pressing invitation to assist her at the wash-tub, having, as she informed her with an engaging smile, expressly saved up the dirty linen for her that week.

“To wash on Good Friday!” exclaimed Rosy, aghast. “Dear, to be sure, aunt, ’tis the unluckiest thing you can do.”

“Unlucky? Fiddlesticks!” retorted Mrs. Melmouth. “A good day for a good deed — so say I.”

Rosy therefore remained immersed in suds during the greater part of that day; and though at first she could have cried with vexation, she soon found herself amused by the old woman’s talk; and with every fresh excursion to the hedge her spirits went up. The air was so fresh, the sunshine so bright, the clean, wet linen smelt quite nice, she thought, here in the country. Then the hedge itself, with its little red leaf-buds gaping here and there so as to show the crumpled-up baby leaves within — it had an attraction of its own; and she could never be tired of looking at the primroses that studded the bank beneath.

As she stood by the hedge on one occasion after having tastefully disposed the contents of a basket on its prickly surface, she was hailed by a voice from the road.

“Be this Widow Melmouth’s?”

The girl peered over the hedge at the speaker, her curly hair flapping in the breeze, her cheeks pinker than ever,

[159]

partly from her recent exertions, partly from excitement. There stood a stalwart young countryman in corduroys and leggings, a bundle in one hand, a stout stick in the other. He had a brown, good-humoured face, with twinkling blue eyes, and a smile that displayed the most faultless teeth in the world.

"This be Widow Melmouth's, bain't it?" he repeated, altering the form of his question.

"It be," returned Rosy; then she nodded towards the house. "My aunt's inside," said she.

Both, from opposite sides of the hedge, directed their steps towards the gate.

"Your aunt?" said the young man. "Then we be cousins, I suppose?"

And thereupon as each paused beside the gate, and before Rosy had time to realise his intentions, he leaned across and kissed her.

"How dare you!" cried Rosy, springing back and rubbing her cheek vigorously, while tears of anger started to her eyes. "How dare you, Mr. Fry? Cousins, indeed! We be no such thing, and I'll trouble you not to take liberties. You'll find your aunt indoor."

With that she stalked back to her wash-tub.

"He's come," she announced as she passed Mrs. Melmouth, who was engaged in rinsing out a few fine things in a crock.

"Who? Simon! I'm glad to hear it. Ye'd best come out a minute and make acquaintance."

"I've made quite acquaintance enough," retorted Rosy, plunging her arms into the suds. "He's an impudent chap!"

[160]

"I'll go warrant you are a bit jealous," said Mrs. Melmouth, and with a chuckle she went forth to greet her guest.

Indeed, from the very first it seemed evident that Rosy had good cause for jealousy. Mrs. Melmouth seemed never tired of commenting on Simon's likeness to her

family, prefacing her remarks with the assertion that she had always been dearly fond of Sister Mary. She further observed two or three times during the course of the evening that blood was certainly thicker than water, and that a body should think o' their own afore lookin' round for other folks. Poor Rosy, hot and tired after her exertions at the wash-tub, took these hints in rather evil part; not, indeed, that she was of a grasping nature, but that she had an indefinable feeling of having been unfairly dealt with.

Simon, however, saw nothing amiss; it was apparent that he looked upon his visit solely and wholly as an "outing," and had no ulterior views as to his aunt's testamentary dispositions. If he had ever heard of her savings he had evidently forgotten about them; he had left home young, and, except for the wonderful epistolary effort which he sent to his mother each Christmas, corresponded little with his family. He admired Rosy very much, and could not understand why she was so short in her speech and stand-off in her manner. It was perhaps her repellent tone and evident moodiness which caused Mrs. Melmouth to lay so much stress on Simon's various good qualities.

During the course of the evening young Fry remarked with a yawn and a stretch that he intended to have a good sleep on the morrow.

[161]

"Jist about," he added emphatically. "Ah! 'twill be summat to hear clock strikin' and to turn over warm an snug thinkin' I needn't get up to drive up the cows. To-morrow's Saturday, too — if I were yonder I'd ha' had to clean out fifteen pigstyes afore breakfast."

"Think of that!" said Mrs. Melmouth. " 'Tater-settin's different, bain't it? Ye wouldn't mind so much gettin' up a bit early to set 'taters — would ye, Simon?"

Simon's jaw dropped, and he looked ruefully at his relative.

"I thought I wer' goin' to have a real hollerday for once," he said hesitatingly. "There, if you do want me to do any little job for ye in a small way I don't mind doin' of it. But settin' 'taters! You've a goodish bit o' ground, an' there is but the two days — I did look to have my sleep out to-morrow," he concluded desperately.

"I did count on ye," persisted Mrs. Melmouth mildly. "Ah! so did I. Said I to myself, 'I'll save up them 'taters 'gainst the time my nevvy do come' — I says. 'He be

a good-natured young man,' I says, 'and I know he will do what I do ax him.' 'Tis beautiful weather for early risin', Simon, my dear, and you'll feel the air so nice and fresh while you're workin'. I'll have a dew-bit ready for ye. Ye won't disapp'int me, I'm sure."

"Oh! I'll not disapp'int ye," returned Simon dolefully. "I can't work on Sunday, of course," he added, brightening up a little. "That's summat, an' if I work real hard to-morrow I mid have a chance o' gettin' off a bit on Monday. Where be the 'taters, aunt? If we was to cut up some o' the sets to-night, we'd get on faster to-morrow."

[162]

"Ah, to be sure," agreed his aunt with alacrity. "I'll fetch a basket of 'em in a minute, an' Rosy there can help ye. She'll be busy to-morrow cleanin' up indoor; but she'll give you a hand to-night."

But Rosy now felt the time had come for her to assert herself. She glanced at the drawerful of stockings which lay on the chair beside her, and then raised her eyes to her aunt's face.

"I know nothin' about cuttin' up sets," said she, "an' I don't fancy sich work. I've got all this darnin' to do. That's enough for anybody, I think."

"Oh, very well," responded Mrs. Melmouth with some dudgeon. "I'll help you then, Simon. I'll fetch 'taters, an' then I'll help you."

When she returned she found Simon and Rosy sitting as she had left them, in absolute silence, Simon drumming on the table and looking dubiously at Rosy, who darned away without raising her eyes.

"There's an odd stocking here," she remarked snappishly, as her aunt sat down. "What am I to do with that?"

Mrs. Melmouth, gazing at her sternly, determined to profit by the opportunity her niece had unconsciously presented to her, and to give her the lesson she deserved.

"That there stockin'," she said impressively, as she took it from the heap and held it up for their inspection, "that there stockin' is more vallyable nor it do look. It is feller to one what's worth farty pound."

Both exclaimed and stared.

"I've always kep' it for that," resumed Mrs. Melmouth.

[163]

" 'Tis nigh upon farty year old — an' the feller to it is worth farty pound. Your uncle and me did begin savin' the very year we was first married, an' I've a-gone on ever since. When Melmouth died there was over thirty pound in it. I didn't like to have so much money about, livin' here all alone, so I axed Farmer Hunt to take charge on't for me. That's ten year ago. Well, since then I've a-gone on pinchin' an' scrapin', a shillin' here, a sixpence there, till
I've got together nigh upon ten pound more."

"Well, I never heerd o' such a thing!" exclaimed Simon heartily. "Ye must have been wonderful clever an' contrivin', Aunt Becky!"

"Ah, I'll take that much credit to myself," replied his aunt. "I do truly think I was. But there it be now, an' it be all to go in a lump to one o' you two. I mid as well tell you straight out. 'Tis to go in a lump — Melmouth an' me settled it that way. 'We saved it between us, an' you can leave it,' he says, 'either to my niece or to your nevvy — but it must go in a lump.' "

"Well, I'm sure!" said Simon; and then he looked dubiously at Rosy, who was holding her curly head very high. " 'Twas very well said o' the wold gentleman," he continued lamely.

"I couldn't make up my mind no ways," resumed Mrs. Melmouth, "till at last I wer' advised to have you both here together and see for myself which I do like the best. So if you do have to make yourselves a bit obligin', it'll p'r'aps be worth your while. Ye mid be sure my choice will fall on the most obligin'."

Rosy smiled disdainfully and returned to her darning.

[164]

It was easy to see, she thought, on whom the choice would fall.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

Simon eyed her askance, realising now the reason of the girl's evident aversion to himself, but he made no comment beyond an occasional ejaculation under his breath. "Farty pound! Well now! I'm sure 'twas very well thought on," and the like.

Next morning, just when Simon's slumbers were at their deepest and sweetest, he was awakened by an imperative hammering and scratching at the partition which separated his room from that of Mrs. Melmouth; and thereupon dutifully, if somewhat reluctantly, he arose, and soon afterwards found his way to the garden.

Early as it was, Rosy was already at work shaking sundry bits of carpet, worn almost threadbare and terribly dusty.

"Let me give you a hand," exclaimed Simon gallantly. "Sich work's too hard for a maid."

"No, thank ye," returned Rosy sharply. "I shan't get much credit anyway; but what I said I'd do, I'll do," and she gave another vicious shake to the ragged carpet.

"I be pure sorry you should think I want to rob ye of any credit," observed Simon mournfully. "There, you do seem to ha' turned again' me terrible; and 'tis quite otherway wi' me — I did like 'ee from the first."

"No thanks to ye, then!" retorted Rosy; and, snatching up a stick, she began to belabour the mat with so meaning an air that Simon felt as if the onslaught were committed on his own shoulders.

"I wish you'd get on with your work," she exclaimed

presently. "You're the favourite, and you'll get the reward, but you mid jist so well do summat to earn it."

"Now look 'ee here," said Simon, and his usually merry eyes flashed angrily; "this here bit o' business bain't to my likin' no ways. What do I care for the wold stockin'? I can earn enough to keep myself — ah, that I can — an' I could keep a wife, too, if I wanted one; an' what's farty pound? The wold 'ooman had best keep it to be buried with."

"For shame!" cried Rosy. " 'Tis pure ongrateful of ye! to speak so, and Aunt Becky so took up wi' ye."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

"Well, I can't help it," returned the young man bluntly. "The job bain't to my likin'. I did come out for a hollerday, and here I be ordered to set 'taters — an' what's more, I get nothin' but cross looks and sharp words what I don't deserve."

"I'm sure your aunt speaks civil enough," said Rosy in a somewhat mollified tone.

"An' so she mid," responded he promptly. "She mid very well be civil when she do expect so much. But there's others what's uncivil, and 'tis that what I can't abide. I've a good mind," he added gloomily, "to cut an' run — yes, I have," he cried resolutely. "I'd sooner be cleanin' out pigstyes nor be treated so unkind as you do treat I. But for that matter, my mother 'ull be glad enough to see I. I'll step home-along — that's the very thing I'll do; I'll step home-along."

"Oh, but what will Aunt Becky say?" cried Rosy in alarm.

"Aunt Becky be blowed!" exclaimed Simon with decision.

[166]

"Let her say what she pleases. I'll leave her an' you to make it up together. 'Tis more nor flesh an' blood can stand to be treated as you've a-treated I since I did come to this house."

"Oh, please — please don't go!" gasped the girl. "There, I really didn't mean — I — I — I only thought my aunt a bit unjust."

"Well, and very like she was," said Simon magnanimously. "I think the money what was saved out o' the man's wage did ought to go to the man's folk. You've the best right to that there stockin', Miss Rosy, and I'll not bide here to stand in your light."

This was heaping coals of fire on Rosy's pretty head with a vengeance. She looked up in Simon's face with a smile, though there were tears in her eyes, and she impulsively dropped the carpet and held out two little sunburnt hands.

"Oh, please, Mr. Fry," she said pleadingly, "please, Simon, do stay — do 'ee now. I'll — I'll — I'll never be unkind again!"

"Is that a true promise, my maid?" asked Simon very tenderly.

Mrs. Melmouth, chancing at that moment to emerge from her house with the view of ascertaining how the young folks' labours were progressing, discovered them

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTINI

standing in this most compromising attitude; Simon clasping both Rosy's hands, Rosy looking earnestly into his face; and thereupon, true to her instincts, rated the couple soundly for their idleness. In two minutes Rosy had returned to her carpet with a flaming face, and Simon was walking

[167]

slowly towards the potato-plot. As their aunt, still full of virtuous indignation, was returning to the house, her nephew's tones fell distinctly on her ear: —

"How would it be if I was to give you a hand wi' they things first, my maid, and then you could be helping me wi' the sets?"

"Well, I declare," commented Mrs. Melmouth, stopping short, "I believe they've started coortin'. It do really seem like it. Well, I never!"

She was turning about in preparation for a fresh outpouring of wrath, when she was struck by a sudden idea, and paused just as Rosy, with a nervous glance towards herself, walked sheepishly up to Simon, trailing the carpet behind her.

"We'd certainly get on much faster," she said, speaking ostensibly to Simon, but really for her aunt's benefit.

"I d' 'low ye would," said Mrs. Melmouth; and suddenly her brow cleared, and she turned once more to go indoors with a good-humoured smile. "I d' 'low you'll get on fast enough — wi' the coortin'. But that 'ud be the best way o' settlin' it," she added to herself — "I'll leave the wold stockin' in a lump to 'em both."

[168]

A WOODLAND IDYLL.

IT was the first Monday of August; the shops were shut in the little town of Branston, but life in the neighbouring villages was more astir than usual, for the men were for the most part working in their gardens and the women stood at their doorways or by their gates to view the passing vehicles. These were not so numerous after all — one might never have known it was a Bank Holiday — yet every now and then a brake or a

wagonette laden with noisy folk rattled by, leaving a trail of dust to mark its progress that lingered in a kind of cloud about the hedgerows long after it had passed.

Two miles away on the downs, another kind of haze caught the eye of Robert Formby as he strode across them, the golden glimmering haze which indicates intense heat; the sun had not yet set, but its rays struck the short herbage as though they must scorch it, and made the white streak of road which threaded the undulating tract positively glitter. But yonder was Oakleigh Wood, heavily green in its luxuriance of summer foliage. As Robert swung along, with the fierce sunshine beating on his brown neck and hands, he pictured it to himself: first, the grove of firs with all its spicy scents streaming forth at this hour, then the open space where the rabbits would presently

[169]

frolic, then, stretching away, the wide dense coppice of hazel and oak and ash. He thought of the broad drives where the feet sank deep in cool lush grass, and of the narrow and more secret paths between serried green walls, where scarce a single burning ray might penetrate, though far, far away at the very end of a long vista, a peep of luminous sky was to be had.

Robert dwelt on it all, not as a poet or an artist would have dwelt on it, revelling in its beauty, but as a man thinks of familiar and undeniably pleasant things.

The young gamekeeper shifted his gun to the other shoulder to ease himself, and swung his now disengaged arm, whistling as he walked. Oakleigh Wood was situated on a Dorset down, but Robert Formby was a North-countryman. He had probably Danish blood in his veins, for his big, loose-limbed figure, his blue eyes and yellow hair and beard, would seem to belong to the race; his complexion, too, had been fair but was now bronzed, though when, impatient of the heat, he threw open the collar of his flannel shirt, the lower part of his throat showed white as milk.

A very energetic, sensible, clear-headed fellow was Robert, full of zeal, and most laudably anxious to do his duty. It was this zealous anxiety which brought him to Oakleigh Wood on this particular occasion. It was just possible that evil-disposed persons might take advantage of the universal relaxation to trespass in these coverts; it behoved Robert to see to that, he conceived.

Here were the woods at length, the undulating outlines of which had wooed him from afar with such enticing promise;

[170]

Robert's feet fell almost noiselessly on a crumbling carpet of pine-needles, and he paused a moment to sniff the aromatic scent approvingly; then he went on. Now the green depths engulfed him on every side; all was gentle gloom, exquisite undefinable fragrance; silence the more palpable because of the never-ceasing stir which seemed to pervade it. What a variety, what a multiplicity of scarcely perceptible noises go to make up the breathing of the wood! The flapping of leaf against leaf, the swaying of twigs, the rattle of falling nuts or sticks, the falling apart of fronds of moss, the dripping of tiny drops of dew or rain, the roamings of minute insects — each sound infinitesimal in itself, yet repeated at thousands and millions of points — in this harmony of life and motion, combining with but never subduing the stillness of the forest, lies its magnetism.

Sharper sounds break the all-pervading hush from time to time without disturbing it; the cooing of a dove, the flight of blackbird or thrush, the tapping of a woodpecker, the croaking of a frog, the hasty passage of a mouse through dry leaves; while the barking of a dog in some distant village, and the clanging of sheep-bells far away seem nevertheless to form part of the mysterious whole.

Robert pushed his hat to the back of his head, rested his gun against a forked sapling of birch, and, taking out his pipe, was proceeding to fill it, when he suddenly started and threw back his head, inhaling the air with a frown. A certain acrid penetrating odour was making its way towards him, drowning the more delicate essences of the forest growths.

[171]

" 'Tis wood smoke!" said Robert, and then his brow cleared. "Mayhap somebody is burnin' weeds nigh to this place," he said, and went on filling his pipe.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

But before lighting it he once more raised his head and shot a suspicious glance down the long green vista which faced him: a faint bluish haze seemed to cling to the over-arching boughs of the hazels. It was not the mist of evening, for it proceeded from a certain point about halfway up the narrow stretch, and, moreover, as Robert gazed, little fresh wreaths came eddying forth to join the ethereal cloud afore-mentioned. Restoring his pipe to his pocket, and catching up his gun, Robert strode off in this direction as rapidly as the narrowness of the path and the breadth of his shoulders would admit of. He had indeed to proceed in a curious sidelong fashion, turning now the right shoulder forward, now the left, so that he looked almost as if he were dancing. The cloud of smoke increased in volume as he advanced, and presently he could actually hear the hissing of flames and the crackling and snapping of twigs; and now bending low, and peering beneath the interlaced branches, he could see the fire itself. A rather large beech-tree stood in the middle of the massed saplings, with a small open space around it. In the centre of this space a fire was burning briskly, and by the side of the fire a girl sat with her elbows resting on her knees and her chin sunk in her hands. Her hat was hung on one of the beech-boughs, and a small open basket lay beside her, from beneath the raised lid of which protruded the brown spout of a teapot.

"My word!" said Robert to himself.

[172]

Lowering his head he made a dive beneath the branches, pushing some aside and breaking down others in his impetuous advance, and in another moment, straightening himself, he stood beside the girl, frowning at her sternly. She raised her head and looked at him with the action and something of the expression of a startled deer; indeed her full dark eyes seemed to carry out the comparison. She was a very pretty girl — so much Robert saw at a first glance, yet the sight of her left him entirely unmollified.

"What are you doing here?" he inquired roughly. "You're trespassin' — d'ye know that? I've a good mind to summons ye!"

The girl scrambled to her feet; she was slender and tall, her clinging pink cotton gown defining the shapeliness of her form.

"I wasn't doin' any harm," she returned with a pout.

Robert strode across the intervening space, and kicked wrathfully at the fire which was cunningly composed of sticks and fir-cones.

"Oh, don't!" cried the girl eagerly, "don't! You'll spoil my 'taters!"

" 'Taters indeed!" retorted Robert, but he drew back the great boot which he had uplifted for the second time.

"Who gave you leave to come picnicking up here? I s'pose you're expectin' a lot more trespassin' folks same as yourself?"

"No," she said, shaking her head sorrowfully. "I was just a-havin' a little party for myself — I didn't think no harm."

[173]

"A tea-party all to yourself," said Formby, and in spite of him, face and voice relaxed, "why, that's dull work!"

"Everybody do seem to be merry-makin' to-day," she went on, with a little toss of the head that contradicted a certain quiver in her voice. "I thought I'd come out too, and take my tea here. I don't hurt nothin'. I d' 'low the wild things do know me quite well. I often walk here of an evenin' and the rabbits scarce run out of my road. I do whoot like the owls and they do answer me back, and bats come flyin' round my head — I often fancy I could catch 'em if I had a mind to."

"Do ye?" said Robert.

He was bending down, resting a hand on either knee, and peering up at her with a twinkle in his eye. She nodded, and dropping on her knees beside the fire began to draw together the embers with a crooked stick, and to turn over the potatoes.

"They be very near done now," she said; "this one be quite done — will ye try it?"

Sitting back upon her heels she held it out to him with a timid smile. Robert, shaking his head half-waggishly, half-dubiously, took it from her.

" 'Tisn't right, ye know," he protested, "nay, 'tisn't right. I didn't ought to be encouragin' of ye in such ways."

"I've got some salt here," cried she, rummaging in her basket and bringing forth a twisted paper which she unfolded and held out, poised on her little pink palm.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

Robert deliberately sat down, broke the potato in two, and dipped one of the smoking halves in the salt.

"Ye mustn't do this no more," he remarked severely;

[174]

"nay, I'm not encouragin' of ye, ye understand; 'tisn't allowed — this here's a wamin'." Here he took a bite out of the potato — "Ye can be summonsed next time."

The girl deposited the paper of salt upon the ground, and, extracting another potato from the ashes, proceeded to peel it deftly with a pocket-knife.

"Have ye got tea in that there basket?" inquired Robert, still sternly.

" 'Tisn't made yet," she replied, "but kettle 'ull boil in a minute." She pulled the basket towards her and unpacked it with great rapidity.

"So that's the kettle, is it?" commented Robert, as a sooty object came to light, partially enveloped in a newspaper. He weighed it in his hand. "There's nought in it — eh, I see you've got water in yon bottle. Shall I fill it?"

She nodded, and then making a pounce on a small bottle of milk, endeavoured to uncork it. As the cork did not yield, she was preparing to loosen it with her teeth when Robert interposed.

"Here, hand o'er! What mun ye go breakin' your teeth for," he inquired gruffly; "ye'll noan find it so easy to get more when they're gone — more o' the same mak' as how 'tis. They're as white as chalk — and chalk's easy broke."

He produced a large clasp-knife, and selecting a corkscrew from the multiplicity of small implements which were attached to it, drew out the cork with a flourish. But the sight of the knife, which had been a present from his former master, recalled graver thoughts, and it was in a harsh admonitory tone that he next spoke: —

[175]

" 'Tis all very well for once," he said; "this 'ere tayparty mun be overlooked for this time, I reckon; but there mun be no more on 'em. Do ye hear, lass? These 'ere woods is private, and Squire doesn't intend no young wenches to go trapesin' about in

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

’em o’ neets, talkin’ to the owls and that. I doubt ye don’t go lookin’ for bats and owls alone,” went on the keeper in a tone of ferocious banter. “I doubt some young chap ——”

“Oh, don’t!” interrupted she, flushing fiery red, “I can’t bear it!”

And to his surprise and distress she burst into tears.

“Eh, don’t ye cry, my lass!” he exclaimed with deep concern. “Whatever have I said to hurt ye? I ax your pardon. I meant no harm — no harm at all. Give over, there’s a good lass.”

The girl sobbed on, with averted face. Robert looked distractedly round, and his glance fell upon the kettle which was boiling cheerfully.

“She’d like her tea,” he said, confidentially addressing this kettle — “a sup o’ tea ’ull put her to rights. Come we’ll make it in a minute.”

He reached for the teapot, rinsed it, dropped the contents of another little twisted paper into it, and poured in the boiling water.

“Don’t fill it quite full,” said the girl, turning sharply round, and displaying a tear-stained face which was nevertheless alight with interest.

“Oh, mustn’t I fill it? I always fill mine right up to the brim.”

[176]

“Have you got nobody to do for you then?”

“Nay, I’m a single man. I have lodgin’s over yonder, but I do for myself mostly.”

He paused looking at the girl curiously. “You never told me your name,” he said.

“You did never ax me,” she said with a dawning smile. “My name’s Rebecca Masters. I live down there, just at the foot of the hill, wi’ my grandmother.”

“Father and mother livin’?” inquired Formby.

“No, they died when I was quite a little thing.”

“My father’s livin’ right enough,” he volunteered. “He’s a fine old chap, my father is.”

“You’re Keeper Formby, baint ye?” inquired Rebecca with interest.

"Eh! ye know me, do ye? A good few folks do, I doubt." Here Robert drew himself up; he felt what was due to himself as a public character and once more his voice took a graver inflection. "Now, see you, my lass, you mustn't coom here again."

"I'm to have nothin', an' to do nothin'," broke out Rebecca passionately. " 'Tis the only thing I care for, comin' here where I did use to walk when — when I was happy."

Robert paused with a potato midway to his mouth.

"Is he dead?" he inquired in a tone of respectful sympathy.

"Who?"

"Your young man."

"No," she returned sharply, adding unwillingly, as if in response to his expectant gaze, "he's gone away."

[177]

Robert pulled thoughtfully at his yellow beard, his blue eyes looking very kind and sympathetic the while.

"P'r'aps he'll coom back," he hazarded after a moment.

"No, no, never!" she cried brokenly then in a curiously hard voice and with a sudden flash in her eyes — "What do I care if he does? He's nothin' to me now — nothin'. He's gone an' left me wi'out so much as a word — just took an' walked off. And he've never wrote either — not so much as a word. He mid be dead only I do know he bain't."

Formby continued to contemplate her, still stroking that fine yellow beard of his.

"Poor lass! poor lass!" he said at last. "And 'tis a comfort to you, is it, to coom walkin' here? Well, see you, my dear, you can coom here as often as ye like about this time. I'm pretty often here mysel' then, and 'twouldn't be same thing as if you was trespassin'. Ye mustn't bring no young chaps here, though," he added after a pause. "I doubt they'll want to come, however little you might want them. You're a bonny lass — as bonny a lass as ever I see in all my days!"

She heaved an impatient sigh.

"I did tell 'ee plain as I don't want nobody," she cried. "Much good it do do me to be nice when ——"

"Is there no other man at all i' th' world?" inquired Robert.

"Not for me," returned Rebecca.

Kneeling up, she began hastily to collect the tea-things, and Robert, leaning forward, pushed them towards her with willing clumsy hands. Then he rose to his feet.

[178]

"I'm fain to hear ye say there's no other man, my wench," he said, "but p'r'aps somebody 'ull coom."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Somebody 'ull begin coortin' ye afore long," he returned with conviction; "it might just as well be me as another. If there's nobody else, why not me?"

Rebecca now rose to her feet.

"I don't want anybody," she said.

"Somebody 'ull coom," reiterated Robert, "an' why not me? Coom, my lass, I ax ye straight. Will ye give me the first chance? Honest now! I like ye very well, an' I doubt I'll soon like ye better. 'Tisn't in nature as a lass same as you can be for ever thinkin' of a chap as has showed no more feelin' nor your chap has. Ye must tak another soon or late. Tak' me — ye'll not rue it."

"I can't settle to do such a thing all in a hurry," cried Rebecca petulantly. "I've never set eyes on you before."

"Nor me on you," returned Robert, "but I feel as if I could like ye very well. Give me first chance — I don't ax for nought else. Let's walk a bit an' see how we get on; but you must give me your word not to take up wi' nobody else while I'm on trial."

"Oh, I can do that," said she, and suddenly began to laugh. The little white teeth which had already called forth Robert's admiration, showed bewitchingly; a dimple peeped out near the lip, another in the chin.

Robert gazed at her rapturously. "I like ye very well. Eh, my word, that I do! 'Tis a bargain — a proper bargain!"

He had possessed himself of one of her little sunburnt

[179]

hands, and was shaking it up and down; as she laughed on, he drew her to him suddenly; but at that she started back, striking out at him like a little wild cat.

"None of that," she cried, "I'll never ha' nothin' to say to ye, if you do try to do things like that."

"Eh, I ax your pardon," faltered Robert, much abashed. "I didn't mean no harm, my dear — 'tisn't reckoned no harm at all up i' th' North when folks begins coortin'. You did look so bonny — an' I just reckoned 'twould give us a good start like."

"I won't have it then!" she broke out violently.

She stooped over her basket, packing away the remainder of the tea-things with a certain amount of unnecessary clatter. Robert, whose proffered help was curtly declined, stood by dejectedly till she had concluded, when, snatching up the basket, she darted suddenly from his side, and bending her head rushed into the track. He immediately followed her, carrying her hat which she had left suspended on the branch.

"You're forgettin' this," he began diffidently. "Now then, lass, coom! This didn't ought to make no difference. Will ye gie me a straight answer?"

Rebecca had deposited her basket on the ground and was putting on her hat with trembling fingers.

"I'll think of it," she stammered. "You must be respectful though."

A dark flush overspread Robert's face.

"I didn't mean nought but what was respectful," he said, "and ye've no need to think so much as that cooms to. It must be Yes or No, I could never bear shilly-shally

[180]

work. Yes or No — take me or leave me — on trial of course. I only ax to be took on trial."

"Well, then, I will," she said in a low voice. "I d' 'low you are a good man, and as you do say I — I can't always be so lonesome."

She paused a moment with downcast eyes; then, taking up her basket again, turned away.

Robert stood stock still, watching her receding figure as it flitted away down the long alley. The sun had now set, and the woods were enveloped in even deeper mystery than that which had possessed them a little while ago; leafage and branch were inextricably mingled; yonder tiny object in the path might either be a rabbit or a stump; but Rebecca's light dress defined her flying figure amid the gloom which otherwise would have engulfed her. Her shape showed white at first, then grey, as it receded farther, until at last it stood out for a moment almost black against the still glowing peep of sky which showed between the over-arching boughs at the farther end; then it vanished altogether. Even then Robert remained gazing after her, and at length he heaved a deep sigh.

"Yon chap," he said, "him as was her sweetheart — I wonder if she was so stand-off wi' him."

The query seemed to open up an unpleasant train of thought; he struck at the sod with the heel of his heavy boot and frowned. "I'd ha' summat to say to him if ever I corned across him," he muttered; and then turned to continue on his beat.

"I never see a bonnier lass," he said presently in a softer tone; "poor lass — how pitiful she looked at me; I could

[181]

do wi' her very well — 'tis to be hoped as she'll mak' up her mind to do wi' me."

A bat twinkled round his head as he emerged into the open, a host of rabbits scurried away at his heavy footfall.

"And all they dumb things love her," meditated Robert. " 'Tis along of her bein' so innocent-like! Eh, she's a flower."

Soon he, too, had left the woods behind, and was marching across the solitary down, grey at this hour save on the upper slopes, where the short grass still caught some faint remnant of the rosy after-glow. Night creatures were stirring in every thicket that he passed, and as the dull thud of his step fell upon the resonant ground it caused a flutter and commotion amid the drowsy children of the day, which had taken shelter

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

there, deeming themselves secure from disturbance. A rustle of wings, a patter of tiny feet, a sleepy twitter, the shriek of a blackbird, the heavy beat of a startled pigeon's wings as it darted blindly from its ambush — Robert held on his way without noticing any of these things, and presently darkness and liberty reigned undisturbed in the many-peopled waste.

For many subsequent evenings he visited Oakleigh Wood at the specified time, but, though he patrolled it from end to end, and strained his eyes in vain for a glimpse of Rebecca Masters, not so much as a flutter of her skirts rewarded his patient gaze.

Then, one day he suddenly heard an unwonted noise proceed from a corner of the copse. An owl was hooting intermittently; every now and then there came a pause, and then the cry would be sent forth again. Now, though

[182]

the bats had been circling about for some time, it was as yet a little early for an owl to be abroad; and, struck by a sudden thought, Robert set off running in the direction whence the sound proceeded, imitating the call to the best of his ability. As he expected, he found Rebecca standing with her hands curved round her mouth, sending forth the eerie cry. Her back was towards him, and it was not until the ground vibrated beneath his rapid advance, that she perceived his advent.

"Dear, to be sure, how you did frighten me!" she cried, turning round with a little spring of terror.

"Did I?" said he. "You know you told me you often hooted to the owls and they answered ye back. I thought I'd answer ye — I thought I'd coom."

She did not speak, though he stood towering over her expectantly.

"Now I'm here must I bide?" he inquired.

"E-es, if you've a mind to."

He thrust his hands into his pocket and drew out a cluster of half-ripened nuts.

"Ye can bite into 'em," he said; "they'll not hurt your teeth."

Then he dived into his other pocket and held something towards her cautiously; curled up in his brown palm was a very small dormouse, sound asleep.

" 'Tis for you," he remarked briefly, "I've been carrying it about three days and more, knowin' as you'd a likin' for such things. 'Tis a mercy I've lit on ye at last, else it 'ud maybe be dead."

This was Robert Formby's mode of courting. It appeared

to be successful, for Rebecca looked up at him with a bright smile.

" 'Tis real good o' ye," she said. "There, I think it awful kind."

"I've got some shells at home," he went on, brightening up amazingly. "Do ye like shells?"

"Sea-shells?" she inquired.

"Ah! little shells as lays upo' the beach when tide goes down. I picked up a two-three handfuls when I wer' last at home."

Rebecca looked up from the dormouse, which she had been breathing upon to warm it, as it lay curled in her hand. "Is your home near the sea then?"

"Aye — right among the sand-hills. I used to hear tide come roarin' in last thing o' nights and first thing o' morns when I were a lad. My mother used to send me out to fetch in drift for our fire — there's always a lot o' wood an' chips an' straw an' stuff washed up upon the shore, an' I used to fill a basket in no time. Eh, in winter it used to be nippin' cold! Many a time I'd find my sticks all froze together. 'Tis pretty nigh always sharp up yonder; always a wind blowin' fresh and free and salty on your mouth."

"Be it a nice place?"

"Well, I think it bonny — not same as this is bonny, though. There's sand-hills runnin' all along the shore, some big and some little, wi' star-grass growin' over 'em. An' t'other side o' the hills there's the plain country — fields an' that. Soil's light, but crops does wonderful well, an' there's woods, and little dykes an' pits nigh to the woods —

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

eh, many's the big snig I've catched!" — he paused, rubbing his hand with retrospective relish — "but 'tisn't not to say bonny same as 'tis about here," he concluded.

"There, it do seem strange as I've never so much as had a sight o' the sea," said Rebecca. "They d' say there's a good view o' Poole Harbour from Bulbarrow, but I've never been there."

"Happen I might take ye there some day," suggested Robert. "Bulbarrow! that's not so far."

A certain startled look in the girl's eyes warned him that he was going too fast and he hastily changed the subject, embarking on a somewhat incoherent account of his childish adventures among the sand-hills. He went on to describe the dunes themselves more minutely, and then the river which ran along the shore so sluggishly that, however blue and clear the distant sea might be, the waves that broke upon the beach were always brown and muddy.

"That's not nice," said Rebecca.

"Nay," acquiesced Robert unwillingly; "nay, I suppose not, but I liked it well enough."

"Better than this?" asked the girl quickly.

The man's sea-blue eyes looked straight into her face.

"Not now," he said.

Next day when he came to Oakleigh Wood at the usual hour he made straight for the spot where he had heard the fictitious owl-hooting on the previous evening; and his heart leaped high when a repetition of the sound fell upon his ear. A few of his rapid strides brought him to the spot: Rebecca was standing beneath the beech tree, as before, but so as to face the path, and as he approached

she dropped her hand by her side with a little laugh.

"I knowed it was you," said Robert breathlessly.

"I did it a-purpose," said she.

His face lit up with tender triumph. It was as though some timid creature of the woods had been coaxed within reach of a friendly hand; its shyness was vanishing, but dared he as yet take hold?

He asked himself this question many times during their subsequent meetings; the girl would prattle to him confidently enough, and seemed interested in all his doings, past and present, but an impenetrable reserve took possession of her whenever he tried to speak about herself, and once when he offered to accompany her home, she curtly refused.

"Folks 'ud get talkin'," she said.

Midway in September, Robert thought it time to put matters on a more business-like footing. With every day that passed he had fallen more deeply in love, and it seemed to him only right that their intercourse should be recognised as courtship proper — the necessary preliminary to matrimony.

He approached the trysting-place with a serious face therefore, and, as was his way, came to the point at once.

"We've been walkin' nigh upon seven week now," he remarked. "Do ye think ye can do wi' me, lass?"

Rebecca turned sharply towards him with that frightened look in her eyes which he had learned to accept as a warning. This time, however, he was not to be deterred from his purpose, and went on, very gently but steadily: —

[186]

"Ye took me on trial, ye know. Will I do, think you?"

"Do for what?" she faltered.

"For a husband, my dear. Ye've no need to be scared. I don't want to hurry ye, but I think 'tis time to put the question straight. I've been coortin' you reg'lar. Coom, will ye wed me?"

"Oh, no," cried Rebecca, darting suddenly away from him, "no, no, never! I don't want to get married — I don't — I never said I would."

Robert followed her and took her gently by the shoulders.

"There! No need to be so scared, my wench. Nobody 'ull force ye — don't think it. I did but ax — but we'll say no more about it — not for a bit, till ye get more used to the notion. I'm content to bide as we are. There now! Give over tremblin'. I'll not hurt ye. See, you're as free as the birds."

He removed his hands from her shoulders and smiled: this woodland thing was only half-tamed after all; he must be patient with it still, but he dreamed of the time when it would come at his call and nestle in his breast.

Autumn advanced rapidly that year — a golden luxuriant autumn, ablaze with colour and lavish with fruit. The thorn-trees upon the downs were laden with berries, the bryony flung long graceful tendrils from side to side of the thickets, chains of transparent gold, bearing here a beryl, and there a topaz, and there a coral bead. The blackberry brambles displayed their wealth in more wholesale fashion, for their clusters were now entirely black and now red. The days were still hot enough to cause Robert to throw open coat and shirt collar when he crossed the down, but

the nights were cold; a thick dew coated the grass, almost a white frost. In the secret recesses of the copse, where the sun scarcely penetrated, lay silvery patches by day as well as by night.

One afternoon Robert came gaily to the accustomed meeting-place, but found no one there.

"I'm a bit early," he said to himself; "I'll have a look round and then come back. I think she'll wait — ah, I reckon she'd wait a bit for me now. She's gettin' used to me. I reckon she's gettin' to take to me."

Smiling to himself he left the wider track and turned aside into one of the narrower alleys before described. The leaves were yellowing here on either side; and the grass beneath his feet was covered with thick rime. As he edged himself along it, lost in meditation, he suddenly stopped short, gazing fixedly at the ground. Its hoary surface bore traces of recent footsteps: a man's footsteps — and a woman's. They stared up at Robert as it seemed to him, and all at once, though he had been glowing with health and happiness a moment before, he fell a-shivering.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

He knew the little foot that made those tracks — only the week before he had laughed admiringly as he had marked its impression in the dew. A little foot — and a great one side by side with it. A man's foot! How close they must have walked there in the narrow path!

Robert's shivering fit ended as suddenly as it had begun, and the blood coursed madly through his veins — hot enough now — boiling hot. His fingers closed tightly round his gun and he rushed forward, brushing aside the close-growing branches, on, on, never stopping, yet keeping his eyes

[188]

fixed all the time upon those tell-tale tracks. Now they were lost in one another, now they were interlaced, now quite distinct and separate, side by side. He stopped short when he came to the junction of the path with the wider one in which it merged, a path which traversed the wood from end to end. Robert cast a hasty glance to left and to right and stood transfixed. Yonder where the green roadway abutted on the down he saw two figures standing out dark against the lambent evening sky — a tall and slender woman, a taller man. As he gazed transfixed he saw the man stoop and gather the woman in his arms; and then the two parted, the man walking away across the grass, the woman turning to the right and disappearing into the wood.

"She's comin' to our beech-tree," said Robert to himself; "she's comin' to meet me."

And for the moment he saw the world red.

He too turned and began to stride fiercely towards the trysting-place. As he entered the wider track he stopped and looked to his gun. But one barrel was loaded. He twisted round his cartridge bag, and with impatient, trembling fingers found the cartridge for the other barrel.

He reached the beech-tree first and stood gripping his gun tight and glaring up the path, still through that red haze. All at once he saw her coming, very slowly, with her head bent.

Half-hidden by the tree-trunk he waited, motionless as a statue, for her to give the accustomed signal; at the first sound of it he would shoot her through the heart.

She came quite near, raised her head, and sighed.

[189]

Then the keeper made a step towards her; his grip on the gun relaxed.

"You here already?" she asked, and turning towards him laid her little hands upon his breast. It was the first time she had ever voluntarily touched him, and the man started and flushed.

"Robert," she said falteringly. "I — I — want to tell 'ee summat."

Then his great chest heaved and the gun dropped from his hand.

"Eh, bless you for that word, my lass!" he cried brokenly. "I reckoned you meant to cheat me."

"Then you do guess?" stammered Rebecca. "Oh, Robert — 'tis Jim. He be come back — he only went away to get work after all."

Robert's heart leaped up with an odd mixture of anguish and joy. It was her sweetheart — "the only man in the world". Who could blame the lass?

"Ah," he said unsteadily, "coom back, is he? It's right then. You be in the right to stick to him if he'll stick to you."

"Oh, e-es," returned the girl quickly, "he've a-come back for that — he do want us to get married at once."

A spasm crossed Robert's face. "You're not afeard now, I see," he said.

"Oh, I can't help it, I can't help it," she cried. "I love him best — I did al'ays love him best, but I — I — oh, Robert, I be so sorry!"

He drew down her hands and gently shook them; then he let them drop.

[190]

"It's right," he said, "ye've no need to fret yoursel', my lass — you're a good lass — I give ye j'y."

He stooped and picked up his gun, half-absently unloading it, and dropping the cartridges into his pocket. Then he turned towards Rebecca again.

"I'll say good afternoon," he said.

Rebecca extended her hand with a sob, and he shook it once more.

"Good afternoon," he repeated, and left her.

The sun had not yet quite set as he crossed the open space that lay between the woods proper and the outlying grove of fir-trees; its level shafts struck the ruddy trunks of these and ran along the lower branches, turning the very needles into fire; the aromatic scent gushed forth, strong and sweet. Yonder the downs were all ablaze in the same transitory glow; the distant hills were sapphire and amethyst, the nearer woods a very glory of autumn tints and sunset fires. Robert stood still as he emerged into the open; his heart was swelling to suffocation, his eyes smarting with unshed tears. They are children of nature, these burly Northmen, and he would have been fain to weep now, though he had not wept since that faraway day when, as a little lad, he had seen them lay his mother in the grave. A great loathing of the beauty and the radiance and the sweetness which had encompassed his dead dream, came upon him; in his actual physical oppression he thought with a sick longing of the pure tart air blowing over the dunes at home; the tall bleak dunes, all sober grey and green; the brown waves leaping in upon the tawny shore.

[191]

"I reckon I'll shift," said Robert.

And early on the following morning, when the yellowing leaves of Oakleigh Wood were catching the first rays of the sun, Robert Formby took to the road, with his face turned northwards.

[192]

THE CARRIER'S TALE.

"E-ES, I d' 'low I do see a many queer things while I be a-goin' o' my rounds, year in, year out, every Tuesday an' Friday so reg'lar as clockwork — only when Christmas Day do fall on a Friday, or Boxin' Day, an' then I do have to put it off. E-es, I do often say to Whitefoot when he an' me be joggin' along; 'Whitefoot,' I d' say, 'if you an' me was to get a-talkin' of all we've a-seen in our day, Lard! we could tell some funny

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

tales.’ Whitefoot do seem to take jist so much notice as what I do do — he be the knowin’est mare in the country. There! ye midn’t notice as he be a-goin’ along a bit unwillin’ to-day, same as if he hadn’t a-got much heart in him; ’tis because he knows so well as me what day ’tis — Friday, d’ye see? He d’ know he’ll have to bring back a heavy load. Fridays we calls at Brewery for two or three cases o’ bottled beer — we do bring ’em full o’ Fridays up to Old’s, at Graychurch — right a-top o’ the hill — an’ we do fetch back empties o’ Tuesdays, an’ then ye should jist see Whitefoot a-steppin’ along.

“E-es, we do see all sorts o’ things, an’ we do hear all kind o’ talk. Miffs do go on many a time under that there wold green shed. When I do hear folks a-havin’ words one wi’ t’other, I do never take notice if I can help it.

[193]

Sometimes they’ll be for drawin’ me in. ‘Don’t ye think so, Jan?’ one ’ull say; and then another ’ull go, ‘I’m sure Jan ’ull agree wi’ I’. An’ I do always make the same answer, ‘Settle it among yourselves, good folks,’ says I; ‘I don’t take zides wi’ one nor yet wi’ t’other. ’Tis my business for to drive, an’ I do do that,’ I do tell ’em, ‘and don’t interfere wi’ nothin’ else.’

“One day I d’ mind, Mrs. Collins, what fell out wi’ her darter for marryin’ some chap down to Bere — dalled if she didn’t meet the young woman plump in my cart! And they hadn’t been speaking for above a year.

“You see, ’twas this way. I took up Mary — that’s the darter — an’ her little child — a hinfant it was, not above four or five month old; I took ’em up first, an’ we was goin’ along the road Branston-ways, an’ it was gettin’ darkish when the wold lady met us.

“ ‘Can you make room for me, Jan?’ she says. ‘I bain’t so young as I was, an’ I’ve a-got a pair o’ new boots what do fair lame me.’

“ ‘To be sure, mum,’ says I. ‘Up wi’ ye; you can set along of I,’ I says, ‘here in front. There bain’t much room under the shed.’

“Well, she sits her down, an’ all of a minute the little baby under the shed begins a-cryin’, an’ poor Mary she begins a-hushin’ of it an’ a-talkin’ to it; and soon as ever

the wold ’ooman hears her voice she gives a great start what very nearly throws her off the seat.

“ ‘Studdy, mum,’ says I; ‘if you do go a-jumpin’ up an’ down like that we’ll be a-droppin’ of ye into the road, I says.

[194]

“She made no answer and never turned her head.

“Well, the baby kep’ on a-cryin’ and a-cryin’ — it had been vaccinated or some such thing — an’ the mother kep’ hushin’ it, an’ at last the wold ’ooman couldn’t hold out no longer.

“ ‘Give I that child, Mary,’ says she, sharp-like. ‘I d’ ’low you don’t know how to hold it,’ she says. ‘ ’Tis a shame to let a pore little hinfant scream like that. I d’ ’low ’twill do itself a mischief.’

“ ‘Oh, mother,’ says poor Mary; an’ she begins to cry herself as she hands over the child.

“Well, soon as ever Mrs. Collins had a-got hold o’ the little thing, an’ got the little face up again hers an’ began singin’ to it, an pattin’ it, an’ rockin’ it, it did stop cryin’ — ’twas a knowin’ little thing, that baby, I did al’ays say afterwards, for ’twas that done the job. The wold body was so pleased as could be.

“ ‘Didn’t I say you didn’t know how to hold it?’ says she. ‘ ’Tis a very fine child too,’ she says.

“And then, ‘oh, mother,’ says Mary, ‘I did so want ye to see it.’

“And so they made friends straight off, and Mary went home wi’ her mother to tea.

“Coortin’? Well, we don’t see so much o’ that — not these times. The young chaps be all for bicylin’ these days; they wouldn’t be bothered wi’ travellin’ in my cart. But I do mind one queer thing what happened many years ago now — dally! ’twas the very queerest thing as ever I knowed, or did happen in these parts.

“ ’Twas one Tuesday. I wur jist puttin’ in Whitefoot,

[195]

an' a few o' my fares was a-standin' about waitin' for I to be ready to start, when I see a great big fellow marchin' down the hill from Old's.

" 'Goin'? Branston-way?' says he with a nod to I.

" 'E-es,' I says, 'I be goin' Branston-way. Be you a stranger?' says I. 'All the folks as lives about here do know as Branston is my way.'

" 'I'm a stranger and I'm not a stranger,' says he. 'My folks used to live here. I used to live with my grandfather up yonder at Whitethorns,' he says. 'He was called old Jesse Taylor — d'ye mind him?'

" 'I mind him very well,' says I. 'A fine wold fellow.'

" 'Well, I come here to have a look at his grave,' says the young chap. ' 'Twas a notion I had.'

" 'Let me see,' says I, turnin' round to look at 'en as I were a-climbin' into the cart, for Whitefoot was hitched by this time, 'let me see who mid you be then? Wold Taylor had nigh upon farty grandchildren — I heard 'en say so many a time.'

" 'Oh, I'm one of Abel's lot,' says he; 'Abel Taylor was my father's name. He emigrated wi' half-a-dozen of us when I was a little lad no higher than the shaft there; my name is Jim Taylor. I have spent most of my life in the States; I scarce call myself a Britisher now,' says he.

" 'Dear, to be sure,' says Mrs. Mayne, what was a-standin' by, ' 'tis very sad for to hear ye say that, Mr. Taylor. Ye must feel very mournful havin' to live out abroad.'

" 'I don't know that,' says he. He was a honest, good-natured-lookin' chap, but when he says 'I don't know that'

[196]

he looked real melancholy. There; ye'd think some awful misfortune had happened. 'I don't know that,' he says; 'there's good and bad all over the world, and there's as much bad as good in England, I guess.'

"He had a funny way o' talking: 'I guess,' he says, meanin' for to say 'I d' 'low'.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"They was all in the cart by this time, an' Whitefoot was a-trottin' out so brisk as could be. He was a young mare then, and 'twas a Tuesday, as I say, an' he knowed he'd have only the empties to carry along.

"Wold Maria Robbins was a-sittin' jist behind Jim Taylor — a great talker she was, al'ays ready to gossip about her neighbours. She did sit a-starin' an' a-starin' at this here Jim Taylor till I reckon he felt her eyes fixed on 'en, for he turns round smilin' wi' some talk about the weather. But 'twasn't the weather as Maria did want to be talkin' on.

" 'I'm sorry, Mr. Taylor,' says she, 'as you've a-been disappointed like in your country,' she says. 'I'm sorry England didn't come up to your expectations.'

"He laughed and began pulling at his girt brown beard.

" ' 'Twill maybe l'arn me not to expect too much,' he says.

" 'I'll go warrant 'twas a maid what played some trick on ye,' says Maria, a-turnin' her head on one side same as an old Poll-parrot.

" 'Maids be tricky things,' says he; but he didn't give her no more satisfaction.

"Well, Mrs. Mayne, what was a-sitting on the t'other side o' the cart, was jist as anxious to pick all she could

[197]

out of 'en, an' says she, pokin' out her head from under the shed: —

" 'I d''low,' she says, 'there isn't many English maids as would fancy the notion of goin' out abroad to get married. Most English maids,' says she, 'likes to settle down near their own folks, an' not be tolled off amongst strangers.'

"The wold 'ooman had jist knocked the nail on the head. The chap turns round about again wi' his back to 'em both, an' the dark look on his face.

" 'Folks are free to please themselves,' says he, arter a bit, 'but should know their own minds. It shouldn't be "I will" one day and "I won't" the next.'

"Well, he didn't seem in the humour to talk much after this, and we did drive on half a mile or so wi'out openin' our lips, till all at once we came to a turn in the road, and there was a lot o' folks a-waitin' for I.

“ ’Twas Meadway what lives down there in the dip, an’ his wife, an’ three or four of his sons an’ daughters, an’ a couple o’ chaps what works for ’en; they was all gathered round his niece, Tamsine, as was standin’ waiting for I, dressed very nice for travellin’.

“They was makin’ sich a din when I pulled up a body could scarce hear hisself speak.

“ ‘Up wi’ the box,’ says one, a-tossin’ it up a’most afore I could get my feet out o’ the way. ‘Here be thy bandbox, maidie,’ says another. ‘Now, Jan, make room. Good luck, my dear.’

“ ’Twas old Tom Meadway as did say that, an’ he no sooner let fall the word than the whole lot of ’em took it

[198]

up. ’Twas ‘Good luck’ here, and ‘Good luck’ there, and the poor maid pulled about from one side to the other, an’ sich kissin’ I thought she’d be in pieces afore I did have her in my cart.

“At last she got in. Maria did have to go and sit next Mrs. Mayne, and Tamsine Meadway took her place behind Jim Taylor, what sat next I.

“ ‘Drop us a line so soon as you get to the other side,’ says Mrs. Meadway.

“ ‘Mind ye tell us what he’s like,’ cries one o’ the maids.

“ ‘Lard, Tamsine,’ says another, ‘I could wish I was you.’

“Then they did all start a-cheerin’, an’ two of ’em popped their heads in under the shed, laughin’ fit to split, and throwin’ somethin’ at the poor maid, an’ she jumps up an’ throws it out again, an’ then another maid comes an’ throws a handful o’ summat almost into her face.

“ ‘Come,’ says I, ‘I’d best be gettin’ on, or they’ll make an end on ye, maidie.’ So I touches up Whitefoot, an’ we soon leaves ’em all behind, laughin’ an’ shoutin’.

“ ‘Ye shouldn’t ha’ thrown back the shoe,’ says Mrs. Mayne to Tamsine; ‘that was for luck, my dear.’

“ ‘They mid ha’ shown a bit more feelin’,’ says Tamsine, and a body could hear she weren’t far off cryin’.

" 'If all the tale be true what I hear,' says Maria Robbins, 'you be a very brave young 'ooman. Be it really true as you be goin' to 'Merica to marry a man what you've never seen?'

" 'Why, of course 'tis true,' puts in Mrs. Mayne, 'and a' very good job, too. What could anybody do, you know,

[199]

Miss Robbins?' she says to Maria. 'There's poor Robert Meadway left his family terrible bad off, and such a lot of 'em, too, and none of 'em fit to earn a penny wi'out it's Tamsine herself."

" 'Why didn't she take a place, then?' says Maria. 'I'd a deal sooner go to sarvice nor set out on this 'ere wild goose chase. Ye'll have to work jist so hard,' she says, turnin' to Tamsine, 'and the Lard knows what sort of a place it is you be a-goin' to, nor what kind of a chap your husband 'ull turn out to be.'

" 'I shouldn't mind the work,' says Tamsine; 'of course I'd be willin' to work for my husband, whoever he mid be.'

"She had a kind of soft, pleasant voice, and Jim, when he heard it, turned round to look at her. I did turn round, too.

" 'What's this tale?' says I. 'I never heard nothin' of it,' I says.

" 'Ah,' says Mrs. Mayne, 'Meadways did keep it dark, d'ye see, till all was settled; but 'tis quite true as Tamsine here be a-goin' out to America to get wed to a man what lives out there. A very good match it do seem to be, too. A large farm, I d' 'low, and a comfortable house. And Tamsine's intended do write beautiful letters, Mrs. Meadway telled I.'

"Tamsine says nothin', but keeps on pickin' up the little bits o' rice what her cousins had throwed at her, an' droppin' of 'em out o' the cart. She was a very handsome maid, wi' black eyes an' hair, an' a pretty bit o' colour as a general thing, but her face was so white as chalk that day.

[200]

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

" 'Well,' says Maria, speakin' a bit sour, as wold maids will when there's talk of ones wed. 'I don't young gettin' think it's at all proper nor becoming to go answer they advertisements what comes in the papers, an' for such a as wedlock — Lard ha' mercy me', she says, 'however had ye the face to do it, Tasmine?'

" ' 'Twas my cousin Martha what did it,' says poor Tasmine, hangin' down her head. ' 'Twas in the Western Gazette — a very respectable paper, my uncle says. We was lookin' out for a place for me, and Martha she saw the advertisement. It said the gentleman wanted a wife from Dorset. Martha said it did seem like a chance for I, an' she took and wrote straight off, more for a bit of fun than anything else, but when the answer came it was wrote quite in earnest. It said the gentleman had knowed some girl what came from Dorset, an' he 'lowed he'd like a Dorset wife. He gave two references, one to a bank what said, when my uncle wrote, he was very respectable and well-off, and one to a minister as said he was a very good man and 'ud make any 'ooman happy. We be chapel-folk, too, and Uncle Meadway said the offer did seem the very thing for I.'

" 'You were forced into it, then?' says Jim Taylor, speakin' out straight and sharp.

" 'Oh, forced,' says she, makin' shift to look up, 'I couldn't say forced.'

"But there were the big tears gatherin' in her eyes — anybody could see she hadn't had much say in the matter.

" 'My uncle said,' she goes on, 'I could have some of

[201]

the little ones sent out to me by-an'-by, an' Mr. Johnson wrote very nice about it, and said he wouldn't have no objections.'

" 'What d'ye say the party's name is?' axes young Taylor, very quick.

" 'Johnson — Samuel Johnson,' says the poor maid.

"Well, if ye'll believe me, the chap got so red in the face as if somebody had hit 'en.

" 'Samuel Johnson,' says he. 'For the Lard's sake, where does he live?'

" ' 'Tis in California,' says Tasmine; 'he've a-got a farm — a ranch he calls it — at a place called Longwood.'

" 'Sakes alive!' cries Jim, an' he sits there gawkin' at the maid.

" 'Of all the durned cheek!' says he at last, speaking in his queer fayshion. 'If the boys around was to know he had the face to ax a young British girl to marry him, I tell ye what', he says, 'he'd be lynched afore he knew where he was!'

" 'Dear, to be sure,' cries Mrs. Mayne, a-clappin' of her hands together, 'what's wrong wi' the man?'

" 'P'r'aps he's got a wife already,' says Maria.

" 'Maybe 'tisn't the same Samuel Johnson,' says I. 'I d' 'low I seem to ha' heerd o' the name afore.'

" ' 'Tis play-actin' kind o' a name,' says Maria.

"Poor Tamsine, she was so white as any sheet, an' she did stretch out her hand an' grab hold o' Jim by the sleeve, an' shake 'en.

" 'Tell I quick,' she cried; an' then she drops her hand, an' begins a-cryin'.

[202]

" 'No, don't tell me,' she says; 'don't ye tell me nothing. I'm bound everyway. I've a-passed my word,' says she; 'an' he's actually sent the money for my ticket. I can't go back now!'

" 'Yes, but you shall go back,' cries Jim, a-catchin' of her by the wrist. 'I'll not stand by — no honest man could, an' see a young girl — a good honest young girl, sold to such a chap as Johnson. Why, he's a nigger!' he cries.

"Poor Tamsine, I thought she'd ha' fell off the seat.

" 'A black man!' screeches she.

" 'As black as my shoes,' says Jim. 'A great big, oily, dirty nigger,' says he.

"He didn't pick his words, d'ye see.

" 'Why, his head's as woolly as a sheep's back,' he says.

" 'No my girl,' he goes on, 'it can't be allowed.'

" 'But I'm bound,' says Tasmine, wi' her face working pitiful.

" 'You are no more bound nor I am,' say he. 'The rascal's imposed on ye shameful. He knows right well he'd no business to ax a white girl to marry him wi'out

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

tellin' her all the truth. Why didn't he ax you straight if you'd be willin' to take up wi' a black man? But he knowed a deal better nor that.'

" 'But perhaps it isn't the same Mr. Johnson,' says Mrs. Mayne. 'It 'ud be a pity for the maid to give up husband if there was any mistake.'

" 'I know Longwood in California,' says Jim, 'as well as I know my own hand. I was there only last fall. 'Tisnt a very big place, an' I knowed every one as lives there. I knowed Samuel Johnson well — he come to chapel reg'lar.

[203]

I reckon,' says he, 'the name o' the minister as recommended him was Ebenezer Strong.'

" 'E-es,' says Tamsine,' that's the name. The Reverend Ebenezer Strong.'

" 'That's it,' shouts Jim. 'Why, he's a coloured man hisself — he wouldn't be likely to find fault wi' the man for bein' a nigger. You mustn't ha' no more to do wi' him, my girl. 'Twas a mercy I met ye, and could warn ye in time.'

" 'Oh! but what can I do?' cries the poor maid, a-sobbin' fit to break her heart. 'There's not a bit o' use in my goin' back. None of 'em would believe the tale. My uncle would make me go all the same, I know.'

" 'E-es, to be sure,' says Maria Robbins, looking at Jim very sour-like; ' 'tisn't very likely as Mr. Meadway 'ud be put off by a chance tale from a stranger. There he've a-been at the expense o' gettin' everthin' ready for the maid, and this 'ere gentleman what writes so straightforward an' sends the money so handsome, may be some quite other Mr. Johnson. I mind,' says Maria, 'the time o' the Crimee War, Miss Old went into deep black for some chap called John Old, what got killed out abroad, and what she reckoned was her brother, an' 'twasn't him at all.'

" 'Samuel Johnson, o' Longwood, is a nigger,' cries Jim, smacking his hands together.

'His grandfather was a slave. He belonged to some queer old gentleman what gave 'en the name to start wi', 'cause 'twas the name of some old ancient chap what wrote a book or some such thing; an' this chap was named for him Samuel Johnson too. There ain't no mistake, you bet,' says he.

[204]

"Well, Tamsine was a-cryin' and a-shakin' all over like a aspen leaf all this time; and when Maria was advisin' her to be sensible an' not hearken to them sort of idle tales, I thought she'd ha' had a fit. I could ha' laughed any other time to hear wold Maria, as was so dead again' the girl marryin' when she thought 'twas a nice match, an' now she was all for her doin' it, though she seed how skeart the poor maid was. Mrs. Mayne had a softer heart.

" 'If this be really true, Jan,' she says, lookin' at I, 'it do seem a pity for the maid to go any forrarder. Better for her to stay at home and go to sarvice,' says she. 'There, Tamsine, give over cryin'. Nobody can force ye to go to America or to take up wi' this 'ere nigger against your will. Go back an' tell your uncle what you've a-heard, an' let him keep ye a bit longer till ye've a-got a situation.'

" 'Oh, I dursn't go back,' says poor Tamsine. An' then Jim reaches towards her and takes her by the hand again.

" 'Look here, my dear,' says he, 'don't go back. Ye can go out to America,' says he, 'but it needn't be to marry that dirty nigger. I'm going back to the States now,' says he, 'and I thought to take a wife wi' me, but the maid I was coortin' drew back at the last. She didn't think so much of her word seemingly as you do. Come,' says he, 'you've seen me an' you haven't seen Samuel Johnson. Look me in the face and tell me if you think you could put up wi' me?'

"The poor maid she was that upset, and that surprised, she couldn't for the life of her look at 'en, an' he leaned

[205]

over an' took her by the chin, very gentle-like, an' turned up her face.

" 'Look at me, my dear,' says he, 'an' see if ye can trust me.'

"So at that Tamsine did look at 'en, wi' the big tears standin' on her eyelashes, an' her mouth all a-quiverin'.

" 'Id' 'low I could,' says she.

" 'And, mind ye,' goes on Jim, 'I can make ye just so comfortable as t'other chap 'ud ha' done. I've got a big place and a comfortable house, and I do want to settle down reg'lar. So say the word, my dear,' says he.

" 'Lard, maid!' cried Maria, so sudden-like that we all fair jumped, 'whatever be ye thinkin' on?' says she; 'tis plain what he've made up this cock-an'-bull story for now,' she says. 'He be a reg'lar deludin' deceiver; don't ye ha' nothin' to say to 'en.'

" 'It do seem very sudden,' says Mrs. Mayne; 'I wouldn't go out to America wi' a stranger, Tamsine.'

" 'Do you trust me, my dear?' says he, looking at Tamsine, and not takin' no notice at all of nobody else.

"The maid she looked back at 'en more pitiful than ever, an' then she did say: —

" 'Id' 'low I do.'

" 'Well, then, so ye may,' says he, a-shakin' of her hand very serious like; 'but I'll make all fair and square for ye first. I'll not ax too much of ye. We'll be man and wife before we go,' says he.

"So the whole thing was made up wi'out no more trouble nor that. Jim axed Mrs. Mayne if the maid could lodge wi' her till they was married, an' he settled straight off what he'd pay for her board. He did pull out a pocket-book

[206]

stuffed wi' money, so as even Maria Robbins could see the maid was a-doin' well for herself.

" 'You hand me over that there money as Johnson sent ye,' says he to Tamsine; 'he must have it back by the next mail. I'll look after ye now,' says he. 'My purse is your purse.'

"An' though the man could scarce ha' meant it, for I d' 'low he was too sensible a chap to hold wi' settin' womenfolk so much above theirselves as that 'ud shape to, 'twas a handsome thing for 'en to say. Well, Tamsine went to lodge wi' Mrs. Mayne, for she couldn't no ways make up her mind to go back to her uncle; an' she did beg us all not to say a word about the changin' her plan till the weddin' was over, but Maria, she did go straight off to Meadways' wi' the tale. They were all in a terrible takin' at

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

first, an' Mrs. Meadway she came to Mrs. Mayne's an' gave her an' Tamsine a bit of her mind — more, I d' 'low, on account of the maid not goin' back to their place than for her takin' up wi' another man. 'Twas bringing disgrace on her family, says she.

"Poor Tamsine was in a terrible way, when in walks Jim Taylor, an' what he said an' what he did I couldn't tell ye, but he managed to pacify them all. Meadways all come to the weddin', an' Jim was so taken up wi' Tamsine's little brothers and sisters, that he took two of 'em out wi' 'en an' sent for the others some time after. I d' 'low he'd ha' cut off his head for Tamsine.

"Well, that's the end o' the tale. Ye'll agree 'twas a bit queer — the queerest thing as ever did happen to I, though, as I do say, Whitefoot an' me have a-seen many queer things in our time."

[207]

MRS. SIBLEY AND THE SEXTON.

IT was Christmas Eve, and Mrs. Fry was returning home from Branston with a bulging pocket and a piled-up market-basket. Clinging to her skirts was the youngest baby but one, while Selina, her eldest daughter, trundled along the "pram," the occupant of which was almost smothered amid parcels of various shapes and sizes. The intermediary members of Mrs. Fry's family straggled between the two, all very clean and tidy and all beaming with good humour. Stanley, indeed, evinced a propensity to tumble into the gutter every now and then, while
Wyndham and 'Erbert occasionally delayed the advance of the procession by playfully sparring at each other almost beneath the perambulator wheels. The little cortège made slow progress, for, as Mrs. Fry laughingly observed, it was the hardest job in the world to get a big little family home-along; nevertheless, the general serenity remained undisturbed. It was pleasant enough to loiter on this fine dry afternoon, for the air was clear and crisp, and the roads clean and hard as iron. Even the baby cooed and chuckled as it squinted upwards at its sister from behind the whitey-brown parcel which reposed on its small chest.

The party at length turned off from the high road, and was proceeding tranquilly down the "dip" which led to

[208]

the small group of cottages of which the Frys' home made one, when from the farmyard gate on the right a tall woman emerged carrying a jug of milk.

"Be that you, Mrs. Fry? I stepped over to your place an hour ago, but there was no one at home."

"We all corned out to do a bit o' Christmas shoppin', Mrs. Sibley, d'ye see. But I'm sorry I missed ye. Will ye step in and have a drop o' tea wi' us? Selina will hurry on and get it ready."

"No, thank ye," returned Mrs. Sibley gloomily; "I'll not go in now, Mrs. Fry — not when all your family's about. I was a-lookin' for a word wi' 'ee confidential-like. I was a-wantin' for to ax your advice, Mrs. Fry."

"Oh, and was ye?" said Mrs. Fry, much impressed. "Tell 'ee what — I'll send the childern home wi' 'Lina an' I'll step in to your place, Mrs. Sibley, my dear. But all Foyle's family 'ull be there, won't they? — there'll not be much chance to talk private."

"There will, though," returned Mrs. Sibley. "I sent the childern out wi' their father a-purpose. Things is gettin' serious, Mrs. Fry; but there! I can't converse out here. Best let the matter bide till we be safe in my house."

Mrs. Fry hastily detached the small chubby hands of Halfred — she had a pretty taste in nomenclature — who was clinging to her skirts, and desiring the child to run home-along wi' 'Lina, gave her undivided attention to her neighbour.

"Not here," said Mrs. Sibley impressively, as she began to ply her with questions; "at my house."

They turned aside into the first cottage of the group, and

[209]

Mrs. Sibley, opening the gate, stalked in front of her crony along the flagged path, and flung open the house-door. Pausing in the middle of the kitchen, she added emphatically, "In Foyle's house I should say".

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

"It be the same thing, bain't it?" returned Mrs. Fry cheerfully, "or like to be soon".

"Be it?" said Mrs. Sibley witheringly. "Be it, Martha?"

Mrs. Fry set down her market-basket, and dropped into the nearest chair.

"Lard, my dear, you do make I feel quite nervish. Be things a-goin' wrong?"

Mrs. Sibley folded her arms, and surveyed her for a moment in silence. She was an angular woman with a frosty eye, which she now fixed grimly on Mrs. Fry.

"I don't say as they be a-goin' wrong," she remarked after a pause, "but they don't seem to be a-goin' right. Foyle, there, he haven't got the spirit of a mouse."

"Hasn't he said nothin' — nothin' at all?" inquired Mrs. Fry, resting a plump hand on either knee and leaning forward.

"Not a single word," replied her friend; "that's to say, not a word wi' any sense in it. An' Sibley have been gone six months now, mind ye."

"So he have!" replied Mrs. Fry. "An' ye mid say as you've been so good as a widder for nigh upon six year — ye mid indeed. A husband what's in the 'sylum is worse nor no husband at all. An' ye've a-been keepin' house for Foyle these four year, haven't ye?"

"Four year an' two month," responded Mrs. Sibley.

[210]

"There, the very day after Mrs. Foyle were buried he did come to me an' he says so plain-spoke as anything, 'Mrs. Sibley,' he says, 'here be a lone woman wi'out no you family, an' here be I wi' all they little childern. Will 'ee come an' keep house for I an' look after 'em all? Ye'll not be the loser by it,' he says. So I looks him straight in the face: 'I bain't so sure o' that, Mr. Foyle,' I says. 'I do look at it in this way, d'ye see. A woman has her chances,' I says. 'I don't think Sibley 'ull last so very long — they seldom does at the 'sylum — an' then here be I, a lone woman, as you do say. I mid very well like to settle myself again; an' if I go an' bury myself so far away from town in a place where there's sich a few neighbours, I don't see what prospects I'll have.' "

"Well, that was straightforward enough," commented Mrs. Fry. "He couldn't make no mistakes about your meanin'."

"He could not," agreed Mrs. Sibley triumphantly; "an' what's more, he didn't. He up an' spoke as plain as a man could speak. 'Well, Mrs Sibley,' he says, 'there's a Fate what rules us all.' He be always a-sayin' off bits o' po'try an' suchlike as he gets from the gravestone, ye know."

"Ah," remarked Mrs. Fry nodding, "being the sexton, of course, it do come nat'ral to 'en, don't it?"

" 'There's a Fate what rules us all,' he says," resumed Mrs. Sibley, " 'an' we didn't ought to m'urn as if we had no hope. If you was a free 'ooman, Mrs. Sibley — well, I'm a free man, and I'd make so good a husband as another. Maria did always find I so,' he says."

[211]

"Well, the man couldn't have said more."

"So you'd think. But why don't he say summat now? There, I've a-kept his house an' seen arter his childern for more nor four year. Time's gettin' on, ye know; I bain't so young as I was."

Mrs. Fry began a polite disclaimer, but was overruled by the other.

"I bain't — 'tisn't in natur' as I could be. I wer' gettin' a bit anxious this year when poor Sibley did seem to be hangin' on so long, so I axed Rector to have 'en prayed for ——"

"A-h-h-h?" ejaculated Martha, as she paused. "An' that did put the Lard in mind of 'en, I should think."

"It did put the Lard in mind of 'en," agreed Mrs. Sibley with gusto. "The Lard see'd he warn't no good to nobody in the 'sylum, an' so he wer' took."

"An' Foyle have never come forward?" remarked Mrs. Fry, after a significant pause.

"He've never made no offer, an' he've never said a single word to show he were thinkin' o' sich a thing. Not one word, Mrs. Fry. I've given 'en the chance many a time. A month arter poor Sibley was buried I says to 'en, 'Here be I now, Mr. Foyle,' I says, 'a widow 'ooman, the same as you be a widow man'."

"An' what did he say?" queried her neighbour eagerly.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

"Oh, summat about the 'opes of a glorious resurrection," returned Mrs. Sibley scornfully. "An' another time I says to 'en, 'Mr. Foyle,' I says, d'ye mind the talk what you an' me did have when you first did ax I to keep house for ye?' 'What talk,' says he. 'Why,' I says,

'about me bein' free an' you makin' a good husband.' 'Free,' says he sighin'; 'this life's a bondage, Mrs Sibley.' An' off he went."

"Ah!" commented Mrs. Fry, "he wer' thinkin' o' them verses what's wrote on old Farmer Reed's tombstone. I mind they do begin this way: —

'This life is but a bondage,
My soul at last is free.' "

"That's it," agreed Mrs. Sibley nodding. "I says to 'en this marnin', 'Mr. Foyle,' I says, 'the New Year's a-comin', an' I think there ought to be some change in the early part of it for you an' me.' 'I don't want no changes,' he says; 'I'm very well satisfied as I be.' I'm gettin' desperate, Mrs. fry."

"Well, 'tis very onconsiderate," returned Martha, "very. I'm sure ye've said all ye could an' done all ye could. 'Tis hard, too, for a woman to have to go a-droppin' hints an' a-takin' the lead in such a delicate matter. I'm sure I don't know what to advise, my dear."

Mrs. Sibley rubbed her nose, and gazed at her friend meditatively.

"I'm about the only 'ooman in this 'ere place as Foyle could get to keep house for him," she remarked. "I'll tell 'ee what I'll do, Mrs. Fry — I'll march! Leastways," she added, correcting herself, "I'll tell 'en I be goin'. We'll see how he'll like that."

"Ye mid try it," said Martha reflectively; "it 'ud be a bit ark'ard, though, if he was to take 'ee at your word."

"He'll not do that," returned Mrs. Sibley, continuing emphatically: "Now, Mrs. Fry, my dear, I'll expect 'ee to

act the part of a friend by me. If he do ax ye to lend ’en a hand or send over Selina to help ’en, don’t ye go for to do no such thing.”

“I won’t,” promised Mrs. Fry.

“An’ if he do say anything to ’ee about my leavin’, do ye jist let on as my mind be quite made up.”

“I will,” said Mrs. Fry.

“I’ll start packin’ at once then, to show ’en as I be in earnest,” said Mrs. Sibley, with a dry chuckle as her friend rose.

No sooner had Mrs. Fry edged through the narrow door with her market-basket than Mrs. Sibley set to work.

When Mr. Foyle, who united the double functions of carrier and sexton, unhitched the horse from his van, and, having seen to the animal’s comfort, went indoors, he was surprised to find his children, who had preceded him into the house, standing with scared faces round the packing-case, which occupied the centre of the kitchen, while Mrs. Sibley, with an air of great determination, was stowing away various articles therein.

“Hullo!” cried he, pausing in the doorway. “What’s the matter here? Isn’t tea ready?”

“You’d best put on the kettle, Florence,” said Mrs. Sibley, turning to the eldest child. “I haven’t had time to ’tend it. Oh, be that you, Mr. Foyle? Would you kindly hand me down that there clock? I’m afeard the childern mid break it. Henery, just roll up that door-mat an’ fetch it here.”

“Dear heart alive what be about, Mrs. Sibley?” ejaculated honest Foyle. “You haven’t had no bad noos, I hope? “

“Oh, no noos at all, Mr. Foyle. Nothin’ noo do never come a-nigh this ’ere place. I be goin’ to have a bit of a change — I did tell ’ee this marnin’ as I wanted a change, didn’t I? I be a-goin’ to shift, Mr. Foyle.”

“To shift!” ejaculated the sexton.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDiI SALAMANTiNi

He slowly unwound the lengths of black and white comforter which were swathed about his neck, gaping at her the while.

“You’d best make tea, hadn’t you?” remarked Mrs. Sibley, ostentatiously counting over the plated spoons which were her property. “Florence ’ud very likely scald herself.”

The sexton dropped heavily into the nearest chair.

“Ye bain’t goin’ away to-night!” he gasped.

Mrs. Sibley straightened herself and eyed him reflectively. It might be a little awkward to say she was leaving that night, for if by chance he did take her at her word, she had not the remotest notion of where she could go.

“Not to-night,” she said at length, with the air of one making a concession. “I reckon to-morrow ’ull be time enough.”

Florence laid down the teapot and approached, her eyes round with consternation.

“Ye’re never goin’ to leave us on Christmas Day!” she ejaculated. “Oh, Auntie!”

“Auntie” was the title unanimously bestowed on Mrs. Sibley by the young Foyles, and accepted by that lady pending its exchange for a more intimate one.

In a moment Florence burst into tears, and the other

[215]

children immediately followed suit, little Rosanna being indeed so overcome by her feelings that she was constrained to lie on the floor and scream.

Mrs. Sibley stooped over her and set her on her feet. Beneath her stiff and somewhat chilly demeanour she had a warm enough heart, and was sincerely attached to her charges, particularly the youngest, whom she had brought up from infancy.

“Ye’ll have to get another Auntie, my dear,” she remarked, winking away a tear. “And ’tis to be hoped as she’ll take as good care of you as I’ve a-done.”

The sexton breathed hard, but did not venture to protest, and Henery, after rubbing his eyes on his jacket sleeve, inquired in a reproachful tone why Auntie was going away.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

"I wants a change, my dears," reiterated Mrs. Sibley, bestowing a gentle shake on Rosanna, as a means of bringing her round, for the child, following her favourite mode of procedure when her feelings were too many for her, was rapidly growing black in the face. "I did tell Father so this marnin' — Father knows. He bain't surprised, I'm sure. What must be, must be!" summed up Mrs. Sibley oracularly. Thereupon casting an inquiring eye round the room, she descried the warming-pan, which was hanging behind the door, pounced upon it, and stowed it away in the packing-case on top of the hearthrug.

Silence reigned for some moments, broken only by the sobs of the children and the rustling of Mrs. Sibley's packing-papers.

"Ye'd best give the children their tea, Mr. Foyle," she remarked, looking up presently. "They be in need of it,

[216]

poor things. There, don't ye cry so, Florence. Ye'll be gettin' another Auntie soon — at least, I hope so. Though reelly I don't quite see who ye can call in, Mr. Foyle, I don't indeed. I passed the remark to Mrs. Fry to-day, an' she said she was sure she didn't know who you could turn to. Her own hands was full, she said. Poor 'Lina was worked a deal too hard for a maid of her age, already. Them was her words. But sit down to your tea, do, Mr. Foyle. Get the bread, Florence; 'tis time for you to be growin' handy. 'Tis you as 'ull have to be keepin' the house most like."

It might have been the result of Florence's emotion, or it might have been owing to the fact that the shelf was a high one and Florence's arms were short, but in some way or other in reaching down the loaf she managed to tumble it into the coal-box.

Foyle rose hastily, pushed the child on one side, picked up the loaf, dusted it with his sleeve, set it on the table, and went out, banging the door behind him.

As the sound of his retreating footsteps echoed down the path, Mrs. Sibley rose to her feet and smiled upon the children, who were now sobbing afresh.

"There, don't ye make such a fuss," she remarked soothingly. "Father's a bit upset; ye mustn't mind that. Get on with your teas, dears. There, ye may have a bit of

jam to it to-night, as it's Christmas Eve; and afterwards we'll stick up some green, and you must all hang up your stockin's and see what you'll find there in the marnin'."

Cheerfulness was immediately restored; little faces grimed by tears smiled afresh; plates were extended for plentiful

[217]

helpings of blackberry jam, and soon little tongues were gleefully discussing the morrow's prospects, and particularly the treasures which might be looked for in the stockings.

"But I've only got such a 'ittle stockin'," lisped Rosanna, contemplating a chubby leg, which was, indeed, but imperfectly protected by about three inches of sock. "My stockin' won't hold half so much as the others."

"There, I'll lend you one of mine, then," said Auntie, graciously; and, going to the chest of drawers in the comer, she drew forth a pair of her own substantial stockings, and presented one to the child.

As the children retired for the night, Henery paused beside her for a moment.

"You won't truly go to-morrow, Auntie?" he pleaded coaxingly.

Mrs. Sibley paused a moment, and in the interval the sound of the sexton's slouching step was heard without, and his hand fumbled at the latch.

"It do all depend on Father, Henery," said Mrs. Sibley, raising her voice slightly. "He do know very well as I do want a change."

Mr. Foyle entered, looking weary and depressed, and sat down in his customary chair. Mrs. Sibley cast a searching glance round the kitchen, and, possessing herself of a pair of spotted china dogs which adorned the mantel-piece, added them to her collection, and retired.

The sexton lit his pipe, and had been smoking in gloomy silence for some time, when Mrs. Sibley re-entered. Going to the dresser, and opening a drawer, she abstracted a

[218]

number of oranges, nuts, crackers, and other such wares, and filled her apron with them.

"What be them for?" inquired the sexton diffidently.

"Why, they be surprises for the childern," returned she.

"Ah," rejoined John Foyle, "surprises, be they?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Sibley, "they do look for 'em reg'lar, they do. I do always fill their stockin's wi' 'em every Christmas."

"Oh," said the sexton, "put their surprises in their stockin's, do 'ee?"

Mrs. Sibley nodded and withdrew, leaving John sunk in profound thought.

"This 'ere be a vale o' tears," he remarked presently, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe. He rose, went to the table, turned up the lamp a little more, and fetching pen, ink and paper from the window-sill on which they usually reposed, sat down to indite a letter. It cost him much labour and thought, but, after all, it was a brief enough document. When completed it ran thus: "If Mrs. Sibley will meet Mr. Foyle in the churchyard to-morrow morning about nine o'clock when nobody's about she will hear of something to your advantage. Yours truly, John Foyle."

"I couldn't," said the sexton to himself, "put the question in any sort of public way. The childern is in and out, and the neighbours mid pop in. The churchyard is best and most nat'ral."

He folded the letter, put it in an envelope, and addressed it; then, looking round, descried hanging over a

[219]

chair-back one of Mrs. Sibley's stockings — the fellow to the one she had lent little Rosanna.

"The very thing!" exclaimed John. "The Christmas surprises do always go in stockin's. It'll be a surprise for she, I d' 'low — not but what she didn't look for it," he added with a grim chuckle.

He placed the letter in the stocking, fastened it securely with a loop of string, and, going cautiously upstairs, slung it over Mrs. Sibley's door-handle. He paused a moment, winking to himself, and then made his way on tiptoe to his own room.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

The usual Christmas bustle and excitement prevailed in the little household next morning. The children ecstatically compared notes over their fruit and toys; the sexton himself was quite unaccountably jovial, with a nervous kind of joviality nevertheless, hardly venturing to glance in Mrs. Sibley's direction. She, on her side, wore a sedate, not to say chastened, aspect, and was attired in her deepest "weeds".

Foyle's jocularity diminished after a time, and he set off for the churchyard in a depressed and uncomfortable frame of mind. What was the woman driving at — what more in the name of goodness could she want?

He paced up and down the path nearest the gate for some time, and then, suddenly recalling the fact that he had not yet attended to the stove connected with the heating apparatus of the church, hurried off to accomplish this duty.

On his return he descried a tall figure in black making its way, not towards him, but towards that portion of the

churchyard wherein reposed the mortal remains of the lamented Mr. Sibley.

After some hesitation the sexton followed, and Mrs. Sibley, having deposited a wreath of evergreens on the grave, turned round with a mournful expression.

"At such times as these, Mr. Foyle," she remarked, "the mind do nat'rally feel m'urnful."

"True, true!" agreed the sexton uncomfortably.

"He was a good husband, Mr. Foyle," said the widow in a melancholy tone.

"To be sure," said John doubtfully.

"I shall never look upon his like again," resumed Mrs. Sibley, shaking her head.

The sexton glanced from her disconsolate face to the wreath of evergreens, and then back again. Mrs. Sibley was still shaking her head with an air of gentle resignation.

"I think I'll be goin'," said Mr. Foyle with sudden desperation. "I thought you did step out to this 'ere churchyard with another intention."

Mrs. Sibley glanced at him in mild surprise.

"Ye didn't chance to get no letter this marnin', I s'pose?" continued the sexton with some heat.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

"A letter!" repeated Mrs. Sibley.

"E-es, the letter what I did put in your stockin' for a surprise," added John emphatically.

Mrs. Sibley's melancholy vanished as by magic; she smiled on the sexton, not only affably, but positively coyly.

"An' it was a surprise! she exclaimed, "it was indeed. E-es, Mr. Foyle."

[221]

She paused again, and then, all scruples apparently vanquished by the delicacy of John's attitude, she extended a bony hand from beneath the folds of her black shawl.

"That's why I'm here," she said.

[222]

THE CALL OF THE WOODS.

MONDAY. — Even to the most casual observer the day of the week would have been announced by the appearance of the rambling village; the new-budding hedges were remorselessly weighted with household gear, fresh from the tub; the very grassplots were whitened with the same; but the gooseberry bushes were as yet unadorned with extraneous trophies, for as every one knows, a thrifty rustic housewife relegates the washing and "getting up" of fine things to Tuesdays.

The orchard of that popular house of entertainment, known as "The Three Choughs," the weather-beaten sign of which bore the partly obliterated presentment of a triplet of birds unknown to naturalists — the orchard of "The Three Choughs," I say, was no exception to the general rule. From the gnarled branches of pear- and plum-tree depended many wavering tokens of Mrs. Cluett's industry; the clothes lines were weighted with the like; and Alice, her rosy-cheeked daughter, went periodically to and fro from wash-house to hedge with a basket poised on one sturdy hip, or, for the sake of variety, set jauntily aloft on her curly head.

The bar was left to take care of itself; at that hour callers were unlikely. Noontide was past, evening had not

[223]

yet come; if any stray wagoner or chance bicyclist were in need of refreshment he had but to uplift his voice, or to knock on the worn panels of the door leading from the taproom to Mrs. Cluett's private premises. Many succeeding generations of knuckles had, indeed, removed the last vestige of paint from the panels in question, and indued them with a fine mellow tint of their own.

Nevertheless Mrs. Cluett was enjoying herself so much in the midst of her suds, so thoroughly absorbed in soaping and kneading and wringing, that such a summons was thrice repeated without effect; and it was not until Alice, returning from one of her expeditions to the hedge, chanced to glance casually at the taproom window that the impatient customer contrived to attract attention.

Seeing a man's face peering discontentedly through the latticed panes, and hearing a corresponding voice repeatedly shouting, Alice set down her basket and hurried into the house.

"We don't often have no one callin' at this time o' day," she remarked with a pleasant smile, by way of greeting.

The man gave his order for a pint of beer without noticing the intended apology, and dropped into one of the wooden chairs allotted to customers.

Alice glanced at him askance as she set jug and glass before him. A tall young fellow, not more than twenty-five, with a face browned by sun and wind till it was as dark as a gipsy's, thick, black hair, good features, and the strangest eyes that the girl had ever beheld in a human face. They were like hawk's eyes, keen and clear, and

[224]

with that fixed, far-away look peculiar to the eyes of a bird or beast of prey. Yet the man's face was not a cruel face, and by-and-by, meeting Alice's questioning gaze, he smiled hesitatingly.

Alice was a good girl, and had always been well looked after by her mother; but it was part of the business of life, as she conceived it, to enter frankly into conversation

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

with all who chanced to need refreshment at “The Three Choughs;” and she was interested in each, from the oldest customer to the latest and most casual caller.

“Where be come from?” inquired Alice, now propping herself against the lintel of the door, and surveying the stranger with undisguised curiosity.

He wore corduroys and leggings, and yet was no gamekeeper; he carried a small bundle and a sturdy stick, but she felt sure that he was not a tramp.

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, looking at her for a moment before replying; his words came at last slowly, as though he were unused to much speech.

“Yonder,” he said, “Chudbury way.”

Alice glibly ran through the names of several villages, with an interrogative pause after each, and the newcomer shook his head in every case, without, however, further attempting to enlighten her.

She stopped at length, evidently at a loss, and the man, setting down his glass, laughed suddenly, a joyous, good-humoured laugh, pleasant to hear.

“You be fair beat, my maid,” said he. “But I do ’low you’d not be so very much the wiser if I was to tell ’ee. I be come from Tewley Warren — that’s where I be come

[225]

from.” He dropped his voice and his face clouded over. “That’s where I’ve a-lived all my life,” he added.

“Why have ’ee left now, then?” inquired Alice.

“I didn’t leave o’ my own free will — ye mid be sure o’ that,” said he.

Alice looked up inquiringly, and he continued after a pause, still slowly and somewhat hesitatingly, as though he found it difficult to lay hold of the words he needed.

“I did live there wi’ my wold father; and when he shifted to the New House, Squire wasn’t willin’ for I to go on a-livin’ there. He did want our place for one o’ the keepers — a married man wi’ a fam’ly — he didn’t hold, he said, wi’ lettin’ a young chap, same as I, bide there — he did turn I out — to speak plain.”

“Oh — h,” said Alice commiseratingly. “ ’Twas a bit hard, I d’ ’low.”

“It was mortal hard,” said he.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

He raised the tumbler of beer to his lips, but set it down again untasted.

"To give Squire his due," he said, "he did offer to keep I on for the same money what I did have when the wold man were livin', but I wouldn't have it. 'No, sir,' says I, 'I bain't a-goin' to be takin' orders in the place where I did use to be my own master' — 'twas jist same as if I was my own master when my father were alive; he didn't never interfere wi' I, poor wold chap."

It was perhaps Alice's fancy that a momentary dimness veiled the hawk eyes — in any case it was only momentary.

"So here I be," summed up the ex-warrener conclusively.

[226]

"Here you be," echoed Alice; then, after a moment's pause: "What be goin' to do now?"

"I don't know," said the man.

"Where be goin' to?"

"I don't know," he said again.

At this moment Mrs. Cluett's voice was heard calling aloud for her daughter; that lady's heavy foot presently sounded in the narrow passage without, and she burst into the room.

"Dear, to be sure! Did ever a body see such a maid? Us so busy and clothes not half done wi'! And here ye must stand gawkin' and gossipin' as if 'twas the middle of the week. There, drink up your beer, do, goodman, and let's ha' done wi' it."

She addressed these words to the new-comer in a somewhat softened tone, and he nodded good-humouredly.

"All right, missus; I'll not be long now," he said, as he poured out his second glass.

"There, for shame, mother, let the poor soul take his drink in peace," whispered Alice. "He's come far — from Tewley Warren; he've a-been turned out now his father be dead."

Mrs. Cluett, with a soapy hand on either hip, surveyed the young man curiously.

"I did use to know Warrener Baverstock well," she remarked slowly. "Warrener Baverstock up to Chudbury — e-es — I did use to know en."

"He were my father," remarked the other, with a momentary gleam of pleasure in his eyes.

"He did use to come here often and often," continued

Mrs. Cluett, emphatically. "He'd sit there — as mid be where you be a-sittin' now — and he'd take his glass, he would; a most respectable man he were. My poor husband were alive too in them days — ah, times is changed, bain't they? Here be I, a poor widow woman wi' my own livin to get, tho' there's them as did ought to be getting' it for I in my ancient years."

She paused to shake her head. Young Baverstock's attention seemed to have wandered during the latter part of her speech, and he sipped his ale without evincing any curiosity as to the hint she had recently thrown out. After the manner of her kind, however, she at once proceeded to elucidate it.

" 'Tisn't as if I didn't have somebody as did ought to be a-doin' for I. There's my son — a big, strong, hearty chap — my right hand he did use to be there's a deal to be done about this here place, ye know."

"I do 'low there is," agreed Baverstock absently.

" 'Tisn't only the public," she continued, "tho' I d' 'low it be a bit hard for two women to have to manage all they menfolk — but there's a bit of a farm to be seen to. Well, when I say a farm I do mean a couple o' cows and a few pigs and chicken and that; and we do always grow our own spuds and greens, you know, and a few ranks o' roots to help out wi' for the cows in the winter. A man be wanted for all that kind o' work, and it do seem hard as I should have to throw away my dibs to strangers when I mid have my own flesh and blood a-workin' for nothin'."

"It do," agreed Baverstock, this time with more attention.

"Why don't your son do it then?" he inquired after a pause.

"Why?" repeated Mrs. Cluett in a tone of deep disgust. "Because he've a-been and gone and got married — that's why, the unnat'ral fellow," she added witheringly.

The young man surveyed her without hazarding a remark; those strange eyes of his remained as impassive as ever, but the corners of his mouth turned slightly upwards.

"I warn't a-goin' to let en bring his wife here," continued the old woman. "I didn't never fancy her, and 'twas again' my will he did take up wi' her. 'You don't bring her here,' I says — 'Then I don't stop here,' says he. 'All right, my lad,' says I, 'ye can march!' So he marched. He be a-workin' over to new brewery now — down in the town."

Baverstock apparently considered that this communication called for no comment; at all events he made none.

Mrs. Cluett, who had wrought herself up to the point of exposing the full extent of her grievances, was no whit abashed by his silence, however, and continued excitedly.

"The menfolk — there! they do seem to think a poor lone 'ooman fit for nothin' but to make a laughin' stock on. Dear heart alive, 'tis enough to drive a body silly! Us can't seem to find a decent civil-spoke chap nowheres, can us, Alice? The minute a thing is not to their likin' up they comes wi' their sauce and their impudence, and off they goes."

The young man gazed at her with an increasing interest: —

"You be short-handed now, then, be ye?" asked he.

[229]

Mrs Cluett threw back her head with an ironical laugh.

"Short-handed! We be, so to speak, wi'out no hands at all. The last boy as worked here marched off o' Saturday. Turned up his nose at his good victuals, and answered I back when I spoke my mind to him about it. I'm sure I don't know where to look for another. And the 'taters bain't all in yet, and there's such a deal to do in this here place."

Adam Baverstock pushed back his chair and gazed at her for a moment reflectively.

"I do 'low I mid serve your turn so well as another," said he, in a calm and impartial tone, as of one in no way concerned in the issue.

Mrs. Cluett surveyed him dubiously, but Alice surreptitiously nipped her mother's elbow.

"Do seem to be a likely chap," she murmured.

Still with the judicial air befitting one about to conclude a bargain, Mrs. Cluett put various questions to the would-be assistant, her countenance brightening perceptibly as she ascertained that he had some knowledge of the management of cows, his father having kept one during the latter years of his life, that he knew all about pigs, that he didn't care what he turned his hand to, and that he was by no means particular in the matter of wages.

"I don't seem to know what to do next," he explained. "I mid be lookin' about me here, and I could fill in the time till you can light upon a man to your likin'. There's one thing," he added with that flicker of the lip which Alice had noted before, "I bain't one as 'ull ever give ye impudence — I bain't one as cares for much talk — I bain't

used to it, d'ye see. The wold man and me — there! There was weeks when we didn't so much as give each other the time o' day."

"Dear, to be sure! To think o' that now," said Alice, whose tongue was wont to wag pretty freely. "Wasn't it terr'ble lonesome for ye?"

"I didn't ever feel it so," returned Adam, "there's a deal o' company in the woods, and company as don't want talkin' to," he added with a laugh.

Mrs. Cluett now proceeded to enter into practical details. Adam's bundle contained, it seemed, all his worldly goods, a large wardrobe having been considered unnecessary in Tewley Warren, and such few sticks of furniture as the old man possessed having been purchased by his successor. He was therefore unhampered by any great need for space in his new quarters; yet he looked round the attic assigned to

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

him with a clouded face, noting which, his mistress sarcastically inquired if he didn't find it big enough.

"Oh, 'tis big enough," he returned; "big enough if a man can breathe in it."

He opened the tiny casement, and looked out: —

"I can see one tree," he exclaimed, in a tone of relief.

"And what mid ye want with trees?" she inquired. "You won't need to be lookin' out much when ye've a-had a proper good day's work."

And thereupon, informing him that it was time to "sarve pigs," and directing him as to the whereabouts of the meal-bucket, she descended to her own long neglected wash-tub.

Alice, however, still lingered in the passage, and observed

[231]

that, as Adam took off his coat preparatory to setting to work, he paused, with an odd little laugh to himself.

"I was near forgetting you," said he, peering into one of its capacious pockets and apparently addressing something inside.

"What have ye got there?" inquired Alice.

Adam carefully hung up the coat on a nail, thrust his hand into the pocket aforesaid, and produced a very small rabbit — a little furry ball with downy semi-transparent ears and bright beady eyes.

"I had to bring he along of I," he explained, as he stroked the little creature which sat quite contentedly in his brown palm.

"How did you make en so tame?" asked Alice.

"I've had en nigh upon a week now. 'Tis thanks to I he warn't made a stoat's breakfast on. They stoats — they be terr'ble varmint. I be always on the lookout for 'em. Well, this here little chap was bein' dragged along by a big 'un when I chanced to spy the pair of 'em. I made an end of Maister Stoat and I did take the little 'un home-along. He couldn't feed hisself, poor little thing, but we made shift, didn't us, little 'un? There, he can drink out of a teaspoon so sensible as a Christian."

"Do 'ee let I give en a drap o' milk now," cried Alice eagerly.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

The little rabbit justified his owner's proud assertion, and after refreshing himself in the manner indicated, was comfortably stowed away in a hay-lined basket.

"I were pure glad to bring he along of I," said Adam,

[232]

for the nonce communicative; "he'll mind me o' the woods, d'ye see. And I've a-brought these, too."

Thrusting his hand inside his waistcoat he brought out a few young fir shoots, green and tender, and deliciously aromatic as he bruised them with his strong fingers.

"Smell!" he exclaimed, thrusting them suddenly under Alice's pretty little freckled nose.

She sniffed, and remarked without enthusiasm that it was a nice smell enough.

"There's n'ar another like it," said Adam gruffly; and replacing them in his bosom he strode away to attend to the wants of the pigs.

Decidedly the new man-of-all-work at the Three Choughs was a queer fellow; all who came to the place agreed in this estimate of him. He worked well, but yet, as Mrs. Cluett frequently averred, as if "he didn't have no heart in it"; he was steady, civil, and obliging enough, but so silent, so unaccountably silent, that the regular visitors to the little inn could make nothing of him.

The only person who could ever induce him to talk was Alice Cluett, and then it was at rare moments, and upon odd, and, to her, uninteresting topics.

One evening he called out to her excitedly as she was crossing the little yard, declaring that he smelt the dew.

Alice paused beside him, inhaling the sweet air of the spring dusk with inquiring nostrils.

"They've a-been mowin' over t' Rectory to-day," said she, "I see'd gardener gettin' the machine out — 'tis the first time this spring. 'Tis the cut grass what you do smell I do 'low."

[233]

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Nay," cried Adam eagerly, " 'tis the dew. Who's to know it so well as me, my maid? Haven't I stood and smelt it time and again yonder in the woods at Chudbury? 'Tis the dew on the young leaves and the noo grass. I used to tramp it down, and then stan' still to smell it. The Warren must be lookin' fine now."

Even in the dusk she could see his eyes dilate, and that tell-tale mouth of his curl upwards.

"And there's scarce a tree to be seen here," he sighed presently.

"Lard," said practical Alice, "what a man you be, Adam! There's plenty o' things more worth lookin' at than trees, I d' 'low. There's fields wi' the crops comin' on so nice, and the river, and the road wi' all the folks' traps an' carts and wagons, and there's the gardens wi' flowers and 'taters and everything, and there's men and women, an' — an' maids," she added, tilting her chin saucily.

Adam brought back his eyes from the distant vision upon which they had been feasting to another vision nearer at hand, and his face relaxed.

"Ah, there's maids," he agreed. "I never knowed any maid afore I knowed you, Alice. There's times when ——"

He broke off suddenly.

"There's times when — what?" she inquired with interest.

"I could a'most be glad sometimes that I did come away from the Warren," said he. "I'm glad to know ye, Alice."

"Oh, and are ye?" rejoined she with a somewhat tremulous laugh.

"E-es," returned Adam reflectively, "I've see'd maids now and then when I did use to come down to buy a few

[234]

little oddments in the town, but I never took no notice of them — I never knowed any of them. I be glad to know you, Alice."

Alice made no answer. She picked a leaf from the hedge and chewed it. Had it not been so dark Adam might have noticed the sudden rush of colour that overspread her face.

"The chaps hereabouts do often seem to go out a-walkin' wi' maids," resumed Adam. "I were a-thinkin' — you and me mid go a-walkin' sometimes."

"We mid," she agreed.

"Sunday, maybe?" suggested Adam, with a sudden note of exultation in his voice. "If you could get off for a good long bit, Alice, we mid step up to Oakleigh Woods. I haven't been there yet, but they do tell I they're splendid."

"They're nice enough," said Alice, somewhat dubiously. "We'll have to see what mother says," she added.

"Do ye ax her then," suggested Adam.

Alice moved away from him, and glanced back over her shoulder.

"Maybe I will," said she.

Mrs. Cluett, on being consulted, was at first doubtful and inclined to be irate.

"This do seem like coortin'," she remarked severely.

Alice twisted the corner of her apron without replying. It certainly did look rather like courting.

"Be you and that chap thinking o' bein' sweethearts?" resumed Mrs. Cluett.

Alice raised defiant dark eyes: " 'Twouldn't be no such

very great harm if we was," she returned. "He be a likely chap, Adam be; he've a-got a few pounds laid by, and if him an' me was to make a match of it you wouldn't need to pay en no wage."

This was a practical aspect of the affair which had not hitherto struck Mrs. Cluett; her countenance relaxed.

"But he haven't axed I yet," said Alice discreetly.

Mrs. Cluett drew a long breath.

"Well I haven't got no objections to your walking out wi' he on Sunday, my dear," she remarked condescendingly; and Alice dropped her apron and went away smiling.

Sunday came, and the pair duly set forth, Mrs. Cluett watching their departure from the kitchen window, not without some elation, for indeed her maid was, as she

said to herself, a fine piece, and Adam, as he strode along by her side, was "so well set-up as a granadier".

Alice chattered away gaily while they walked, tucking up her pretty blue skirt to show her starched white petticoat, while her curly head, under its rose-crowned hat, turned this way and that as they passed friends and neighbours. Other heads turned to gaze after her, and many jests and laughs were exchanged, and not a few sly innuendos as to the possible outcome of events. Alice would laugh and blush then, and glance surreptitiously at Adam; but the ex-warrener was more taciturn even than usual that day, and though his face wore a contented expression, he appeared to take little heed of his surroundings.

Presently the girl became silent, and by-and-by distinctly cross; she lagged a little behind Adam; once or

[236]

twice she stumbled, and once paused, having tripped over a stone.

"What be to do?" inquired Adam, bringing down his eyes all at once from the horizon, where the irregular parti-coloured lines of Oakleigh Wood had hitherto held his gaze.

"You do walk so fast," complained Alice, "and the road be so rough — and —" in a still more aggrieved tone — "all the other boys and maids what we do meet be a-walkin' arm-in-crook."

"Come," said Adam diffidently, "us can do that too, I suppose."

Alice curved her arm, and he, after a little practice, supported her elbow in the recognised fashion prescribed for courting-folk. He looked down at her with a softened expression as they advanced afresh.

"Be enjoying of yourself, my maid?" he inquired.

"E-es," returned Alice dubiously. "Be you?"

"Jist about!" said Adam, at which she brightened visibly.

They now turned off the dusty road that for the last half-mile had climbed up almost perpendicularly, with the downs rolling away on one side and a carefully enclosed fir plantation skirting it on the other. A sheep-track that presently lost itself,

wound away over the downs between patches of grass and low-growing thorn and elder bushes to where Oakleigh Wood spread its exquisite, undulating length invitingly before them. Adam quickened his pace; his whole face lightened and brightened in a manner of which it had not hitherto seemed capable; presently he began to sing in a rich ringing joyous voice, and Alice,

[237]

clutching at his arm to stay his progress, exclaimed in amazement: —

"You do seem quite another man to-day!" she cried half petulantly.

"I d' 'low I be another man," answered he. "Let's run, maidie, let's run. Let's get there."

He caught her by the hand, and the girl, infected by his excitement, raced with him at her topmost speed. Off they flew over the springing turf and only paused, laughing, when they reached the shelter of the belt of firs which stood at the outskirts of the wood. The cool green fragrance was refreshing after that breathless race in the fierce sunshine; Alice's eyes were dancing and her heart leaping, but Adam had suddenly become grave again; when he spoke it was in a subdued voice almost as if he were in church, the girl thought. Nevertheless he looked very tenderly at her as he touched her lightly on the shoulder.

"Now, maidie," said he, "I be goin' to show ye such things as ye did never see in your life — I be a-goin' to let ye into a few of the secrets o' this place."

"Ye've never been here yourself afore," protested Alice.

"I know 'em all the same," returned Adam. "I do know all about woods. A squirrel, see! Look yon."

"Where?" whispered Alice.

"On the big crooked branch there. Keep still, and he'll come nigh us."

As they stood motionless the little creature did indeed come frolicking downwards from bough to bough, pausing to glance at them, leaping away in feigned terror, returning for closer inspection, then, evidently deciding that they

[238]

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

were not, and could never have been, alive, and were, in consequence, not dangerous, sitting up, chattering, a yard or two above their heads. He was presently joined by a friend, or it might be a rival; a lively discussion ensued, a mad scamper, a protracted chase, the two finally disappearing in the inner depths of the wood.

"Let's go," said Alice.

She had been amused and interested, but felt nevertheless somewhat disappointed. This was the strangest courting she had ever heard of: it seemed hardly worth while to have walked three miles on a Sunday afternoon merely to watch the antics of a couple of squirrels. But Adam was perfectly happy; for the first time since he had left the Warren he found himself in his element and at ease.

"If you do know how to treat 'em, birds and beasts is tame enough," he remarked. "There, the very varmint 'ull be friendly wi' you. There was a wold weasel yonder in the Warren what did use to have reg'lar games wi' me. He knowed I were arter him, d'ye see, and he were that cunnin' he did lead I a dance for months and months. I do 'low the creature 'j'yed it. When I did take en out o' the gin at last he did grin up in my face as if he were a-sayin' 'ye be upsides wi' me at last, wold chap!' — I could a'most have found it in my heart to let him go, but I dursn't, along o' my father. Hush, look!"

A green woodpecker was climbing up the tree near which they had halted; the pair watched him until he took wing, and then pursued their way. Alice's heart was sinking more and more; she yawned once or twice in a frank, undisguised way, and walked ever more

[239]

"Hark!" cried Adam jubilantly, "the cuckoo. 'Tis the first time I've heard en — he be late to-year."

"Have ye got any money about ye?" inquired Alice eagerly. "Turn it round quick, if ye have."

"What for?"

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Why, for luck, sure. Didn't ye know that? You must turn your money first time you do hear cuckoo cry so as you'll have plenty more to-year."

Adam's fingers dropped from the waistcoat pocket where they had been vaguely fumbling.

"What's money to me?" he muttered, as, with head thrown back and brows frowning with eagerness, he followed the course of certain black specks which at that moment were flying high over the wood.

"Wild duck!" he remarked presently.

Alice turned on him in desperation.

"Well, I be a-goin' for to sit down," she remarked. "I've a-brought a bit o' summat to eat wi' me."

She produced from the little basket which she had carried sundry slices of cake which she offered to Baverstock.

"I did bring seed-cake a-purpose because you did say you liked it best," she observed in an expectant tone. But Adam's dark eyes continued to rove even while he ate, and his only response was inconsequent enough: —

"Don't it taste good out o' door?"

Alice edged away from him and munched in silence, and presently tears of mortification welled into her eyes. Adam, returning on tiptoe from a cautious expedition to inspect a nuthatch's nest in the hole of a tree, suddenly took note of her woeful expression, and paused aghast.

[240]

"What be cryin' for, maidie?" he asked in so kind a tone, that the tears rolled down upon her cheeks, and a little unexpected sob burst forth.

"I don't know," she murmured; then petulantly: "I wish I hadn't come!"

Adam's face fell.

"Don't 'ee like being here? I thought ye'd be so pleased."

The sense of injury now overcame maidenly reserve.

"You do never say a word to I. You don't so much as look at I. I mid be a stock or a stone," she added passionately.

Adam surveyed her with dawning comprehension; during the silence that intervened the rustling of the leaves could be heard, the distant notes of a lark circling upwards from the downs beyond the woods, the chirp of nestlings, the irrepressible laughter of a gleeful squirrel. Perhaps all this cheerful bustle of the sunshiny spring awoke in the man's breast certain hitherto dormant instincts. He, too, was young, and love and springtime go hand-in-hand. He stooped, laid a tentative forefinger gently under Alice's round chin, tilted it slightly, and gazed down into the tearful eyes.

"Ye mustn't cry, my maid," said he, and then he kissed her.

They came out of the wood as the sun was sinking, hand-in-hand as before, but walking sedately now, and with a glow upon their faces other than the glow which was dying the fir-boles crimson, and making the gorse flame.

[241]

Alice was in the seventh heaven, and as for Adam, perhaps he too had learnt a new secret in the greenwood, the existence of which had been hitherto unguessed.

"Well?" said Mrs. Cluett as the couple parted by the yard door.

"Well," returned Alice, with a conscious laugh.

"You do seem to be gettin' along," pursued the mother.

"E-es, we be gettin' along," conceded Alice, but no more would she say.

She was subsequently forced to own to herself, however, that they did not get on very fast. Adam was incomprehensible to her, and frequently exasperating; and more than once he seemed puzzled and irritated by things that Alice said and did. Mrs. Cluett, for her part, blamed them both with equal impartiality. Now she would aver that Alice was a simpleton, now that Adam was a fool. Was the thing to be or was it not to be? she wanted to know; even if it was to be Mrs. Cluett was not sure that she cared so very much about it; but if it was not to be, there was no manner of use in Alice wasting her time.

Meanwhile the couple walked together frequently, talked little, and quarrelled more than once. On that warm June night, for instance, when Adam, rolling himself in his blanket, stretched himself in the orchard to sleep under the stars, Alice's indignation was to the full as great as her mother's; while the day the girl refused Adam's offer of

pine-cones for her fire, on the ground that they popped like pistols and smelt of turpentine, her lover's resentment had flashed forth in words fierce and strong.

[241]

"You do never seem to care for the things what I like," he summed up.

To each the other was an unknown quantity; the mutual attraction was almost counterbalanced by a shyness begotten of the knowledge of being misunderstood.

The crisis came one summer's night — a night long remembered in the village, for there broke such a storm over the land as had not been known, the old folks said, since the days of their childhood. A brooding and oppressive stillness reigned at first, and then came lightning that seemed to split the heavens, and thunder that roared like a thousand menacing cannons. Alice sat crouched in a corner with a face as white as a sheet and her fingers in her ears; and Mrs. Cluett hurried round the house, closing doors and windows, and fastening shutters. As she was about to shut the door leading to the yard, a sudden flash revealed to her a motionless figure standing without, a few paces away.

"Dear heart alive! 'Tis never you, Adam."

She had seen his face transfigured in the momentary gleam, the eyes exultant, the lips parted in rapture.

"Isn't it grand?" came Adam's voice, tremulous with excitement, as the darkness enfolded him once more, and the mystic artillery crashed over their heads.

"The chap's daft!" exclaimed Mrs. Cluett. "Come in this minute. You'll be struck dead afore me eyes. We don't want no carpses in the house, do us, Alice?"

But Alice made no response.

"Lard save us!" ejaculated Mrs. Cluett, as a new flash lit up all the surrounding country, revealing the cattle

[243]

huddled together in the adjacent fields, the hedges, the trees, Adam's face, eager, enraptured, as before. She darted out and seized him by the arm.

"Come in, I tell 'ee," she cried. "I'll not have ye standing there no more."

As he turned towards her half-dazed, she dragged him in, and had shut and bolted the door before he recovered his wits. The air was stifling inside the house; the paraffin lamp reeked; the gusts of storm-wind which arose every now and then puffed volumes of acrid wood-smoke down the chimney.

"A man mid choke here," growled Adam.

"To bed wi' ye then!" cried Mrs. Cluett indignantly. "Us be a-goin' too — 'tis late enough."

She took up the lamp as she spoke, and roused Alice by a jerk of the sleeve. Adam went creaking upstairs, and threw himself dressed upon his bed. The atmosphere of his little attic-room, sun-baked as it had been through all that breathless day, was like that of a furnace; he felt his brain reel and was oppressed almost to suffocation. The storm continued, flash after flash playing on his narrow window; he could see the tip of his one fir-tree, now motionless, transfixed as it were, now swaying in a puff of wind that died away as suddenly as it came.

The house was very silent now, and permeated by the odour of Mrs. Cluett's recently extinguished lamp. Adam sat up gasping. He thought of the Warren — of the close-growing trees stretching away about the free and happy man who dwelt beneath them. Once he, too, had stood with the woods wrapping him round, and the stars of

[244]

heaven over his head. Tewley must look grand to-night. As he thought of it the dark shadowy forms of the trees seemed to press upon him; he could hear their deep breathing, and share their expectancy.

Ha! there was a flash. How it would light up the beeches and play among the pines. Now the thunder! it would roar and reverberate among those billowing trees. The rain would come soon. First there would be a rush of wind, and ash and oak and beech would rustle and shiver, and the larches sway down all their slender length. And then, while the trees were bending and rocking, the rain would come — the cold, heavy, glorious rain. Adam caught his breath as he thought of it — how it would come down,

hissing among the leaves, splashing on the hot ground! How good the wet earth would smell, every strand of moss and fibre of grass adding its own spicy fragrance.

He leaped from his bed and almost at the same moment the tree outside his window was caught by a whirling wind and snapped. Then something seemed to snap, too, in Adam's brain and he laughed aloud. What was he doing there, in that suffocating room, when he was free to go that moment, if he chose, to Tewley Woods? What should hold him back — what should keep him? If he made haste he might yet reach the Warren in time for the rain.

In another moment he was out of the house, and when the next flash of lightning came it revealed a flying figure scudding along the whiteness of the road.

[245]

Alice cried bitterly over the defection of her wild man of the woods, but she consoled herself in time, and took a mate more to her mind, a practical person who sowed cabbages in the flower-border, and considered the view of the new brewery the finest in the neighbourhood.

But Adam Baverstock had passed for ever out of her life; as silently as he had come from the shadow of the trees into the spring sunshine, so had he vanished in the summer storm.

[246]

THE HOME-COMING OF DADA.

"I KNEW he was bound to be one of the first," said Mrs. Bunce triumphantly. "Why, he've a-been out there ever since the war broke out. Two year and seven month he've a-been there —and the hardships he's been through, and the fightin' he's done! There, I can't think how ever the Government had the heart to keep en out so long."

"There's others what have been out jist same as he have," returned her neighbour plaintively. "My Jan now — such a good boy as he be, too! — well, he've a-been out there months and months, and he've a-been in hospital!"

"As for fightin'," put in the shrewd-faced little man who formed the third party to the discussion, and whose opinion carried weight in the neighbourhood, for his vocation of carrier enabled him to pick up many items of news during his daily round, "as for fightin', Mrs Bunce, I don't mean to make little o' your husband, but there bain't nothin' wonderful about him doin' a lot o' fightin'. They all done that — 'twas what they were sent out for, and not a bit more credit to any of 'em nor for me to go joggin' along behind the wold horse here."

Both women reddened, and turned upon him angrily.

"If ye do think such things, ye did ought to be ashamed to say 'em," cried Mrs. Andrews. " 'Eroes — 'tis what they

[247]

be every man of 'em, Mr. Bright; and you did ought to know it, seein' as 'twas wrote up plain over the very Corn Exchange the day as peace was declared. 'All Honour to Our 'Eroes,' it said, in them little coloured lamps so 'andsome as it could be; and bain't there a song about 'they're 'eroes every one'?"

"And I'm sure ye can't say," chimed in little Mrs. Bunce, nodding her curly head emphatically, "as it be the same thing for a man to sit snug in his cart behind the quietest old harse in Darset as it is to leave your wife and your home and — and everything, and to go riskin' your life among Boers and Blacks in them wild parts out abroad."

"E-es," agreed her neighbour, making common cause with her against the enemy, "e-es, indeed, Mrs. Bunce. And your little boy wasn't so much as born when his dada was took away, was he? Many a time, I dare say, you did think to yourself as he'd never see the face of his child. I d' 'low he thought the same hisself goin' off, poor fellow! Ye'll agree that was a bit hard on the man, Mr. Bright, so little credit as ye be willin' to allow our soldiers. Ye'll agree 'twas hard on the man to go off, leavin' his missus to get through her trouble alone, and the child the first child, too, mind ye."

"If it had been the tenth you wouldn't pity him so much," said the carrier, with a dry chuckle. "There's some as don't think so much o' them things. Jim Marshall, now

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

— says I to Jim t'other say, 'Jim,' I says, 'I hear you've got an increase to your family'; and poor Jim, he looks at me and says, 'E-es,' he says, 'more hardship'."

[248]

Chuckling sardonically, he gathered up his reins and jogged on again, the women looking after him with indignant faces.

As the green "shed" of his van disappeared round the corner, their eyes by mutual accord reverted to each other, and Mrs. Andrews laughed disdainfully.

" 'Tis a queer cranky sort of body," she remarked; "a bachelor man. What can you expect?"

Mrs. Bunce's face was still pink with wrath, but she smiled upon the other woman.

"I should think your Jan did ought to come home soon now," she said handsomely; gratitude for Mrs. Andrews' timely sympathy causing her to be for the moment almost willing to admit there might be another soldier of some merit in the British Army besides Private William Bunce.

"I'm sure I hope so," responded her neighbour rather dismally. "You are safe to get your husband back next week, anyhow."

"Next week," echoed Nellie Bunce joyfully. "Yes, he says in his last letter they was to start in a week, and I've a-counted up the time, and he did ought to land at Southampton Saturday week."

"I d' 'low ye'll be busy gettin' all ready for him," said the older woman, falling into an easy attitude with her hands on her hips, the better to contemplate her pretty neighbour.

"I d' 'low I be," responded Nellie, enthusiastically. "I be goin' to give en the best welcome I can, ye mid be sure. I be cleanin' up the house fro' top to bottom, and I be goin' to paper the kitchen. I've bought paper already; I

[249]

reckon I could easy do it myself; the wall aint so very high and the room hain't too big neither."

" 'Tis a stiffish job for a woman though," returned Mrs. Andrews dubiously. "If Andrews wasn't so bad with the lumbagey, I'd get en to lend ye a hand; but he's that stiff, poor man, he can scarcely so much as turn hisself in bed."

"Oh, I'll manage," returned Mrs. Bunce, nodding brightly. "I'm a great one for contrivin', and 't'ull be summat to tell Bill as I've a-done it myself."

"It'll take you all your time," protested Mrs. Andrews, and they parted.

During the ensuing days Nellie was indeed up to her eyes in work, carrying out vigorously her plan of cleaning and polishing the house from top to bottom. Baby Billy, who had hitherto considered himself a person of very great importance, found himself hustled hither and thither as he had never been in the whole of his existence, a period extending over about thirty months.

On one particular afternoon, when every washable article in the house was in Nellie's tub, he was bidden to play out of doors, and finding the maternal eye less on the alert than usual, surreptitiously opened the garden gate and wandered to the forbidden precincts of the lane.

He trotted along for nearly a quarter of a mile, until he reached a particularly delectable corner graced by a large rubbish-heap, which he proceeded to investigate with huge satisfaction, carrying one treasure after another over the way, sitting down to examine it, and immediately rolling on to his legs again to procure some yet more coveted object.

[250]

At last, however, he secured two prizes, than which nothing more desirable could be imagined, and with a sigh of satisfaction toddled for the last time across the lane and sat down to enjoy them at his leisure. The broken jam-pot was immediately filled with sand, while the rusty knife, grasped by its fragmentary handle, could be used in a variety of ways — so Billy discovered — as a spade, as a saw, as a chopper.

He was engaged in mincing a dock leaf very small on a flat stone, his mouth opening and shutting in accompaniment to his labours, when he was suddenly hailed by

somebody who had abruptly turned the corner of the lane, somebody who was probably on his way from the town.

"Hello!" cried this somebody.

"Hello!" responded Billy, pausing with his knife poised in mid air and looking up with a pair of very big and very blue eyes. He had to tilt his head quite a long way back to do so, for the new comer was tall. Billy was a little startled; to begin with the new comer was a man, and he was not sure that he liked men — they cracked whips sometimes, and spoke loud and gruff, particularly when, as occasionally happened, Billy chanced to run across the road immediately in front of their horses; then he had funny brown clothes nobody that Billy had ever seen wore clothes like that; and he had a brown face too, a face so very, very brown that it gave his blue eyes a strange look. Billy was secretly a good deal frightened, but being a soldier's son he only clutched his knife the harder and said, "Hello!" again, as the stranger continued to look at him without speaking.

[251]

"I rather think I ought to know you, my lad," said the man at last, in a queer quavering voice. "I'd swear by that little cocked nose. What's your name, eh?"

"Billy," responded the child promptly.

"Right you are!" cried the man, and he caught him up in his arms, knife and jam-pot and all. "Let's hear the rest of it, though. Billy what?"

"I want to get down," asserted the urchin, vigorously struggling. "I want to get down and make a pudden for my dada."

The man grimaced, and instantly set the child upon his legs.

"Perhaps we've made a mistake after all," he said; "perhaps you are some other chap's Billy. Where does your dada live, young 'un? — tell us that."

Billy had by this time squatted on the ground again, and was once more chopping at his dock leaf. He did not answer until the man had twice repeated his question, then he explained.

"My dada's tummin' home. He's tummin' in a ship — and a puff-puff," he added, as an after-thought.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

“Right you are,” cried the brown-faced man again, and he caught him up in his arms once more and kissed him. “I thought I’d know my little woman’s nose among a thousand, and yours is so like it as one pea is like another. Come, let’s go and look for mammy.”

Billy was at first disposed to protest, but something at once merry and tender in the man’s blue eyes disarmed suspicion; and when he presently found himself hoisted on a broad shoulder, and was thus carried at galloping speed

[252]

down the lane and through the village; when, moreover, this self-constituted steed actually vaulted the garden gate, and covered the tiny path that intervened between it and the cottage door with two strides, he was not only reassured but jubilant.

They could see “mammy” bending over the wash-tub through the open kitchen door, very red in the face, very wet and draggled as to dress, and with one end of her hair straggling down; and the queer thing was that at sight of her the man suddenly came to a standstill and uttered a kind of choking cry. And then mammy turned round and dropped the shirt she had been wringing out, and fairly screamed as she came rushing across the kitchen. Then laughing and crying together she flung her arms round the brown man’s neck, heedless of the danger to which she was exposing herself from the broken jam-pot and the rusty knife which Billy was still brandishing; and kissed him, and rocked backwards and forwards with him, and seemed altogether to have taken leave of her senses.

After a moment’s breathless pause of astonishment, Billy thought it time to assert himself. He dropped his two treasures on the floor and burst into a loud wail. Then clutching hold of the new comer’s close-cropped fair head, he endeavoured with all his might to pull it away from the curly one that was pressed so close to it. And then mammy looked up, and her eyes were all wet, but her mouth was laughing.

“You mustn’t do that, sonny,” she said. “This is dada! Dada’s come home.”

Billy was dumb with dismay and disappointment, partly

[253]

at the discovery that the much-talked-of and hitherto unimagined dada was a man, partly because he was such a very brown man, but chiefly because he had arrived shorn of the glories of the ship and the puff-puff which he had understood were to accompany him. So he sat still and rather sulky on the khaki shoulder while Private Bunce explained how he had caught sight of the little chap, and how he at once "spotted" him by that little nose of his, and how disappointed he had been when for a moment he had thought it was not his Billy after all, but some other quite uninteresting Billy belonging to another fellow.

"But I found him all right," he summed up triumphantly, "and I found you, little woman — lookin' tip-top you are, just about! Lard, it do seem a mortal time since I left you, my girl."

"Oh, Bill, I meant to have everything so nice for 'ee," cried Nellie. "Dear, to think there's nothin' ready! I'm sure I'm not fit to be seen myself."

She glanced regretfully towards the wash-tub. Her pink blouse was in there — the blouse Bill had always said he liked — and her lace collar and the little ruffles for her wrists. The old blue cotton gown which she wore was not only faded and patched, but soiled and almost wet through.

"You're lookin' just splendid though," cried her husband. "Why, that there's the very gown you used to wear when we went a-coortin' — I mind it well — that little wavy stripe. I used to think it the prettiest thing I ever did see. And here's the little curl comin' down what I used to kiss when we was a-walkin' down by the river."

[254]

"Oh, Bill, is it comin' down? I wanted to be so tidy and nice. I reckoned ye was comin' next week, ye know."

"I come over wi' the colonel. He come across a bit sooner nor we expected, bein' knocked up wi' one thing and another. 'The sooner the better,' thinks I."

"Of course," cried Nellie fervently; "the sooner the better indeed. But we be all in a caddle here. There, the window curtains and the best table-cloth and the very bedquilt is in the tub, and I haven't got any meat in the house! I thought Billy and me ud

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

go a bit short this week, so's to have a reg'lar feast when you did come home. And — and ——"

"Now, don't you fret, old girl; we hadn't no tablecloth nor yet bed-quilts out on the veldt. And as for meat — blowed if I do care so very much for meat. But I tell ye what I would like."

"What?" cried Nellie breathlessly.

"What I would like more nor any earthly thing," said Bill emphatically, but with a twinkle in his eye, "is just 'taters — 'taters done wi' a bit o' drippin', hot and tasty, the way you did often do 'em."

Nellie drew a long breath of relief.

"Them's easy got," she said jubilantly, but almost immediately her face fell again. "It do seem a poor kind o' welcome," she murmured, "and I ——"

Private Bunce deposited his son and heir upon the floor, the better to bestow a really satisfactory embrace upon the little sunburnt woman. She was exceedingly damp and smelt very strongly of soap, but he did not seem to mind.

[255]

"Now, look here," he said, "you couldn't give I a better welcome nor what you've a-done. This here's home — home as I did so often think of and long for; and here you be, my wold 'ooman, lookin' just same as ever — just same as I so often seed ye in my mind, and I used to dream about ye many a time, and wake up and find mysel' lyin' on the sand. This here's home and this here's my little 'ooman — and I don't want nothin' else, wi'out it's this young shaver," he added as an after-thought.

And so, while the wash-tub steamed away unheeded in the back premises, a very merry party sat down to an impromptu meal. The 'taters were duly set forth, and Nellie, cleaned up and tidy, poured out tea, and Private Bunce cut huge slices from the crusty loaf, and declared he hadn't had such a blow-out, no, not since he sailed from Southampton.

"To my mind, Nellie," he cried presently, "the room do seem to look more cheerful like wi'out the winder curtains. A body notices the paper more — the dear old paper what I did stick up for 'ee myself."

Nellie opened her mouth as though to speak, but changed her mind and closed it again.

"I tell you what it is," cried Private Bunce enthusiastically, "the place wouldn't look itself wi'out that wall-paper. I wouldn't have it changed for anything."

Then Nellie burst out laughing and clapped her hands.

[256]

THE MAJESTY OF THE LAW.

THEY were cutting Farmer Fowler's largest hayfield; it was eleven o'clock, and the men had just "knocked off" for the light meal known in those parts as "nuncheon". A big flagon of cider was being passed round from one to the other, accompanied by goodly slices of bread and cheese. The farmer himself stood a little apart under the shade of a large elm which grew midway in the hedgerow that divided this field from its neighbour, paying a half scornful attention to the scraps of talk with which the labourers seasoned their meal. He himself was not given to self-indulgence, and inwardly chafed at the loss of this half-hour from the busiest time of the day. He had worked as hard as any of his men, and was, indeed, hardly to be distinguished from them, except by the better quality of his clothes. He was a tall, strong-looking fellow, with a face as sunburnt as any of theirs, and arms as muscular and brown. He was coatless, and wore a great chip hat; his shirt-sleeves were rolled up above his elbows, and his shirt was open at the throat. Two teams of horses stood in the shadow of the hedge, plucking at the twigs or stretching down their necks towards the grass which they could not reach; the vast field, half cut, lay

[257]

shimmering before him in a blaze of light; the dome overhead glowed almost to whiteness, for the sun at this hour was intolerably hot. Yet even as the master gazed, impatiently longing for the moment when he could set his hinds to work again, he saw a figure rapidly crossing the field, looking from right to left, as though in search of some one. It was the figure of a young woman; so much he could divine from the shapely

outline and springing ease of motion, but her face was at first lost to him under the deep shade of her broad-brimmed hat. She approached the group of labourers first, and made some query in a tone too low for him to distinguish the words. He saw his foreman, however, turn towards the tree beneath which he himself stood and jerk his thumb over his shoulder. Evidently the young woman had come in search of him.

She made her way towards him, walking more slowly, and indicating by her aspect a certain amount of diffidence. A comely girl — he could see that now — dark-eyed, dark-haired, and plowing with health and life.

“If you please, sir,” she began timidly, “I came — my father sent me. It’s about the taxes.”

She drew from her pocket a little blue paper of familiar aspect; the demand-note for the rates collected four times a year by the Overseers of the Branstone Union. The angry colour glowed in Jacob Fowler’s face as he twitched the paper from her hand.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he cried; “what have you got to do with it?”

“I am Isaac Masters’ daughter, of Little Branstone,” she said hastily. “He collects the rates for our parish, but

he’s very ill in bed. He’s had a stroke, poor Father has, and I’m doing his work for him.”

“He should have known better than to send you to me,” returned Jacob, still wrathfully. “I never heard sich a tale i’ my life. Sendin’ a maid to collect the rates! Dally!
Where will the women-folk stop?’

“Nobody else made any objection,” said the girl, with a little toss of her head. “I’ve got it all right, except yours; and Father thought I’d best come and ask for it.”

“Then you can tell your father as he did make a very great mistake,” thundered Fowler. “ ’Tis bad enough to be bothered about they dalled rates wi’out havin’ a woman set up over you.”

He tore the paper into fragments as he spoke, scattering them to the breeze. “There, you jist turn about and go home-along, my maid, and tell your father that’s my

answer. If your father bain't fit to do his work hissel', he did ought to get somebody else to do it for 'en — some other man. The notion o' sendin' a maid! I never did hear o' sich a piece o' cheek!"

The girl, without waiting for the end of his indignant commentary, had turned about as he had advised, and was now walking swiftly away, her head held very high, angry tears on her thick lashes. Jacob impatiently jerked out his watch; it wanted still ten minutes of the time when work would have to be resumed. He dropped the watch into his pocket again, whistling under his breath, a good deal out of tune. Once more fragments of the men's talk reached his unwilling ears.

"That be Bethia Masters, that be — a wonderful good

[259]

maid. They d' say the wold man 'ud be fair lost wi'out her. The Parish Council did give her leave to take his place for a bit so long as there was a chance he mid get better." "She be a shapely maid and a vitty one." "E-es, she's well enough; looks a bit tired now, walkin' i' the heat three mile here and three mile back." "E-es, and a sarcin' at the end o't," chuckled one old fellow under his breath. "Our maister, he did gi' 't to her! I heerd 'en. Our maister bain't partial to payin' rates at any time, and he didn't reckon for to hand over his money to a 'ooman."

Farmer Fowler watched the retreating figure idly; it was true she was a shapely maid. How lightly and rapidly she walked: 'twas a long way, too — three miles and more. He could have wished he had not been quite so hard with her. He might have asked her to sit down and rest for a while; he might have offered her a glass of cider. He almost wondered at his own outburst of irritation as he looked back on it now, and watched the girl's retreating form with an increasing sense of shame.

The toilsome day was over at last, the horses stabled, the men fed. Farmer Fowler was smoking the pipe of peace in his trellised porch with a pleasant sense of weariness. It was good to rest there under the honeysuckle in the twilight, and to think of how much had been accomplished during the long sunny hours which had preceded it.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

The sound of a light foot caused him to raise his eyes, which he had partially closed a few moments before, and the ensuing click of the garden gate made him sit upright

[260]

and crane forward his head. A girl's figure was making its way down the little paved path, a girl's voice once more greeted him tremulously.

"If you please, Mr. Fowler, I'm sorry to trouble you, but ——"

Jacob Fowler in the evening was a different person to the Jacob Fowler of the fields; he stretched out his hand and drew her forward by the sleeve.

"Sit down, my maid," he said; "sit ye down. You've a-had a longish walk, and for the second time to-day, too."

Bethia came into the shadow of the porch; her face looked pale in the dim light, and he could see the bosom of her light dress rise and fall quickly with her rapid breath.

"If you please, sir," she began again, "I know you'll be vexed, but Father, he's very much undone about the taxes. He'll be gettin' into trouble, he says, if he doesn't send the money off to-morrow. He made me come back and ask you again. We'd take it very kind if you'd let us have what's owing, sir."

Her tremulous tone smote Jacob; stretching out his big hand once more, he patted her shoulder encouragingly.

"There, don't ye be afeard, my maid; don't ye. I'll not bite ye."

A dimple peeped out near Bethia's lip. "You very nearly did bite me this morning," she said.

"Nay, now," returned Jacob, smiling beneath his thick beard, "I weren't a-goin' to bite ye; I was on'y barkin', maid. Lard, if you did know I, you'd say wi' the rest of 'em that my bark was worse nor my bite. There! what

[261]

about this trifle o' money as I owe for the rates? How much is it? Dally! I don't know how 'tis, but it fair goes agen me to pay out money for taxes. It do seem so unfair when

a man's farm's his own — land and house and all — for Government to go and say, 'You've a-got a house, and you've a-got land as your father and grandfather have a-bought wi' their own money — you must pay out for that, my lad; you must hand over whatever we pleases to ax for.' 'Tisn't as if they'd consult a man. If they was to say to I, 'Mr. Fowler, you be a warmish man, and there's a good few poor folk up i' the union; what be you willin' to allow us for them?' I'd call that fair enough and I'd tell 'em straight out what I was willin' to 'low. But no; they goes and settles it all among theirselves wi' never a word to nobody, and jist sends out a paper wi'out by your leave or wi' your leave. 'You be to pay so much, whether you do like it or whether you don't.' 'Tain't fair."

"I dare say it isn't, sir," rejoined Bethia, very meekly; "but I'm not askin' you on account of the Government — I'm just askin' you for Father's sake. He's fretting terribly, and the doctor says he oughtn't to upset himself."

"Well, I don't mind if I do make an end o' this here business for your father's sake, maidy; but I d' 'low I'd jist so soon do it for yours."

"For mine!"

"E-es, because you do ask I so pretty. I did speak a bit sharp to ye this mornin', but it was along o' being vexed wi' the Government — I wasn't really vexed wi' you, my dear."

Bethia began to laugh; her little white teeth flashed

[262]

out in the most charming way — her bright eyes lit up. Jacob gazed at her with increasing favour.

"I bain't vexed wi' you, my dear," he repeated affably, and then suddenly standing up, darted into the house. In a few minutes he emerged again carrying a little packet, which he handed to her.

"It be all there, wrapped up i' that bit o' paper; you'd best count it and see as it be right. Will ye take a glass o' milk or summat?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Fowler; I'm very much obliged, but I think I must be getting home now. It's growin' dark, and my father will be anxious."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Wouldn't you like nothin'?" insisted Jacob. "A posy o' flowers or summat? There's a-many of 'em growin' i' the garden, and nobody ever thinks for to pick 'em."

"Of course not; a man does not care for such things, I know. You live all alone, don't you, Mr. Fowler?"

"All alone, my maid, since my poor mother died. She went to the New House fifteen year ago. I'm what you mid call a reg'lar wold bachelor, I be."

He threw out this last remark with such an obvious wish to be contradicted that Bethia hastened to return, "Not so old as that, I'm sure, Mr. Fowler. My father always speaks of you as a young man."

"I be jist upon farty," returned Jacob, with surprising promptitude. "Farty; that be my age. Not so old for a man."

"Not at all old," returned Bethia very politely; then, extending her hand, "I'll say good-night now, sir."

"Won't you have a posy, then? Do. Help yourself,

[263]

my maid. I'll walk a piece o' the way home wi' you, and then you needn't be afeard."

"Very well, and thank you kindly."

She followed him out of the porch, and up a path that led round the house to the old-fashioned garden at the rear, where there were roses, and lilies, and pinks, and sweet-williams growing in a glorious medley. She uttered little shrieks of delight, as she ran hither and thither, breaking off here a cluster of roses, there a lily-head. Jacob stalked silently behind her, clasp-knife in hand, cutting ten stalks where she had culled one, until at last a very sheaf of flowers rested in his arms.

"I'll have to go all the way to carry it for you," he remarked in a satisfied tone.

Bethia turned and clapped her hands together. "Oh, what a lot! I never thought you were going to get all those for me. How shall I ever thank you?"

"I'll carry it for you," repeated Jacob. "This way out, my dear; there's a little gate jist here."

A faint after-glow still lingered on the horizon, but already the silver sickle of the young moon appeared in the transparent sky. A bat circled round their heads from

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

time to time, yet some love-lorn thrush serenaded his mate somewhere not far off, his liquid ecstatic notes filling the air, as it seemed. Great waves of perfume were wafted to Bethia's nostrils as she paced along beside the farmer, whose tall figure towered over her, the silhouette of his face showing clear above the irregular line of hedge.

As they walked he questioned her from time to time, and learned how the girl had only come back to live with her

[264]

parents within the past year, having been absent for some time teaching in a school at Dorchester.

"School-teachin'!" commented Jacob. "That be how you do speak so nice and clear. I speak awful broad myself — never had much eddication."

"Hadn't you?" returned Bethia, with interest.

"Nay, never had no time for that. My father, he died when I were a lad, and my mother weren't one as could manage a farm so very well. She was a bit soft, my poor mother, and very easy taken in. So I did put shoulder to the wheel, and I mid say I've been a-shovin' of it ever since."

"I wonder you didn't get married, Mr. Fowler," said Bethia, with perhaps a suspicion of archness in her voice.

Jacob only grunted in reply, and an embarrassed silence fell between them, and remained unbroken till they had reached Little Branstone village.

Jacob accompanied the girl down the by-lane which led to her home, and followed her into the kitchen; there, however, he refused to stay, in spite of Mrs. Masters' civil request that he would sit down and rest.

"Nay," he returned gruffly, "I'll be gettin' home-along now; I only come so far to carry this here posy."

Depositing his fragrant sheaf upon the table, he nodded right and left at mother and daughter, and withdrew.

"Dear! Well, to be sure! Dear heart alive, Bethia, ye could ha' knocked I down wi' a feather when he come marchin' in. Lard ha' mercy, maidy, you be clever to ha'

got Jacob Fowler for a beau. That there man do fair hate women of all sarts. There, he do never so much as

[265]

look at one — and to think of him a-walkin' all that long ways jist for to carry them flowers! He did give you the flowers, too, I suppose?"

"Yes," returned her daughter; "but you mustn't call him my beau, please, Mother. He only meant to be polite."

"Well, I'm sure he did never try to be polite to any maid afore," returned Mrs. Masters with conviction. "They do say he were crossed i' love when he were a young 'un. Did he give 'ee the money, child?"

"Yes, Mother, and was very nice and kind altogether. I think he was sorry for Father when I told him how ill he'd been."

"Oh, to be sure, that's it," agreed her mother jocosely. "All they flowers be for Father, too, I d' 'low. Come, let's fetch 'em up to 'en."

Poor old Masters, ill though he was, chuckled feebly on hearing the marvellous tale, and expressed in quavering tones his belief that his daughter was a-doin' pretty well for herself.

The girl, who had lived till now absolutely heart-whole, could not repress a certain flutter of excitement, and passed the next few days in a state of expectancy; but Jacob Fowler gave no further sign of life. Though he appeared at church on Sunday, he kept his face religiously turned away from the pretty tax-gatherer's, and at the conclusion of the service rushed from the door without pausing to look round.

Bethia bit her lip, and instead of dallying a little, as was her custom, to chat with one or other of her acquaintance, hastened home.

[266]

"Were Farmer Fowler there, my dear?" inquired her mother.

"Yes, but he didn't speak to me — he didn't take a bit of notice of me. Put that notion out of your head, Mother — there's nothing at all between him and me."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

Soon the attention of the little household was entirely absorbed by a more acute and immediate cause of trouble: poor old Masters, after a brave struggle, and in spite of the adjurations of his neighbours, found himself unable to "hold on"; he loosed his feeble grasp of life suddenly at last, and went out, as his wife sorrowfully remarked, "like the snoff of a candle".

After the funeral was over, the question of ways and means stared the mother and daughter in the face. Mrs. Masters did a little business — a very little business — with a small general shop; it was quite insufficient to support them. Her health was not good, and Bethia was determined not to leave her; there was no opening for her as a teacher in that village, and such sums as she might earn by taking in sewing would add very little to their modest income. She resolved to make a bold appeal to the Parish Council for permission to continue to fill her father's place.

"I could do it every bit as well as a man," she averred. "I have done it during the last few months. The accounts are all in order — I have found no difficulty anywhere. Do let me try, gentlemen."

The gentlemen in question were at first taken aback, then amused, finally moved. After all, they said to each other, there was no reason why the girl should not try. As long as the duties were discharged exactly and punctually,

[267]

there was no reason why they should not be undertaken by a woman as well as by a man.

"But there must be no favouritism, Miss Masters," said one, with a twinkle in his eye; "no letting off of any particular friend. You must be firm, even with your nearest and dearest. If people don't pay up after two or three applications, you must harden your heart and take out a summons."

"I will," said Bethia seriously.

In a few days the news of her installation as assistant overseer spread through the place, one of the first to hear of it being Jacob Fowler.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

Bethia was standing in the kitchen shelling peas one morning when his knock came at the door, almost immediately followed by the appearance of his large person from behind it.

"Be this here true what I've a-heard?" he inquired abruptly. "Be it true as you be a-goin' to carry on this rate-collecting same as your father did do?"

"Yes, Mr. Fowler," answered Bethia, not without a certain pride. "The Parish Council gentlemen think I can do it just as well as anybody; and I'm glad to say they've agreed to let me try."

"I don't agree, then," cried Jacob violently. "It bain't at all fit nor becomin' for a young 'ooman same as you to be a-goin' about from house to house, visitin' folks and axin' them for their money. It bain't proper, I tell 'ee."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed Bethia, with a toss of her pretty curly locks. "What's it to you, Mr. Fowler, anyhow?"

[268]

"I don't like it," growled Fowler. "Will you go and ax folks for it, same as you did ax I?"

"I shall leave a little note first," said Bethia, with a very business-like air, "a demand-note, you know. If they don't pay up I shall call personally."

"It bain't the right thing for a faymale," repeated Fowler sourly; "least of all for a young faymale. Folks 'ull be givin' ye impidence."

"Oh, no, they won't," returned Bethia with dignity. "I'm not one that anybody could take liberties with, Mr. Fowler."

He stood leaning against the table frowning.

"Will ye ax 'em rough-like, or will ye ax 'em civil?" he inquired, after ruminating for a while.

"Why, of course I shall be civil, Mr. Fowler."

"Will ye ax 'em so civil as ye did ax I?" he insisted with a kind of roar.

"I'm sure I don't know," stammered the girl, taken aback for a moment. "Yes," recovering herself, "certainly I shall. There's no reason why I should make any difference between you and anybody else."

"You tell I that to my face! You'll go a-speakin' 'em soft and a-smilin' at 'em pretty, jist same as ye did do to I! Dalled if I do allow! Dalled if I do, I say!"

"Really. Mr. Fowler," said Bethia with spirit, "I don't know what you mean. It's very rude of you to talk to me like that, and I do not see why you should interfere. I shall be business-like and polite, as I always try to be with everyone, and I shall be firm too. The Law will support me just the same as if I were a man."

[269]

"Dalled if I do allow it," repeated Jacob, still in a kind of muffled bellow. "A British ratepayer I be, and have a-been this twenty year and more, and I say I bain't a-goin' to allow it. I know my rights so well as any man, and I bain't a-goin' to be put upon by a 'ooman. I bain't a-goin' to allow any young faymale to be took out of her proper place and set up where she's no business to be. I'll have no faymale tax-collectors a-gaddin' about this here parish if I can prevent it. I'll protest, maid, see if I don't, and, what's more, not one farden o' rates will I pay into any faymale hands."

Bethia, more and more irritated by his manner, thought it time to assert herself finally; and withdrawing her hands from the basin of peas, and looking him full in the face, she returned, with great firmness, "Won't you, Mr. Fowler? Then I'll make you."

"Lard ha' mercy me! Listen to the maid!" exclaimed Jacob, bursting into a fit of ironical laughter. " 'I'll make ye,' says she. Look at her," pointing at the girl's slender form. "That be a good un! I tell 'ee, Miss Masters, you'll find it a bit hard to make I do anything I've not got a mind to do."

Bethia took up a pod again and split it viciously. "I've got the Law at my back," she remarked.

"Ho! ho! ho!" chuckled Jacob, this time with unfeigned merriment. "Listen to her!
The Law at her back indeed! Such a little small back it be! Why, maidy, I could jist finish ye off wi' one finger!"

"I'm not talking of brute force," said Bethia, with flashing eyes. "The Law is stronger than you, Mr. Fowler.

Now, if you'll kindly go away and let me get on with my work, I'll be much obliged."

But Jacob did not take the hint. He sat down on the table instead, and watched the girl as, with an affectation of ignoring his presence, she moved about, filling her saucepan at the tap, peeling the potatoes, setting them on to boil. She did everything swiftly, deftly, and gracefully, holding her head very erect meanwhile, and being a little sharper in her movements than usual on account of her inward irritation. By-and-by Mrs. Masters came creaking down the narrow stairs, and started back at the sight of the farmer.

"Dear! To be sure! I didn't know you had visitors here, Bethia, my dear. Won't you sit i' the armchair, Mr. Fowler? Do 'ee now. I'm sure 'tis very kind o' ye to come a-visitin' o' we in our trouble."

Bethia marched past her mother, removed the pot from the fire, and carried it over to the table.

"Could you make a little room, if you please?" she inquired tartly.

Jacob chuckled and rubbed his hands as he slowly removed his ponderous frame; then the remembrance of his former grievance returned to him, and he gazed at the widow loweringly.

"You don't like this here notion, Mrs. Masters, I hope?" he inquired severely.

"What notion, sir?" returned the poor woman, startled.

"Why, this here notion o' your daughter a-gaddin' about lookin' arter the rates."

"Well, you see, we be so hard pressed, we be," faltered

she. "My daughter do try to do her best to earn a little, all ways she can. I'm sorry as you've a-got objections. Mr. Fowler."

"It doesn't in the least matter if he's got objections or not," put in Bethia tartly. "It's no concern of Mr. Fowler's. So long as he pays up regularly he need not trouble himself."

Jacob got out of the armchair and once more approached the table.

"Look 'ee here," he said threateningly; "this here's past a joke. I do forbid ye for to do it — do ye hear?"

Bethia looked at him steadily. "I hear, and I can only repeat what I said before. Now, Mr. Fowler, will you please go away? I'm going to dish up."

"Bethia, my dear!" protested Mrs. Masters feebly. "There, she've a-got sich a spirit, Mr. Fowler, you must excuse her. She be a bit vexed, you see, wi' you findin' fault wi' her. I'm sure, the longer you stay, Mr. Fowler, the better we'm pleased. We've nothin' much fit to offer ye, but if ye'd like to sit down and take a bit wi' us you're truly welcome."

Bethia shot an indignant glance towards her parent, and Jacob stood hesitating for a moment; then with a laugh he drew up his chair to the table.

"I'll not refuse a good offer," he said.

Bethia fetched a plate, knife and fork, and glass, setting each before him with somewhat unnecessary clatter. Then she served up the vegetables, brought out a roll of butter and a small piece of cheese from the buttery, and took her place in silence.

[272]

"I'm sorry," began Mrs. Masters regretfully, "we've got nothing better to offer ye, Mr. Fowler. My daughter and me seldom eats meat of a week day."

"Don't make excuses, Mother," interrupted Bethia, with asperity. "Mr. Fowler knows very well that we are poor."

The meal proceeded in silence for the most part, Mrs. Masters making an occasional remark, to which Jacob responded by a gruff monosyllable. Bethia did not speak once, but had never looked prettier in her life; the angry sparkle still lingered in her eyes, and her cheeks were flushed. Whenever she glanced at the visitor her countenance took on an additional expression of haughtiness.

At the end of the repast Jacob stood up. "I'd like a word wi' ye private, Miss Masters."

"Oh, I beg pardon, I'm sure," apologised the poor old mother, hastening to efface herself.

As soon as her heavy footsteps were heard in the room upstairs the farmer turned to Bethia.

"I've a-come to see ye friendly like," he remarked, "and I'll come again. I ax ye, as a friend, my maid — will ye gie this notion up?"

Bethia looked if possible more indignant than before.

"No, Mr. Fowler," she returned promptly, "I tell you — as a friend — I won't."

"Then you'll ha' trouble wi' I, I warn 'ee," responded he, almost with a groan.

Jacob Fowler kept his word, and gave the poor little rate-collector an inconceivable amount of trouble.

He took no notice whatever of her demand-notes and official reminders; and when she called to see him in person,

[273]

though he received her with civility and even undisguised pleasure, he resolutely refused to part with a farthing. The friendliness with which he hailed her advent, and entered into conversation on indifferent subjects, gave place to a rigid silence as soon as she touched on the motive of her visit, and he would shake his head fiercely as often as she reverted to the point.

One day she found him in what she took to be a softened mood. It was in the spring, and the consciousness that it was grand weather for potato-setting, added to the recollection of a long and successful day's work, had put Jacob in an unusually good humour. He was smoking in his porch when she drew near, and at once invited her to sit down and rest.

"You do look a bit tired, my maid," he remarked; "tired and worried."

"I am tired and worried too," said Bethia, looking up at him appealingly. "I'm afraid of getting into trouble, Mr. Fowler."

"Oh," said Jacob, "how's that?"

"They will be down on me for not sending in the money regularly," returned the girl tremulously; "I've got it all in except yours."

Jacob, instead of immediately becoming wooden of aspect, as was his wont, gazed at her searchingly. "You'd be all right if you was to get mine?" he inquired.

"Yes — oh, yes, Mr. Fowler. Couldn't you pay up and have done with it?"

Jacob shook his head, but this time apparently more in sorrow than in anger.

[274]

"Can't be done, my maid. I've a-passed my word, d'ye see, and I be forced to stick to it."

"I think you are very unkind," said Bethia; "you are trying to force me to give up one of the few ways I have of making a living."

"E-es," said Jacob, " 'tis true; 'tis the very thing I be a-doin'. You said if I didn't pay up you'd make me — well, how be you a-goin' for to make me?"

"Oh, I suppose I'll have to send you a summons," cried she, with gathering anger. " 'Tis my duty and I must do it."

Jacob's face changed. The colour mounted in his brown cheeks, and when he spoke his voice was unsteady with surprise and wrath.

"You don't mean that," he said quickly. "You'd never do it."

"I'll have to do it," said Bethia, "if you force me to proceed to extremes. Oh, Mr. Fowler," she added, almost passionately, "can't you be sensible; can't you make an end of it once and for all? If I'd been a man instead of a girl you wouldn't persecute me like this. You'd think it quite natural for me to want to take my father's place, wouldn't you? What difference does it make? I can keep the accounts, and make the applications, just as well as any man. Why should you try to bully me?"

"Now look 'ee here, my maid," said Jacob, "if you come to that, 'tis you what be a-tryin' for to bully I. I've a-set my face again this 'ere notion. No respectable young 'ooman did ought to go a-trapesin' fro' one house to t'other, a puttin' herself for'ard and a-coaxin' folks out o'

[275]

their money, whether it be for the Government or whether it bain't. 'Tis a question between us two which can hold out longest. Now if you was to give in to I ——"

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"Well," said Bethia, bending forward with unconscious eagerness, "what would happen if I were to give in to you?"

Jacob took out his pipe and stared at her, and then he got up and paced about the little flagged path.

"What would happen?" she repeated sharply. "What would you advise me to do?"

"Oh, I don't know," returned Jacob confusedly. "I haven't had time for to think o' that."

It was now Bethia's turn to spring to her feet. "I think you are hard, and obstinate, and cruel! Yes, cruel, to try and put upon my poor mother and me! But I'll have an end of this shilly-shally work; you shall be forced to pay, sir."

She hastened down the path. Jacob, after delaying a moment to lay his pipe carefully in a corner of the seat, strode after her and opened the garden-gate, holding it for a moment so that she could not pass through.

Bethia glanced at him. He did not look angry, but resolute; his jaw was firmly set and his eyes steady. It struck her forcibly that he had a good face — honest, open, manly — and she realised with a little pang that it was probably turned towards her for the last time in friendship.

"I'll give you a month," she said waveringly.

"Ye mid as well say a year," returned Jacob. " 'Twill be all the same."

[276]

Thereupon he opened the gate and she went away.

The allotted time of grace passed very slowly, and though Bethia continued to post a little demand-note every week, no notice was taken either of her appeal or of herself.

Late on the last day of the month she was making her way back from the town with a very melancholy face, when, at a turn in the road, she suddenly encountered Jacob; Jacob in holiday attire, carrying a large nosegay of monthly roses and lilac.

"Hullo, my maid," he cried genially, "well met! I were just a-goin' to see you."

"Were you?" returned Bethia, in a very small constrained voice.

"E-es, I was a-bringin' you these here flowers. I seed 'em i' th' garden just now, and I thought you'd like 'em."

"Oh, Mr. Fowler, you shouldn't give them to me!" cried the girl with a catch in her voice. "I've — I've just been and taken out a summons against you."

"Oh, and have you?" said Jacob staring at her. "Well, that's summat."

"Yes," returned Bethia desperately. "I waited till the end of the month, and then I had to do it; it was my duty. Oh, dear; oh, dear!"

"Well, to think on 't," said Jacob, still apparently more surprised than angry. "Lard ha' mercy! That be a pretty thing for a maid to do."

"So you'd best take back your flowers," broke out Bethia. "I know everything's at an end between us. I've quite made up my mind to it."

[277]

"Ah," said Jacob, eyeing her thoughtfully; " 'tis queer once folks makes up their minds how a notion will stick i' their heads. Now all this month I've been a-thinkin' and a-thinkin' — I never was one to do a thing in a hurry — but at last I reckoned I'd got it settled. 'I'll do it,' I says, 'I'll ax the maid to marry I — that'll be the best way out of it. She'll not want to go again' I then,' I says. And you go and summons me."

Bethia burst out crying. "Oh, Jacob," she cried, "why couldn't you have done it before? If you had asked me kindly — if you had told me to give up for your sake, I — I — I ——"

She broke off, sobbing bitterly.

" 'Tis true," said Jacob regretfully, "I mid ha' axed ye a bit softer — I mid ha' spoke a bit more kind — but you did go and put my back up with stickin' to the notion so obstinate. Says I to myself, 'So soon as ever she gives in I'll ax her — but she must give in' — and you wouldn't. So then I thought — 'Dally! I'll ax her first and then we'll see.' And then you go and put the law on me afore I've time to open my mouth."

"Oh, Jacob! I waited a whole month," protested Bethia, almost inarticulately; "and you never said anything, and I thought you didn't care about me, and it seemed to be my duty."

She covered her face with her hands. Jacob stared at her for a moment, and then suddenly slapped his thigh and burst into a roar of laughter.

"I d' 'low the maid done it out o' pique," he cried ecstatically, "I d' 'low she did! She did do it along of

[278]

her feelin's bein' hurt with me a-holdin' back so long. That's a different story, my dear — a different story altogether! I bain't one to bear malice along o' that; 'twas but nat'ral arter all. E-es, I d' 'low I be a terrible slow-coach; but, ye see, I'd a-got set i' my bachelor ways, and it did take I a long time for to make up my mind; and then, as I do tell 'ee, I wur a-waitin' and expectin' for you to give in. But I've spoke now, and if you'll say the word, my dear, all can be forgive and forgot."

Bethia presumably did speak the word, for she resigned her post as tax-collector that very evening, and she and her Jacob were "asked in church" on the following Sunday.

As for that matter of the summons, it was settled "out of court".

[279]

THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT.

DANIEL CHAFFEY stood poised on a step-ladder nailing up the fine Gloire de Dijon rose which was trailed over the wall of his house. He had already performed the same operation for the jessamine which grew over the porch and for the purple clematis on the right of it. He had tied his dahlias so tightly and firmly to a variety of newly cut stakes, that each individual scarlet bloom reminded one in some measure of a choleric old gentleman suffering from a tight and high shirt-collar. He had scraped the little path till the cobble-stones of which it was composed stood revealed each almost in its entirety. From his exalted position he could survey the whole frontage of his own roof — a sight in which an artist would have revelled, for not only was the thatch itself mellowed by time and weather to the most exquisite variety of tones, but on its mouldering surface had sprung up a multitude of blooms, vying in brightness with those

of the garden beneath — not merely your common everyday mosses and lichens, though patches of these were to be found in every shade of emerald and topaz and silver, but flowers, real flowers, seemed to thrive there; saxifrages, toad-flax, snap-dragon, and, just where the bedroom gable jutted out, a flaming bunch of poppies. It will be seen from this that Daniel Chaffey's

[280]

house was an old one; it bore a date over the door, cut roughly in the weather-beaten stone —1701. It had mullioned windows with diamond panes, and an oaken door studded with nails. It had indeed once been the village schoolhouse, though the Chaffey family had been in possession of it now for many generations, and had farmed, more or less successfully, the small holding attached to it.

Daniel, himself, looked prosperous enough as he stood hammering and whistling, and occasionally pausing with his head on one side, and his mouth screwed up but emitting no sound, to survey his handiwork. He was a bullet-headed young man of about four or five-and-twenty, with twinkling blue eyes, and a face, the natural ruddy tone of which was overlaid by such a fine veneer of sunburn that it was now of a uniform brick-colour. His expression was jovial, not to say jocular; his mouth wore an habitual grin when it was not whistling, and on this particular occasion some inward source of jollity appeared to entertain him, for he not only frequently chuckled but winked to himself.

Having inserted the last tack into the crumbling wall, he paused, removing his hat and scratching his head meditatively; for the first time his face wore a somewhat serious, not to say puzzled expression, and his eyes travelled dubiously over the flaunting array of blossoming weeds on the roof.

"I wonder," quoth Daniel to himself, "if 'twould look better if I was to scrape out them there. Maybe the thatch wouldn't hold together, though — it's a-been agrowed over sich a many year, I d' 'low I'll let 'em bide — they do look well enough where they be."

[281]

And, after coming to this decision, he was preparing to descend from the ladder when he was suddenly hailed by a chorus of voices from the lane on the other side of his garden-hedge.

"Hello, Dan'l!" — "Hallo, old cock!" — "Well, bwoy, bist getten' all to rights afore weddin'?"

Daniel put on his hat and turned slowly round on his rung.

"E-es," he said, grinning sheepishly, "that's about it. The job's to be done the day arter to-morrow."

A party of young men had halted just outside his little gate; it was Saturday and, though only five o'clock, their field-work was over and they were now on their way to the allotments; a rough, sunburnt, merry-looking group, most of them bearing the marks of the day's toil on heated face and earth-stained apparel; one or two of them with spade and fork on shoulder, others with dangling empty sacks. September was drawing to a close and potato-getting was in full swing. It was observable that as they addressed Chaffey, each man assumed a knowing and jocular air; this one nudged his neighbour, that one winked at Daniel himself.

"You'm to be called home for last time to-morrow, bain't ye Dan'l?" inquired Abel Bolt, elbowing himself to the front.

"E-es," responded Daniel, "we be to be called last time to-morrow an' tied-up o' Monday."

Abel threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

"I should like to come to your weddin', Dan!" he cried ecstatically, "I d' 'low I should."

[282]

"Ye won't, though," retorted Chaffey. "Ye'll be jist in the thick o' your ploughin' — I thought o' that. I axed the Reverend to fix time a-purpose. No, we'll be wed on the quiet, Phoebe an' me — I settled that."

"There, 'tis real ill-natured o' you, Dan," cried one of the youths, looking archly at his comrades. "Sich a pretty sight as 'twill be. Sure it will! And your missus, sich a beauty!"

"Haw, haw, haw!" came the chorus again.

"Her eyes, now," giggled Abel, " 'twill be sich a convenience for the man to have a missus what can keep one eye on the dinner an' t'other on the garden."

"An' her figure," said Jarge Vacher, "did ye have to make the gate anyways larger, Dan?"

"No, there'd be no need for that," returned Abel, before Daniel could open his mouth. "The woman could get in very nicely sideways, more pertick'ler since she can see all round her like."

Chaffey's complexion had been gradually deepening from crimson to purple, and from purple to a fine rich mahogany, his smile had widened to an extent that was positively painful, but he spoke with unimpaired good-humour.

"Neighbours, you may laugh, but I do know what I'm about. I do know very well Phoebe Cosser bain't a beauty, but she's good, and I d' 'low she'll make I comfortable — an' that's the main p'int to look to. She mid be a bit older nor what I be ____"

Here the irreverent group in the road began to nudge each other and chuckle afresh; Chaffey sat down suddenly on the top of his ladder.

[283]

"What I d' say, neighbours, is," he began, "what my notion be — if ye'd give over sniggering for a moment," he cried with gathering ire, "I could make it plain to ye."

But they wouldn't give over; the merriment increased instead of diminishing, and at last Daniel, exclaiming that he would be dalled if he stood it any longer, leaped to the ground, and, dashing into his house, bolted the door behind him.

His friends, trooping into the little garden, serenaded him with a ballad which they thought suitable to his case, and having goaded him into declaring he would come

out in a minute and break their heads for them, withdrew in good order and pursued their interrupted course to the allotments.

Daniel waited until the last heavy footfall had died away, the last battered hat brim disappeared, and then came forth with a vengeful expression on his usually good-tempered face. He picked up the hammer and nails which he had scattered in his flight, shouldered his ladder and carried it round to the little shed in the rear, and then came back slowly to resume his labours in the garden.

"She be a good 'un," he muttered to himself, "let 'em say what they like, she be."

He paused to uplift and secure a tuft of golden rod which had fallen across the path.

"I never did take so mich notice of her eyes," he said to himself. "They bain't so crooked as that comes to — they can see well enough, and that's the p'int."

He plucked out a tuft of groundsel which had hitherto escaped his vigilant eye.

[284]

"There's nothin' so much amiss wi' her shape neither — I d' 'low I'd sooner have a nice little comfortable roundabout woman nor a great gawky faymale like a zowel or a speaker. If she's pluffy, she's sprack, an' that's the p'int."

Whenever Daniel uttered this last phrase he seemed to pluck up courage, and a momentary cheerfulness returned to his face, which, nevertheless, speedily became overcast again. Dall it all, he thought, why couldn't folks keep their tongues quiet. What was it to them what kind of missus Daniel chose, that they must come tormenting and ballyragging him? He didn't meddle wi' nobody, and didn't want nobody to meddle wi' he, but there, even the lord's roughrider stopped him on the road to deliver, as his opinion, that he, Daniel, had chosen a plain-headed one. Old Mrs. Inkpen of the shop had laughed at him for marrying a woman so many years older than himself. Well, she'd be all the more sensible.

"Let 'em laugh if they do have a mind to; it 'll not hurt Phoebe and I. We'll soon show 'em who's in the right."

And with that, he heaved a sigh and went indoors.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDiI SALAMANTiNi

Next day he went to call for Phoebe, whom he had promised to escort to afternoon church. She stood awaiting him in her own doorway, which she filled up pretty well it must be owned — a little ball of a woman with the ugliest, merriest face it was possible to conceive. She wore a very fine purple hat with a feather in the middle and two red roses on each side, and this arrangement of headgear seemed to accentuate the somewhat roving propensities

[285]

of her eyes. Pinned to her jacket was a bunch of natural roses that vied with these in hue, and in one stout hand she waved a posy, similar in colour and almost equal in size, which was intended for her swain.

At sight of her bright face Daniel forgot all his troubles, and after bestowing a sounding salute on her hard red cheek, stood straight and stiff to be decorated, then, "Come along, my dear," said he, and they set forth arm in crook, entirely satisfied with each other.

Nevertheless, as they walked through the churchyard, Daniel was conscious of a dawning sense of discomfort, for was not that Abel Bolt who stood under the yew tree, and who stepped aside with such exaggerated deference to let them pass? Even his hat seemed to Daniel to be cocked with a sarcastic air. Martha Hansford and Freza Pitcher nudged each other as Phoebe preceded him up the church — he was almost sure he saw Martha spread out her hands in allusion to Phoebe's figure, which certainly looked particularly ample in her thick cloth jacket. To increase his uneasiness Jarge Vacher took up his position immediately behind him. It must be owned that this proximity was seriously detrimental to poor Daniel's devotions. When Phoebe found the place for him and invited him to sing out of her own hymn-book he heard a choking sound in his rear, which he knew proceeded from Jarge. As he stole a cautious glance round he observed that the eyes of more than one member of the congregation directed towards him and the unconscious Phoebe, who happened to be in particularly fine voice and was singing away with entire satisfaction. Daniel

[286]

fidgeted and reddened and grew more and more wrathful. He couldn't see anything to laugh at, not he. The maid was right to sing out, and to be a bit more tender than usual to the man who, before twenty-four hours were out, would be her husband. Yes, it would be all over by this time to-morrow — that was one comfort; and it was a mercy he had fixed an early hour; none of these impudent chaps would be there to dather him.

At the conclusion of the service he started up and hurried from the church with what seemed to Phoebe, as she waddled in his wake, unseemly haste. Indeed they very nearly had their first serious "miff" on the subject. However, once out of sight of the mockers, and wandering with his sweetheart in the quiet lanes, where the hedgerows were all ablaze with scarlet berries, and primrose and amber leaves made little points of light here and there amid the more sober September green, he forgot his discomfiture.

"We be like to have a hard winter," said Phoebe, as they paused to look over the first gate in the prescribed fashion of rustic lovers.

"I don't care," returned Daniel, gazing at her amourously from beneath his tilted hat. "I've got a snug little place of my own and a missus to make me comfortable. It may snow for all as I do care."

Alas for Daniel! His jubilation was short-lived. Early on the morrow he was up and doing, putting the final touches to his preparations for welcoming his bride, and he set forth in good time to join the wedding party, whom he found ready and waiting for him, sitting stiffly in a

[287]

row in the parlour. Mr. Cosser, magnificent in broadcloth and his father's deerskin waistcoat; Mrs. Cosser in a violet gown and a Paisley shawl; Dick Cosser, Phoebe's younger brother, in a suit of checks that would set an aesthetic person's teeth on edge; Phoebe herself in a crimson silk with a white hat and a fluffy tippet, over which her eyes twinkled with most uncanny effect. Daniel privately thought she looked very well, and extended his arm to his future mother-in-law, with a bosom swelling with pride. Mr. Cosser had already preceded them with Phoebe, and Dick brought up the rear with his cousin Mary Ann, a tall maid of sixteen, who had an unusual capacity for giggling;

these two were to officiate respectively as best man and bridesmaid. Daniel's parents had long been dead, and most of his relations scattered, but his married sister who lived at some little distance, had promised to drive over and meet them at the church. She and her husband and their three or four olive-branches were, in fact, already installed in one of the front pews when the little procession arrived; the clergyman was in readiness, and the ceremony began without delay.

All went well at first; Phoebe was jubilant and extremely audible in her replies, Daniel gruff and sheepish as it behoved a rustic bridegroom to be, but just as the Rector uplifting his voice inquired "Dost thou take this woman to be thy wedded wife?" a certain scuffling sound was heard at the further end of the church, and the half-made husband might have been seen to start and falter. "Daniel, wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?" repeated the Rector sternly.

[288]

Suppressed titters were heard, not only from the direction of the porch, but actually from the aisles. For the life of him, Daniel could not resist turning his head right and left with an anguished gaze. Horror! There was Abel Bolt peering from behind one pillar, and surely that was Jarge's impudent face grinning at him from the opposite side. The Rector glared through his spectacles and uplifted his voice yet more.

"Daniel!" he cried emphatically, "wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?"

The best man cleared his throat warningly, and the bride turning a reproachful glance somewhere in the direction of the west window, nudged him with her elbow.

"Speak up!" she whispered. This was the last straw.

Hardly knowing what he did, Daniel started away from her, and whisking round charged through the bridal party, down the nave, thrust aside the knot of gaping onlookers in the porch, descended the flight of steps apparently with one stride, and bounding over the lychgate fled into the fields on the opposite side of the road.

Phoebe, with a stifled shriek, hastened after him with all the speed that her distress of mind and amplitude of person would admit of, but was almost knocked over by her brother Dick, who had started in hot pursuit of the fugitive. Mary Ann, not to be

outdone, gallopaded in the rear, and Mr. Cosser with muttered threats of vengeance hobbled in her wake at a considerable distance.

"Yoicks! Gone away!" shouted Abel Bolt, tumbling out of the church followed by Jarge and the whole of the idle crew who had brought about the catastrophe. In

[289]

another minute, the whole party joined in the chase, and the church was left entirely deserted except for the astonished and scandalised Rector, his clerk and poor old Mrs. Cosser, who remained dissolved in tears in the front bench. Even Daniel's own relations had joined in pursuit, his sister announcing breathlessly, as she hastened forth, that he must have gone out of his mind.

Meanwhile the fugitive, in spite of the tightness of his wedding boots and the stiffness of his new clothes, careered across country, with almost incredible speed. Now his blue-coated form might be seen leaping a hedge, now scudding over a stretch of pasture. Dick, the best man, was the nearest to him, family pride lending wings to his long legs, but even he was soon distanced, and by the time he had reached the second bank and forced his way through the thorns and briars which topped it, the runaway bridegroom was nowhere to be seen. Dick was at fault, and though when the rest of the pursuers came up they scoured the fields, and "drew" the thickets, and hunted up and down by the banks, and even searched the willow-bed by the river, no trace of the fugitive was to be found. Phoebe had come to a standstill in the midst of the third field, where her father presently joined her. They stood panting opposite each other for a moment or two, after which Phoebe unfolding a lace-bordered handkerchief wiped her brow; then restoring it to her pocket, she remarked in a tone of conviction.

"I d' 'low he've a-changed his mind."

"Looks like it," returned her parent shortly. "Ye can have the law on him for this."

[290]

"That wouldn't be much comfort to I," she retorted.

"What be goin' to do then?"

"I d' 'low I'll go home along," said the forsaken bride with decision. "There bain't no use in standin' here for the folks to gawk at, an' I mid just so well take up one o' they fowls. I shouldn't think any o' Dan'l's folks 'ud want to show their faces at our place."

"I d' 'low they won't," returned Mr. Cosser in a menacing tone, as though who should say, "they'd better not!"

"Let's be steppin' then," said Phoebe. "You'd best look in at church and fetch mother. I'll make haste home."

"That there Dan'l o' yourn be a reg'lar rascal!" shouted her father.

Phoebe, who had already proceeded some paces on her way, turned her head and called back over her shoulder: "I can't say as how he've acted so very well!" Then she went on again.

When the baffled hunting party finally gave up the chase and returned to Cosser's, partly with the hope of being commended for their zeal, which they felt must have atoned for all previous errors, partly to see how the forsaken bride bore herself, they found that damsel in her working dress, "salting down" a fine piece of beef.

"There'll be a terr'ble lot o' waste over this 'ere job," she remarked, "but we must do our best to save all what we can."

"We couldn't find en nowheres, Phoebe," cried Dick. "Abel here d' say he's very like drownded; serve en right if he be."

[291]

Phoebe paused in her labours to cast a reflective glance at the horizon.

"I'll go warrant he bain't drownded," she said. "He don't want to marry I, that's what 'tis. He wouldn't ha' married I a bit the more if you'd ha' catched en."

"But what's the meanin' of it," thundered Mr. Cosser from his corner, "what's the meanin' on't, I want to know. He did seem to know his own mind afore — very well he did."

"I think he was gallied like," said Phoebe. "E-es, Id' 'low that's what he wer'."

Abel and Jarge began to edge away from the group, but Phoebe went on without seeming to notice them.

"When Parson did ax en the question straight-out like, I d' 'low he felt 'fraid. That's what 'twas, he was 'fraid."

Withdrawing her gaze from the distant hills and heaving a gentle sigh she carried away her beef; and as there was no indication that any outsider was expected to join the family circle, or indeed to partake of any refreshment, the bystanders walked slowly away, and the Cosser family proceeded gloomily to divest themselves of their holiday clothes.

It was quite dark when Daniel rose from his cramped and exceedingly moist hiding-place in the sedges by the river, and slowly betook himself homewards. During the many hours he had lain cowering there, listening to the voices of his pursuers, he had had leisure to repent of and marvel at the senseless impulse which had brought him to his present plight.

"Well, I be a stunpoll!" he had said to himself over

[292]

and over again. "I be a dalled stunpoll! What the mischief did I do it for? Whatever will the poor maid think of I? She'll never look at I again — she'll never take the leastest notice of me."

More than once he had been half-inclined to rush out of his lair and give himself up to justice, but how could he face that grinning multitude? If they had made fun of him before, what would they do now? Besides her family were furious, and the rustic mind loves justice of a certain rough kind. Daniel was not more of a coward than another, but he had a wholesome dread of broken bones. No, he dursn't show his face for a long time, that was certain; and as for ever making up with Phoebe again, it was out of the question — no woman could forgive such treatment.

Very disconsolately, indeed, did Daniel turn in at his own little gate; even in the dusk he could see how nice the place looked, how complete were his arrangements. He opened the door and slunk in, dropping into the nearest chair with a groan. After quite a long time he made up his mind to strike a match and look round, though he knew the

VNiVERSiTAS STVDIi SALAMANTiNi

sight of the cosy little room would increase his melancholy. He lit the blue glass lamp which had been placed in readiness on the dresser, and with a heavy sigh poked up the fire which had been carefully "kept in" with a thick layer of wet slack. The light leaped on the newly-papered walls with their neat design of blue roses on a buff ground — he had papered these walls himself, in honour of the coming event — on the two elbow-chairs, just re-covered with a gay chintz. On the

[293]

table in the centre was a small tray with a biblical design in prodigiously bright colours, which bore a curious old decanter containing elderberry wine, a plate of mixed biscuits and two tumblers. In setting these forth that morning he had thought with tender glee of how Phoebe's first wifely task would be to "hot-up" some of that wine in one of her new saucepans. Had it not been for his own inconceivable folly, they might at that very moment have been sitting face to face drinking each other's health. And now! Daniel dropped his face in his hands and fairly sobbed.

One day about a fortnight after the untoward event which had so rudely quenched her simple hopes, Phoebe Cosser was standing by the wash-tub up to her eyes in suds, with Mary Ann similarly engaged; while Mrs. Cosser in the inner room laboriously ironed out a few of the fine things which had already passed through her daughter's hands. All at once, Mary Ann, raising her eyes, uttered a little scream which immediately lost itself in a fit of giggles.

"There! I never did see such a foolish maid!" commented Phoebe severely. "Whatever be gawkin' at?"

"Lard! There now! Well, to be sure!" ejaculated Mary Ann between spasmodic titters. "Look yonder behind the thorn tree!"

The Cossers' garden sloped downwards towards the road, and a gnarled May tree filled the angle where the front hedge joined that which separated their piece of ground from their neighbour's; the twisted trunk was split down to a few feet from the ground, and through

[294]

this aperture Daniel Chaffey's woeful face was peering. As Phoebe turned towards him he immediately dived out of sight. After waiting a moment and finding he did not reappear Phoebe philosophically went on with her washing. In a few minutes, however, Mary Ann began to giggle afresh. Phoebe whisked round so sharply that she caught a glimpse of her former lover's vanishing face.

"Don't take no notice," she said sternly, implanting a vicious nudge in her cousin's ribs; after which she shifted her position so as to turn her back to the thorn.

After another short interval, however, the sound of her own name breathed in the most dolorous of tones caused her to turn her head once more. Daniel had thrown an arm round each half of the trunk, and was craning forth through the gap, his face vying in colour with the clusters of haws which surrounded it.

"Phoebe!" he pleaded with a gusty sigh.

"Well?" returned she, slowly wiping the suds from her stout red arms.

"Phoebe, I've acted terr'ble bad to ye."

"E-es, you have," replied Phoebe succinctly.

"I d' 'low I have," he agreed dejectedly. "I be pure sorry, dalled if I bain't."

Miss Cosser snorted.

"I've a-repented, my dear, ever since. E-es, I have! Sure I have! Phoebe!"

"Well?"

"I've a-been thinkin' — would ye go to church wi' me now?"

"This minute?" queried Phoebe with alacrity; the

[295]

muscles of her face relaxed, and she twitched down first one of her rolled-up sleeves and then the other.

"E-es, this very minute; the Reverend 'ull tie us up right enough if I ax en."

"Gie me a clean apron!" cried Phoebe, turning quickly to Mary Ann and jerking at the string of the very damp garment which protected her dress.

She already wore her hat, and by the time her cousin, who had vanished with a bound, reappeared shaking out the crisp folds of the clean white apron, she had unpinned her skirt.

"Now, then," she remarked after tying it on, and she fixed her best eye with a business-like air on her Daniel, who had been gazing at her with almost incredulous rapture. He left off embracing the hawthorn and reached the garden gate at the same moment as Phoebe herself; and before Mrs. Cosser, attracted by Mary Ann's shrieks of enjoyment, had had time to reach the door they had set off arm-in-crook and disappeared round the angle of the lane.

[296]

"A TERR'BLE VOOLISH LITTLE MAID."

THE cottage next door to Mrs. Cross had long been occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Frizzell, but when that good couple went to live "Darchester-side" near their married daughter Susan, their discarded dwelling was taken by a respectable widow woman named Chaffey; and on a certain autumn morning she entered into possession.

From under the green "shed" of his cart the carrier extracted a variety of goods and chattels, exciting keen interest in the mind of Mrs. Cross, who, with her nose flattened against the leaded panes of her bedroom window, watched the proceedings closely. The large articles of furniture had arrived on the previous day in a waggon — a wooden bedstead, so solid in construction and uncompromising in shape that its legs had hung over the edge; an oak settle and carved linen chest at which Mrs. Cross had turned up her nose, deeming them "terr'ble old-fayshioned".

She was better pleased with the parlour suite of painted wood cushioned with brightly coloured cretonne — couch, armchair and three small chairs; the lot must have cost at least three pound ten, thought Mrs. Cross, for she had seen the like in the upholsterer's window at Branston. Her respect for the newcomer immediately increased, and this morning as she squinted down at her from her attic,

[297]

vainly endeavouring to see all round her at once, she was much impressed by her appearance.

Mrs. Chaffey was a spare woman of middle height, wearing a decent brown stuff gown and grey fringed shawl. Her black bonnet with its yellow flowers was quite "fayshionable" in shape, and though her black kid gloves were unbuttoned and had moreover grown somewhat grey about the finger-tips, they nevertheless conveyed the idea of exceeding respectability.

"Quite a genteel sort o' body," commented Mrs. Cross, "and do seem to know what she be about too," she added a moment later, as Mrs. Chaffey, having entered the house presently emerged again, having changed her headgear for a gathered print sun-bonnet, and protected her dress by the addition of a large white apron.

Mrs. Cross screwed her head in the other angle of the window and again squinted down.

"That's a feather bed," she observed as a large tied-up bundle was placed in the expectant arms of the newcomer who clearly staggered beneath its weight; "carrier did ought to carry it for she. Pillows next! And a basket — chaney most like. Fender — fire-irons — kettle — pots and a pan or two — very small 'uns they be. 'Tis but a lone 'ooman they d' say, she'll not want so much cookin' — clock — hassock ——"

The carrier's voice now interrupted the inventory: "This 'ere basket, mum — that do make the lot. I hope ye'll find all reg'lar, mum, and no damage done."

Mrs. Cross, who had been breathing hard in her excitement, was at this point constrained to polish the window

[298]

with her apron; by the time the operation was concluded and her nose again applied, Mrs. Chaffey had taken out her purse and was slowly counting out a certain number of coins into the carrier's hand. Mrs. Cross could not for the life of her see how many, but she observed that the man's face lengthened.

"Bain't there nothin' for luck?" he inquired. "I did take a deal o' trouble wi' they arnaments and sich-like."

"You've a-had what I did agree for," responded Mrs. Chaffey with dignity; her voice was high and clear, and as she spoke she turned towards the cottage with a final air.

"I d' 'low she's a bit near," remarked Mrs. Cross as she retired from the window, rubbing her nose pensively. "Poor Martha Frizzel! She was a good soul, she was! Just about!"

She stood a moment looking round the little attic chamber, but without seeing either the somewhat untidy bed with its soiled patchwork quilt, or the washstand with its cracked jug, or the torn curtain pinned half-across the window; she saw instead her neighbour's shrewd, kindly face bending over a pot of well-stewed tea, or nodding briefly in response to sundry requests for the use of a bucket, or the loan of a pan, and sometimes a few "spuds".

"Mind you do bring 'em back," was all Mrs. Frizzel would say. Well, sometimes Mrs. Cross did bring them back, and sometimes Martha came and fetched 'em, but she never made a bit of fuss, and was always as kind and neighbourly as she could be.

Mrs. Chaffey must be getting a bit settled by this time,

Mrs. Cross thought, and resolved to pop in and ask how she was getting on. She smoothed her rough hair with the palms of her hands, jerked down her sleeves, which she usually wore rolled up till dinner-time, not because she fatigued herself with over-much work, but because it seemed somehow the proper thing to do of a morning; she twitched her apron straight, pinned over a gap in her bodice — Mrs. Cross was a great believer in the efficacy of pins, and rarely demeaned herself by using a needle and thread — and finally composing her features to an expression of polite and sympathetic interest, strolled leisurely downstairs and into her neighbour's premises.

Mrs. Chaffey was standing by her table, busily unpacking china, but when the other entered remarking genially that she thought she'd just look in to see how Mrs. Chaffey liked her noo place, and if she could lend a hand anywheres, she came forward with a somewhat frosty smile and set a chair.

"Sit down, won't ye?" she said. "I'm a bit busy, but there! it do do folks good to set a bit now and then."

"E-es, indeed, my dear," responded Mrs. Cross enthusiastically; it was a sentiment she cordially endorsed. "Lard! if a body was to keep upon their legs from morn till night, churchyard 'ud be fuller at the year's end nor it needs to be. I be pure glad you've a-took this 'ere house," she added graciously, " 'tis what I scarce expected as any respectable party 'ud come to it. The chimbley smokes," said Mrs. Cross delightedly; "there, 'tis summat awful how it do smoke! And in the bedroom the rain and wind do fair beat in when a bit of a storm do come

[300]

— 'tis these 'ere queer little vooty winder-panes — rain comes through them so easy as anything. And the damp! there, Mrs. Frizzel, what lived here last, used to say many a time: 'Mrs. Cross, my dear,' she did use to say, 'the damp do seem to creep into my very bwones'. But I be pure glad to see you here, I'm sure," she summed up cheerfully, "and 'tis to be hoped as you'll find it comfortable."

Mrs. Chaffey's face, always somewhat plaintive in expression, had become more and more dismal as her neighbour proceeded, and she now heaved a deep sigh.

"I d' 'low 'twill do for I," she said gloomily; "I be a lone 'ooman, Mrs. ——?"

She paused tentatively.

"Mrs. Cross be my name, my dear. E-es Maria Cross. E-es, that be my name, my dear."

"Well, Mrs. Cross," resumed the newcomer, taking up her discourse in a voice tuned to just the same note of melancholy patience as before, "well, Mrs. Cross, as I was a-sayin', I be a lone 'ooman, a widow 'ooman, and I d' 'low I must look to be put upon. I bain't surprised to hear o' the house bein' damp and the chimbley smokin' — 'tis jest what I mid have expected; and so I'll tell the agent when I do go for to pay my rent."

"It did ought to be considered in the rent," suggested Mrs. Cross.

"It did," agreed Mrs. Chaffey, and for a moment her eyes assumed an uncommonly wide-awake expression. "I'll mention it to the gentleman, but I don't look for much satisfaction — I don't indeed, Mrs. Cross. A few

[301]

shillin's back maybe, and a new chimbley-pot, and toils put right on the roof, and a bit o' lead paper maybe at back o' my bed — no more nor that, Mrs. Cross — they'll not do more than that for a lone 'ooman."

"And didn't ye never ha' no childern?" inquired Mrs. Cross, with her head on one side; "it do seem molloncholy for ye to be left wi'out nobody to do a hand's turn for 'ee, poor soul."

Mrs. Chaffey shook her head with a portentous expression.

"A-h-h-h, Mrs. Cross, my dear," she said, "if there was sich a thing as a bit o' gratitood in this world, I wouldn't be left wi'out a creature to do for me at my time o' life. Childern of my own I have not," said Mrs. Chaffey, with an air which indicated that the fact was very much to her credit, "but there's them livin' now as I've been more than a mother to, what have gone and left I in my ancient years — as thankless."

"Lard now!" ejaculated her neighbour, much interested; "ye don't tell I so, Mrs. Chaffey. Somebody what you've a-been very good to, I suppose, mum?"

"Good!" echoed Mrs. Chaffey. "Good's not the word for it, Mrs. Cross. 'Twas my first cousin's child — a poor little penniless maid what was brought up in a institootion — an orphan, my dear, as hadn't nobody in the world to look to. Well, when her time was up at the institootion, I come and for'ard, and I say, 'I'll take her,' I says; 'she don't need to go to service,' I says. 'I'm her mother's cousin,' I told 'em, 'and she can come to live wi' I.' "

[302]

"And they were delighted of course," suggested Mrs. Cross, as she paused impressively.

"No; if you'll believe me, they fair dathered I wi' axin' questions, and wantin' I to make promises and that. 'Why didn't I come and see the maid afore?' says they, as if 'twas likely, Mrs. Cross, as I'd go trapesin' off to a institootion to ax arter a maid as was too small to be any good to anybody. Then they did want I to give her wages. Wages to a little bit of a thing as knowed nothin', and couldn't do nothin'! 'No,' I says, 'I'll give her a home,' I says, 'and I'll be a mother to her, and train her same as if she was my own child, but more than that I will not do.' "

"O' course not," agreed Mrs. Cross; "lucky enough she was to get sich a good offer, I think."

"And so you may," agreed the other solemnly, "and so I did often say ta the maid herself. 'You may think yourself lucky,' I did say to her often and often; 'many another,' I did tell her, ' 'ud put you out on the road when you do behave so voolish. But me! look at the patience I've had wi' you!' 'Twas a terr'ble voolish maid, Mrs. Cross — she was a bit silly in herself to begin with, and they institootions — Lard, they do never seem to teach a maid a thing as 'ull be a bit 'o use to 'em! She could scrub a stone passage a mile long if she was put to it, but there bain't no passages in cottages, and she couldn't so much as peel a potato or wash a cabbage. Well, I did take so much pains wi' her as a mother could ha' done — I did make her find out for herself how to hold a knife, no matter how much she did cut herself. 'Find out,' I

did say; and she did find out. And when grubs come up on the dish wi' the cabbages, I'd cut off the bits as was nearest to 'em and put 'em on her plate; so she did soon learn, ye see. Sleep! that maid 'ud sleep many an' many a cold morning arter I'd pulled blankets off her — e-es, there she'd lay so fast as anything, and never take a bit o' notice till I got a drap o' cold water — an that didn't always wake her up all to once. There, she was fair aggravatin! — when I did get her up at last and get back to bed again, I couldn't get a wink o' sleep for thinkin' on't."

"Dear, to be sure! Well now!" commented Mrs. Cross, scratching her elbows appreciatively.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"E-es, indeed," continued Mrs. Chaffey, warming with her theme. "I did tell her many a time, 'You'll come to no good'. Ah, that I did, and she didn't come to no good neither."

"Didn't she though?" queried the other with interest. "Took up with a soldier, very like?"

"Nothin' o' the kind. There weren't no soldiers anywheres near us. 'Twas another kind of a man altogether."

"A-h-h," groaned Mrs. Cross sympathetically. "And I s'pose he wouldn't marry her, mum?"

"E-es, he married her, Mrs. Cross," responded the widow in a tone of dignified surprise. "E-es, he married her. Indeed he did."

"But there was carryin's on, I s'pose?" suggested Mrs. Cross respectfully.

Mrs. Chaffey fixed her with a stony stare.

"I'm not one as 'ud allow no carryin's on," she returned

[304]

loftily. "When the man come and axed Jenny — that was her name — I says to her, 'Not with my consent,' I says — well, she took and got married wi'out it."

"Lard ha' mercy me," ejaculated the listener, seeing that she was expected to say something, "well, that was ——" she hesitated, "I s'pose the man wasn't one as you'd ha' picked for her, Mrs. Chaffey? Maybe," she added darkly, "he wasn't in work?"

"He was in work," replied Mrs. Chaffey solemnly, "reg'lar. Oh, e-es, he was in work."

Mrs. Cross was a good deal mystified, and being too uncertain of her ground to venture on a comment, contented herself with clicking her tongue and turning up her eyes.

" 'Tis a queer tale; 'tis indeed," resumed the widow; "but as I did often say to she arter the job was done: 'Don't blame me, Jenny — what you did do, you did do wi' your eyes open. I've a-told you plain,' I says, 'I've gied ye the best advice. Stay,' I says, 'where you're well off. You've a-got a good home,' I did tell her, 'and one what is a mother to ye — don't ye go for to take up with this 'ere stranger.' "

"Ah," interrupted Mrs. Cross, beginning to think she at last saw daylight, "he was a stranger, was he?"

"He was a man what come to the door," returned the other impressively, "what come to the door like any tramp. I did take en to be a tramp first off."

"Oh, and he wasn't a tramp then?" put in her neighbour, slightly disappointed.

"He mid ha' been one," resumed the narrator, with a

dignified wave of the hand intended to discourage further unnecessary and frivolous questions. "I'm willing to tell 'ee about it, Mrs. Cross, if you be willing to listen. 'Twas a Sunday of all days. We'd a' been pretty busy till dinner- time. I'd got Jenny up soon arter four to get through wi' cleanin' up — I'm always one what likes to have the place reg'lar perfect, ye know — and by the time I come down for breakfast she'd a' got everything straight. Well, her an' me fell out — she did want, if ye please to go to church wi' I — so I say to her, 'Who's to get dinner then? Be I to wait on you?' says I. 'No', I says, 'you stay at home and do your dooty, and you can go to the childern's service in the afternoon if you behave well,' says I. Well, but she wouldn't hear reason; I did leave her cryin' like a baby.

"I were a bit late comin' back — chattin' to this one and that one, an' when I got in, what did I see but a strange man by the fire. Ye could ha' knocked I down wi' a feather. I did jist drap in the first chair I come to and p'int that way wi' my finger — I couldn't get out a word.

" 'Please ye, ma'am,' says Jenny (I wouldn't have her callin' I Cousin Maria, d'ye see, a little maid same as her out of a institootion! She did offer to call I so once or twice, but I soon checked her). 'Please ye, ma'am,' she says, 'this 'ere poor chap was so terr'ble cold — froze up he was — he'd a-been walkin' ten mile an' more in the snow; and when he axed I to let en in to warm hisself a bit, I didn't think you'd object.'

" 'You didn't think I'd object,' says I. 'You little good-for-nothin' hussy! We might ha' been robbed an' murdered for all you care.'

"The man turned round laughin' as impident as ye like. He was a Irishman, Mrs. Cross — I could tell it the very minute I clapped eyes on his face, afore he so much as opened his mouth, and when he did begin to speak, Lard ha' mercy me! I never did hear sick languidge."

"Swearin' an' that?" questioned Mrs. Cross, with her head on one side.

"Oh no, nothin' o' that sort, but sick a queer, ignorant fayshion o' talkin'. 'The top o' the mornin' to ye, ma'am,' says he. 'Is it murther ye're talkin' of? Sure, how could I be afther murtherin' ye when ye weren't here?' he says. 'Don't ye be afeerd,' he went on — I can't really remember his queer talk, but he said he had come over harvestin' an' then got laid up wi' a fever, an' was a long time in hospital, and now, he said, he was on his way to see a friend who had been in the hospital at the same time, and after that he had the promise of work.

"A reg'lar cock-and-bull story; I didn't believe a word on't. I did tell en so.

" 'Why be ye a-trapasin' the roads then,' says I. 'if you've a-been invited to stay with a friend?'

" 'I missed my road,' says he, 'I took the wrong turn; I shan't get there till night now,' he says. 'I'm a bit weak still with being sick so long, and it'll take me all my time to get there.'

" 'You'd best be startin' then,' says I, p'intin' to the door. Then if ye'll believe it that little impident maid ups and interferes.

" 'Oh, ma'am,' she says, 'let him bide and eat a bit o' dinner wi' us. I'm sure he's respectable man, and it's

[307]

Sunday and all. And there's more dinner nor we can eat.'

"Well, I could ha' shook her — 'I'll thank ye, Jenny, to mind your own business,' I says, 'a little chit like you, what's kept for charity. Bain't it enough,' I says, 'to be beholden to I for every bit you do put into your own mouth wi'out antin' to waste the food what don't belong to ye on good-for-nothin' tramps and idlers?' I says. Then the man gets up.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

" 'That'll do ma'am,' he says. 'I wouldn't touch bite or sup of yours,' he says, 'for fear it 'ud stick in my throat. Good-bye my dear,' he says to Jenny, 'an' blessin's on your pretty face and your kind heart. Maybe better times 'ull be comin' for you as well as for me,' he says."

"Ah," put in Mrs. Cross excitedly, "he had summat in his mind about her, you mid be sure."

Mrs. Chaffey threw out a warning hand once more and pursued her narrative.

"I did give the maid a right-down good talkin'-to, you mid think, but it didn't seem to do her much good.

"About a week or two arter, I was sendin' her to fetch the washin' back — I did use to wash for a lady what lived a mile away, and sometimes carrier did fetch it, and sometimes I did send Jenny. Well, 'twas a heavyish basket, and when I did see her marchin' back down the path, I says to her: —

" 'You've a-been quicker nor I could ha' looked for,' I says.

" 'Oh, e-es,' says she, 'somebody helped I for to carry it.'

[308]

" 'Somebody,' I says. 'Who?'

"She went quite red, and opened her mouth and shut it again, and then she says very quick: —

" 'Oh, a man what I met, as said it did seem too heavy for I.'

"Ah-h-h!" said Mrs. Cross, seizing her opportunity as the other paused for breath, "it was him?"

Mrs. Chaffey resented the other's eagerness to jump to a conclusion, and continued in a voice of increased sternness, and without noticing the interruption: —

"Next day was a Sunday again. I wasn't feelin' so very well, so I did tell her she mid go to church that mornin' an' I'd bide at home. Well, that there little maid took so long a-dressin' of herself as if she was a queen; so arter I'd called her once or twice I just went upstairs an' looked in at her. I had my soft shoes on, and she didn't hear I comin'.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"There she was, if you please, a-kneeling before her bed, a-turnin' of her head this way an' that, an' a-lookin' at herself in a wold lid of a biscuit-box, what she'd picked up somewheres an' rubbed up till it did seem so bright as silver. There! the little impident hussy; she had stood it up against her pillow, an' she was a-lookin' at herself an' a-holdin' up a bit o' blue ribbon, fust under her chin an' then sideways again her hat.

" 'Jenny,' I says, an', dear, to be sure, how the voolish maid did jump!

" 'Lard, ma'am,' says she, 'you did fray me!'

" 'What be doin' there?' I axes her very sharp. 'What be doin' with that there ribbon? Where did you get

[309]

it?' I says, for I knowed very well she hadn't a penny of her own.

"She went so red as a poppy, an' stood still, gawkin' at I, wi'out making no answer.

" 'You did steal it, I d' 'low,' I says, an' I gives a kind of a scream.

"Then she did go white, and her teeth fair chattered in her head.

" 'Oh, no, ma'am,' she cried; 'no, indeed. It be mine, honest. It was give me.'

" 'Give ye,' says I. 'Who give it?'

"Then she did begin a-cryin' and a-rockin' of herself backwards an' forrads. 'It be mine,' she sobs; 'somebody did give it to I.'

" 'Somebody!' I says, an' the notion come to I all to once. 'It was never that man as you met on the road yesterday?'

"Not a word would she answer, but goes on cryin'.

" 'Jenny Medway,' I says to her, 'I'll come to the bottom of this here tale if I do have to call Policeman Jackson in for to take 'ee to prison. Tell I the truth this minute, or I'll run out an' fetch en. It won't be the first time as you've met that man, whoever he be. Own up, or
I'll call Jackson.'

"Well, she was real scared, an' she ketched hold o' my arm: —

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTINI

" 'Oh don't, ma'am, don't do that!' she says, 'I'll tell 'ee — I'll tell 'ee. 'Twas the man what did come to the door ——'

" 'You wicked, wicked wench!' I says. 'I d' 'low ye've a-been meetin' of en regular.'

[310]

" 'No, indeed, ma'am,' she cries, 'I never set eyes on en since that day, till yesterday, when I did meet en quite accidental-like — an' he did offer to carry my basket for I, an' he did put his hand in's pocket an' pull out this bit o' ribbon — he'd a-been carryin' it about hopin' to meet I, he did say, for he did think it jist the same colour as my eyes.' "

"Well! well! well!" exclaimed Mrs. Cross, clapping her hands together and shaking her head. "Lard now! dear to be sure! What nonsense-talk, weren't it, ma'am?"

"I did tell her so indeed," returned Mrs. Chaffey, severely. "I did tell her plain what I thought of her – 'Courtin' an' carryin' on wi' a tramp on the road!' I says.

" 'He bain't a tramp,' she cries, quite in a temper, if you please. 'He's an honest, respectable young man. He've a-got good work now, an' he be a-lookin' for to settle.' "

"Ah!" put in the irrepressible Mrs. Cross. "He was lookin' out for a wife."

Once more Mrs. Chaffey quelled her with a glance and proceeded: —

" 'An', be he wantin' you to settle wi' en?' I axed the maid straight out.

"She hangs her head, an' begins a-playin' wi' the buttons of her bodice.

" 'He did say so,' she says, very low; 'he did ax I to walk wi' en an' think it over — he be gettin' good wage,' she says, lookin' up at me. 'He says he'll do all what he can for me — I think I could like en very well — I d' 'low he be a good man."

[311]

Mrs. Cross clicked her tongue and shook her head with an air of disapproval.

"Yes, indeed, my dear," cried Mrs. Chaffey warmly, "that was my own opinion. My dooty did stare I in the face."

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

" 'Put that there notion out of your head, Jenny,' I says to her, very firm, 'for I'll never hear on't — never!' I says. 'If you was a-thinkin' o' meetin' that idle good-for-nothin' fellow this mornin', you may give up the notion. Take off your hat,' I says, 'an' put by that jacket of yours. Outside this house you don't set foot this day. You bide at home,' I says."

Mrs. Cross looked dubious at first, but catching the other's severe eye, shook her head once more in an impersonal way, and folded her arms with an appearance of great unconcern.

"The way that maid did go on," pursued Mrs. Chaffey, "was scandalous, quite scandalous, I do assure 'ee. She cried an' sobbed, and acskally tried for to dodge round to the door, but I were too quick for her. I nipped out first, and turned the key in the lock.

"Well, if you'll believe me, jist about dinner-time, who should come walkin' up to the house as bold as brass, but my gentleman himself, an' before I could shut door in's face if that little bold hussy didn't call out to en from the window: 'I'm locked in, Mr. Connor, I'm locked in!'

" 'Locked in, are ye?' says he; an' for the minute I was frightened at the looks of en.

"If ye'll believe me, Mrs. Cross, the fellow walks straight into the house, makin' no more o' me nor if I wasn't there.

[312]

He pushes past I, and marches upstairs and bursts open the door o' Jenny's room.

" 'Locked in, are ye?' he says. 'I'll soon settle that. Come down, asthore' — E-es, 'twas some such name as that he did call her — 'come down, asthore. I've a little word to say to ye, an' I want this good lady to hear it as well as yerself.'

" 'I'll call the police,' I says. 'I'll call them in a minute.' I says."

"I'd a-done that, I'm sure," cried Mrs. Cross. "I'm sure I would. Housebreakin' ye know. Did ye call 'em?" she added, as Mrs. Chaffey seemed to hesitate.

"Well, no, my dear," returned that lady. "I did not. I was all shaky an' trembley like. Besides," she added, casting up her eyes, "I be always for peace, Mrs. Cross.

'Peace an' quietness,' is my motto. I could no more break the law o' Christian lovin' kindness nor — nor anything, Mrs. Cross.

" 'Now, Jenny, alanna,' " says the man, 'you an' me was talkin' yesterday, so I may as well come to the p'int at once. I want a home, an' you want a home.'

" 'You make a mistake," says I, 'the girl does not want a home. Jenny has got a good home — a better home nor she do deserve,' I says.

" 'A pretty home!' says he; 'a prison! Don't mind her, me darlin'. Just look me in the face, an' tell me will ye have me?'

" 'I will,' she says, so bold as brass — the little barefaced, impident wench! I did really blush for her.

" 'Then,' says he, 'I'll put up the banns on Sunday, an'

[313]

the two of us 'ull be j'ined together before the month's out.'

"Well! To think of the chap settlin' everythin' straight off, an' she givin' in wi'out so much as a question! I stood gawkin' at 'em both, wi' my tongue quite speechless. Then the chap goes up to Jenny, and says he: —

" 'I'm sorry we can't walk out by ourselves,' he says, 'but we must do wi'out that.' An' before my very eyes, Mrs. Cross, he puts his arm round her waist, an' kisses her. 'I'll strive to be a good husband to ye,' says he, 'an' I'll engage I'll have the best little wife in the world.'

"Then he turns round to I an' whips off his hat, jist out o' pure impidence.

" 'Good mornin' to ye, ma'am,' he says; 'I'm afraid its losin' yer black slave ye'll be.' "

"*Oh!* " interrupted Mrs. Cross, much scandalised. "Such a thing to say."

"E-es, indeed," responded Mrs Chaffey, "an' me as had a-been so good to her. I did tell her so, so soon as I'd got my breath. 'Me, what has been a mother to ye,' I did tell her, 'that ye should go a-backbitin' o' I an' a-sayin' such things.'

" 'I never said nothin', ma'am,' says she.

"Such a story. It do stand to reason as if she must ha' gone abusin' o' I."

"Maybe he thought of hissel' you was a bit hard on her," said Mrs. Cross, struck by a brilliant idea.

The inspiration, however, was not a happy one apparently. Mrs. Chaffey took great umbrage, and it was.

[314]

indeed, some time before her neighbour could pacify her sufficiently to induce her to continue her tale.

"I did talk to her kind, an' I did talk to her sharp," she resumed, in an aggrieved tone. "But no; she wouldn't hear reason, an' at last I did fair lose patience.

" 'Well, then,' says I, 'I be done wi' 'ee; I'll ha' no more to say to 'ee from this out. If you do leave yer good home,' I says, 'an' desert one what's the same as yer mother, I be done wi' 'ee. Mark my words,' I did tell her, 'this 'ere marriage 'll turn out unlucky. You'll repent it all the days of your life.' "

"Ah!" said Mrs. Cross, sucking in her breath with gruesome relish. "An' she did, Mrs. Chaffey, I should think. She did."

"She did ought to," returned Mrs. Chaffey, impressively, and paused.

"I d' 'low she hasn't done so very well for herself?" insinuated the other. "She hasn't a-got such a very good home."

Mrs. Chaffey rubbed her nose and coughed, but apparently did not feel called upon to enter into particulars as to the recreant Jenny's domicile.

"Her man be out o' work pretty often, I dare say?" hinted Mrs. Cross.

"Not as I've heerd on, so far," returned her neighbour, in a tone which implied that Mr. Connor would probably find himself thrown upon the world in a very short time.

"Any family, my dear?"

"Two," replied the widow. "Two childern, Mrs. Cross — a boy an' a girl."

[315]

"You haven't ever seen them, of course?"

"E-es, my dear," responded Mrs. Chaffey, with a superior air. "I do see 'em two or three times a year. I bain't one for to bear malice. When her 'usband do drive her over on a Bank Holiday I could never have the 'eart for to shut my door i' their faces."

"Drive over!" exclaimed Mrs. Cross. "They must be free wi' their dibs to go throwin' 'em about on car-hire."

"It don't cost them nothin'," said Mrs. Chaffey hastily. " 'Tis their own trap."

Mrs. Cross gasped.

"They keeps a trap! They must be pretty well off."

Seeing that this remark was evidently unpleasing to her new friend, she obsequiously hastened to allude to what she felt sure must be a genuine grievance.

"An' not a bit grateful, as you was a-sayin' jist now! She don't remember, I shouldn't think, all what you've a-done for her. She don't never make you no return I d' 'low. She don't never give 'ee nothin', do she?"

"Nothin' to speak of," retorted the other, peevishly, and closed her mouth with a snap.

"Such as half a dozen fresh eggs, I suppose?" suggested Mrs. Cross. "She wouldn't ever give 'ee a fowl now, would she? Would she?' she persisted, as Mrs. Chaffey did not answer. "I shouldn't think she'd ever give 'ee a fowl. Lard, no, not a fowl — would she?"

Mrs. Chaffey was at length goaded into an answer.

"If she did it wouldn't be so very much. I wouldn't think meself at all beholden to her — no, that I wouldn't. Seein' that she's got dozens of 'em a-runnin' about her

place, I don't think I need be so very thankful if she do spare a couple every now an' then, an' a ham at Christmas, wi' all the pigs they've got."

"A ham!" ejaculated Mrs. Cross. "A ham! Why, they must be doin' pretty well!"

"Well — not so bad," conceded Mrs. Chaffey, very unwillingly. "Connor, he did take a kind o' little farm a few year ago, a kind o' dairy farm. They've a-got pigs an' chickens an' sich like — a deal of 'em. I hope there mayn't be too many," she added

darkly. "I hope they mayn't be a-livin' too free an' a-spendin' too fast. I hope not. I hope there mayn't be a day o' reckonin' comin'."

She shook her head in an ominous manner, and Mrs. Cross hastened to follow her example.

"They bain't a-layin' anything by, ye may be sure," she exclaimed conclusively.

A kind of spasm crossed the other lady's face, and she rose hastily, remarking that if she didn't begin to straighten up a bit she wouldn't get the house put to rights before bedtime.

Mrs. Cross took the hint, rose likewise, and backed meditatively towards the door.

"Well, 'tis a strange tale what you've a-told I, Mrs. Chaffey, an' I do feel for ye terr'ble. As for that there voolish ——"

She paused suddenly, a slow grin dawning on her face.

"She don't seem to ha' done so very bad for herself, after all," she remarked, and vanished.

[317]

SWEETBRIAR LANE.

"THERE they go," said Grandmother Legg, "a-marchin' off together so happy as a king and a queen."

Susan Ball, a visitor from the town, craned her head round the door-post and gazed after the young couple with interest. David Samson, a big broad-shouldered, rather awkward looking young fellow was walking arm-in-crook with Rebecca Yeatman, Mrs. Legg's orphan granddaughter. A little slender fair-haired thing, lissom and graceful in all her movements was Rebecca — she looked like an elf as she paced along beside her cumbersome lover.

"They've a-been a-courtin' a long time, haven't they, mum?" queried Miss Ball.

"They've a-been coortin'," responded Grandmother Legg emphatically, "since they was no higher than nothin' at all. Dear, yes! he'd come Sunday after Sunday same as if they was reg'lar coortin' folk, an' Rebecca, she'd lay down her doll, and fetch her

hat, an' walk off so serious as a grown-up maid. Poor Legg — he had all his senses then same as anybody else — he'd laugh fit to split he would."

Miss Ball looked towards the chimney corner where Grandfather Legg was now installed and received from that worthy old gentleman a smile calculated to give any

[318]

weak-minded person a "turn," accompanied by some unintelligible remark delivered in a quavering treble. Miss Ball, who was not troubled with nerves, smiled back at him and nodded cheerfully.

"He haven't got no wits at all now, mum, have he?" she inquired parenthetically of Mr. Legg's better-half. "But we was a-talkin' of Rebecca. I do 'low she an' David 'ull be gettin' married one o' these days?"

Grandmother Legg screwed up her mouth and shook her head dubiously.

"I don't know I'm sure," she replied. "David he's not earnin' more nor ten shillin' a week, nor likely to for a good bit, and Rebecca, she wouldn't be much good at keepin' house on such a little money. 'Tis a child, Miss Ball, nothin' but a child. There, if you was to see the antics she do carry on wi' David! I do truly wonder the chap has so much patience wi' her. Sweetbriar Lane is where they do always go. 'Tis Coortin' Lane, you know — so they do call it hereabouts — and a-many do go a-walkin' there of a Sunday an' they do tell I that Rebecca do seem to care for nothin' but teasin' and tormentin' the poor boy. Mary Vacher — e-es, 'twas Mary — did tell I last week as she an' her young man was a-walkin' in Sweetbriar Lane o' Sunday and she did see our little maid a-playin' all manner o' tricks on Davy. One minute she'd be runnin' round a haystack, then when the poor chap 'ud run after her she'd trip off and hide behind an elder-bush. Mary did say she'd go dancin' from one place to another just lettin' him nearly catch her but poppin' off the minute he'd come close."

[319]

"Well, there now," commented Susan, "it do seem childish, don't it?"

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

"It be reg'lar nonsense I do tell her," said Mrs. Legg severely; then relaxing — "but Mary Vacher did say 'twas really so good as a play to watch 'em. Her an' her own young man stood lookin' arter 'em a long while, she said. There, Rebecca 'ud go flyin' up the path same as a bird or a butterfly; an' every now an' again she'd stop and smile round at Davy an' beckon him, an' off 'ud run poor Davy, hammerin' arter her so hard as he could, an' just as he'd be holdin' out them great long arms o' his off she'd go again. An' she's real fond o' him, mind ye — 'tisn't as if she looked at anybody else."

"Ye did ought to speak to her a bit sharp, mum," said Miss Ball severely, "you did ought to scold her for it. They bain't sensible, sich goin's on."

"Scold her!" ejaculated the other. "I mid so well speak to the wall. I mid just so well expect that there settle to hear reason. She don't mind me, what's her own grandmother, no more nor if I was the cat. She haven't got no respect for nothin'. I've see'd her pinch David's arm when they was a-walkin' up the church steps one day —— "

"Never!" ejaculated the scandalised Susan.

"She did though! And she'll carry on her antics up in the churchyard yonder — you know the churchyard up Sweetbriar Lane? — she'd as soon play off her tricks there as on the Downs. Even when she was a little bit of a maid she'd never run past the lychgate same as the other children — she'd go a-swingin' round the pillars or a-climbin'

on the trestles, or she'd maybe pop through the gate and put her face up again the bars and dare David to kiss her. He dursn't go nigh the place, poor boy, an' she knowed that very well."

"Well, well!" sighed Susan Ball, "I wouldn't like to say nothin' unkind o' your granddaughter, Mrs. Legg, but 'tis to be hoped as she'll not come to a bad end, mum."

" 'Tis to be hoped so," agreed Mrs. Legg, "but there's no knowin'." She echoed Susan's sigh but smiled the while; indeed it was evident that she looked on the misdemeanours of Rebecca with a certain tolerance, one might almost say satisfaction, as distinguishing her from the ordinary run of maidens.

Meanwhile Rebecca and David, having finished a somewhat discursive progress up Sweetbriar Lane, emerged on the Downs beyond. Here Rebecca took up a position on a sunny little gorse-crowned hillock and despatched him to a neighbouring copse with orders to collect some of the wild strawberries which grew there in abundance.

Nearly a score of journeys did David make to and from that copse, while Rebecca fanned herself with a beech branch and gibed at him for his slowness.

"I do 'low you do eat more nor you do pick," she remarked at last.

David stood stock still, indignant and disheartened.

"There's no pleasin' ye!" he cried. "I haven't so much as ate one."

"No more have I then!" exclaimed Rebecca; and uplifting her beechen fan she proudly showed him a pile of the ruddy berries neatly arranged on a flat stone beside her.

[321]

"There, you be to eat 'em all!" she announced with an imperative wave of the hand, "I did save 'em up for ye."

"You must have half," said he.

But Rebecca shook her head.

He sat down beside her on the short turf and placed the stone between them.

"Certain sure you must have some of 'em," he cried. "I shan't care to eat 'em if you don't."

"You be to eat 'em all," reiterated Rebecca; "I'd like to watch ye."

"Nay now, you must taste one," said David, and leaning forward tenderly he endeavoured to force one into her mouth. But thereupon Rebecca set her little white teeth, jerked back her head, and uplifting a small but vigorous hand slapped his face with all her might.

"I won't have 'em neither then!" cried he, flushing hotly and clambering to his feet. "You do go too far, you do."

"I do go too far, do I?" retorted the freakish sprite. "Let's go home then."

Too much wounded to protest, David turned about and walked sulkily beside her as she tripped down the lane.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDiI SALAMANTiNi

"A body never knows where to have 'ee, maidie," he complained after a pause. "There's times when you do seem so sweet as honey, and next minute I fair wonder if you do care a pin for me."

The two were now walking under a hedge so tall that it almost arched over their heads; it grew on the summit of the high bank which bordered one side of the lane. A serried mass of greenery was this hedge; the star-like foliage of maple mingling with the rougher, darker green

[322]

of hazel and guelder, while amid the stronger growths, delicate trailing wreaths of dog rose and sturdy bushes of wild sweetbriar flourished side by side. It was from this latter that the winding path took its name. The sweetbriar, indeed, grew so freely about the place that in the summer time all the air was filled with fragrance.

Rebecca seemed not at all moved by her lover's lament; she gave a little laugh and continued the song she had been humming to herself.

"There's times," continued David warmly, "when I do truly think I'd do better to go off and coort some other maid."

"Well, and why don't ye?" inquired Rebecca blithely.

"I don't know but what I will," cried he. "Most maids 'ud give ye a kind word back when ye speak 'em fair, and 'ud say thank ye when ye do make 'em a present, and 'ud not go for to rub their cheeks after their sweetheart had given them a kiss."

This was indeed an offence which Rebecca committed but too often. She darted from him now, and, approaching the bank, made two little upward springs at the hedge, bringing down with each a small trophy. One was a wild rose, the other a tuft of sweetbriar.

"Look ye, David," said she, "which do ye like best of these two?"

"The sweetbriar o' course," cried he, recovering his spirits at once at what he took to be a sign of softening on her part, and his face wreathing itself with smiles as he stretched out his hand for the little sprig.

Rebecca waited till he had taken hold of it, and then

with a sudden malicious squeeze of both her little hands, pressed his ringers close about the prickly stem.

“Ha’ done,” cried he in real displeasure, “that were a spiteful trick and one as I didn’t expect from ’ee, Rebecca. I d’ ’low I will go off and ha’ done wi’ it.”

As he spoke, however, he fastened the bit of sweetbriar in his button-hole. Rebecca laughed and pointed to it.

“Sweetbriar has twice so many thorns as wild rose,” said she, “but ye like it best for all that. An’ if ye do go a-courtin’ any other maid ’twill be just the same. Ye’ll come back to I.”

Taking hold of the lappet of his coat she sniffed at the little sprig.

“Bain’t it sweet?” said she.

“ ’Tis sweet indeed,” returned he earnestly, and emboldened by her unwonted softness he did what any other lover under the circumstances would have done, and Rebecca, after a pause, loosed his coat and deliberately polished her cheek with her handkerchief.

Yet for all that David did not court another maid.

Not long after this the young pair were unexpectedly parted. David had an uncle who was a large sheep-farmer in Westmorland, and it was thought by all his family a great opening for the lad when this well-to-do and childless relative offered to take him into his employment. Every one rejoiced at David’s good fortune except David himself and his poor little sweetheart. Even he was not so much broken-hearted as Rebecca. David scarcely knew whether to be more afflicted or elated at the girl’s despair.

[324]

“I never reckoned you cared for I that much,” said he, as they went for their farewell stroll up the lane.

She looked at him reproachfully without speaking, her pretty blue eyes were drowned in tears, her mouth drooped, her little face looked very white and pitiful.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDii SALAMANTiNi

"There I shouldn't ha' said that." cried he remorsefully. "Ye never loved anybody but me, did ye? An' you'll always be true — won't ye?"

"Always! always!" she sobbed — "faithful an' true, David. Whenever you do think of me you must always say that to yoursel'. Rebecca was a teasin' maid, you may think, but she loved me an' she'll always love me — faithful and true."

Then David in a kind of rapture of anguish, felt her arms about his neck — such little, light, slender arms and her golden head sank upon his breast.

Before that time he had had many misgivings in thinking of the two years that must elapse before they again met, and had wondered to himself often if Rebecca would be likely to stick to him when he was no longer at hand; but now all such ignoble doubts died within him, and in spite of the knowledge that the morrow must part him from her, he was a proud and happy lad as he folded her in his arms.

In two years he would come back — his uncle had said he might come home for a holiday after two years. He would earn a lot of money and meanwhile they would write. They would often write; Rebecca wouldn't be too partic'lar about blots or spellin', would she? No, Rebecca was not in the mood to be particular about anything. Then David would give his word to write often.

[325]

"An' whenever ye see a bit o' sweetbriar, ye'll think o' me?" said Rebecca.

Yes, he would think of her then and always.

"I do want the sweetbriar to remind you o' me," went on the girl, "because — because — I reckon it's like me — full of prickles. I've often been a bad maid to ye, Davy, haven't I? Often an' often I've pricked ye and hurt ye, but I've loved ye all the time."

And thereupon David assured her he didn't mind the prickles, and that there was nothing in all the world so sweet as the sweetbriar, and then having reached the top of the lane they kissed each other again and came home through the scented dusk full of a melancholy happiness.

The memory of that hour comforted David during the first weeks of separation, but as time went on the old habit of jealous distrust reasserted itself in some measure.

VNiVERSiTAS STVDII SALAMANTiNi

Rebecca was a bad correspondent. The wilful little maid had never taken much pains to make herself a scholar and letter-writing was to her a matter of difficulty. David would brood over each scanty ill-spelt scrawl, torturing himself with doubts: Rebecca said so little — was she already beginning to forget him? She was so pretty, so gay — surely somebody else would "snap her up" while his back was turned.

Yet now and then a little word in one of Rebecca's letters would make his heart thrill afresh with hope and love, and he would be filled with remorse for his unworthy suspicions. And when towards the end of autumn she sent him a sprig of sweetbriar saying that "it would mind

[326]

him of her," he carried the thorny trophy in his breast till it shrivelled and fell to pieces.

The northern winter was long and cold and the lad thought regretfully many a time of genial Dorset with its unseasonable flowers peeping out at all manner of times, its gleams of sunshine and blue sky even on the shortest days, the breeze rushing over the Downs, mild for all its freshness, and carrying with it always a hint of the sea not far distant. He dreamed of Dorset often, of his father's little homestead, of the farm on which he had used to work, of the animals he had been wont to tend, of the church to which he had betaken himself Sunday after Sunday — but strangely enough, though he longed and almost prayed to dream of Rebecca, the vision which haunted his thoughts by day kept aloof from his pillow.

One night, however, he did dream of Rebecca, and his dream was so vivid that he could hardly believe that it was not indeed reality. He thought he saw her standing in the sunshine on the Downs at the top of Sweetbriar Lane; he was toiling up this lane at some distance from her, running, but after the manner of dreams, not seeming to make much progress, and she kept afar off, waving one little slender arm and calling: —

"I want you, David!" she cried. "Davy — Davy — I want you!"

Her voice was ringing in his ears when he woke; the sweat stood on his brow, and his heart was thumping violently.

"If she do want me, I'll go," he said.

[327]

It was not yet six months since he had left home; according to his contract another eighteen should elapse before he took a holiday, yet he did not hesitate for a moment. An unendurable longing was upon him; he was drawn by an inexplicable force. Without pausing to reflect on the possible consequences which might ensue, he rose, dressed and set forth on his journey before any one, even in that early household, was astir.

He had but little money, and his progress was necessarily slow, his resources only permitting him to travel a part of the way by train. He walked the rest, begging occasional "lifts" from good-natured waggoners.

It was nearly a week after that dream had come to him when he arrived late one afternoon at his native place. So travel-stained was he, so haggard and gaunt with fatigue and privations, that his old friends would have found it difficult to recognise him had he traversed the village; but Rebecca's home lay on the outskirts and he made his way there immediately.

His heart had been torn by a thousand conflicting hopes and fears during his long journey. What if Rebecca did not want him at all? What if she should laugh at him for his pains? What if she should join in the chorus of disapproval which would, he knew, greet his foolhardy undertaking? His uncle had probably written home to announce his disappearance; his parents would have plenty to say on the subject, but for that cared little. What would Rebecca say? what would she think? And then he remembered her parting words: "She'll always love me faithful and true," and he seemed again to feel her arms about his neck.

[328]

His heart leaped up within him as he approached the cottage, for he half-expected to see the elfin shape come flitting forth to greet him; and then he chid himself for his folly. How could she be on the look-out for him? he had sent her no word of his coming.

It was a frosty night, clear and unusually cold. The moon had already risen and the sky was spangled with stars. He could see the withered hollyhocks standing stiff on either side of the whitewashed flagged path, and observed that the door was fast closed. A little glimmer of firelight came through the kitchen window, but otherwise there was no sign of life about the place.

Three strides carried David up the garden path and in another instant his hand rattled at the latch; but the door did not yield to his hand — it was bolted within and no sound broke the succeeding stillness except the barking of a distant dog and the tremulous beating of his own heart.

"Rebecca!" he cried. His voice was hoarse and his great frame trembled like a leaf. "Rebecca! I'm here. I be come."

A shrill cackle from within — Grandfather Legg's unmistakable laugh — was the only response.

David's hand dropped from the latch and he darted to the kitchen window and peered in the room.

By the dim light of the fire he could make out the old man's form in its accustomed place, and rapped sharply at the pane.

"Eh?" cried Grandfather Legg.

"Be every one out?" shouted David. " Where's Rebecca?"

The old man leaned forward so that the firelight fell full upon his shrivelled face; his habitually vacant eyes wore a cunning look and he laughed again, as though amused by some secret joke.

David uplifted his voice once more and in his excitement shook the little casement. "Look at me!" he cried. "Don't ye know me, Mr. Legg? It's me — David Samson."

"Oh, I know ye," chuckled Mr. Legg. "I know ye, David."

"Right!" cried David, delighted at having extracted an intelligible response. "Then tell me where's Rebecca? I've come a long way to see her. Which way has she gone? I be talkin' of Rebecca, Mr. Legg."

"E-es," rejoined the other, still chuckling; "oh, e-es, Rebecca — surely."

"Where is she, I say?" shouted David.

Grandfather Legg lifted a lean hand and jerked his thumb expressively in the direction of Sweetbriar Lane.

"Rebecca," said he, "Rebecca be yon."

David stepped back from the window and stood a moment paralysed. The eager excitement of a few moments before left him all in a minute and he became suddenly cold. Rebecca was out at this hour — Rebecca had gone a-walkin' in Sweetbriar Lane with another man. That dream which told him she craved for him was but a mockery.

After a pause he began to walk rapidly away in the direction indicated by the old man. He would see for himself; he would find Rebecca and tax her with her

[330]

infidelity; he would — here he drew in his breath and clenched his hands — he would reckon with the other fellow.

Now the lane lay before him, winding upwards between its shadowy hedges silent and deserted. His steps rang sharply on the frozen surface; deep shadows lay beneath the hedgerows but the path itself gleamed silvery white in the moonlight. Up, up — there was never a soul in sight — if Grandfather Legg spoke truth Rebecca must have wandered on a long way with that new sweetheart of hers. He pressed forward with what speed he might, he would come upon them sooner or later and then!

Yonder at the turn of the lane, the outline of the lychgate was visible, and, topping the churchyard wall the dark heads of a group of cypresses; his eyes wandered absently over them, insensibly taking note of how bravely the frost-encased needles gleamed; the hoar lay thick on the ancient tiles of the lychgate roof too, and even edged the time-worn pillars which supported it. As he brought his absent gaze down to these pillars he saw a face peep out at him from behind one. The moonlight fell full upon it and he recognised at once that it was Rebecca's. Very small and pale it looked, and yet it wore a smile, tender and a little sad.

David with an inarticulate cry rushed towards her. But before he could reach it the little figure came gliding forth from its ambush and went fluttering up the path

before him as it had so often done in former days. She paused every now and then to turn round with the arch smile which he knew so well, and to beckon, but she spoke no word, and her feet fell so lightly on the stony track that they made no sound. She wore a cotton dress familiar to

[331]

David, and no wrap of any kind in spite of the cold; her fair hair, too, glistened in the silvery light unshaded by a hat.

"Rebecca! Rebecca!" cried David, lumbering in pursuit of her, a prey to such a tumult of emotions that he almost wept. "Rebecca, come back, love. I came because ye did call me. Ye must have a word to say to me sure. Ye'll never go for to treat me so foolish now I have come all this way to see ye."

But the little figure only waved its arms for all response and went gliding on — on, always out of reach, now lost to sight at the turn of the lane, now in obedience to some such freakish impulse as had often roused his ire long ago, darting behind a clump of bushes, now peering down at him from the top of a high bank. Always tantalising, always elusive, but his own Rebecca for all that — his Rebecca who had never given a thought to any other man. She would surely soon tire of her play and run to his arms.

Here were the Downs at last, and Rebecca, as though in answer to his yearning, paused, turning towards him and beckoning. For a moment he saw her thus almost as he had seen her in his dream, save that the light which bathed her slight figure was not the noonday glow of his fancy but the ethereal radiance of the winter's night, and that no word passed her smiling lips. As he gazed upon her the dream powerlessness came upon him, his feet remained rooted to the ground, his arms hung useless by his side, he tried to call her name aloud but his tongue clove to his palate. Only a moment did this nightmare-like oppression endure and then, with a cry, he rushed towards the spot where she had stood — but Rebecca had vanished.

[332]

His arms closed upon the empty air, his dazzled eyes beheld only the frost-bound Downs, the clump of firs against which he had seen her form outlined — there was no trace of her anywhere. Calling upon her frantically, first in anger, then with anguish, then in wild terror, he searched about the place, but all was silence — desolation.

He came down the hilly path at last slowly, looking neither to right nor to left, his head sunk upon his breast and his figure swaying.

Here was the bank where she had picked that sprig of sweetbriar to which she had likened herself; the leafless bush coated with frost like its fellows gave forth no perfume as he passed, and he did not even pause.

Now the lychgate came in sight once more, and David quickening his pace ran unsteadily towards it. The gate yielded to his hand, but no fairy form lay in ambush behind it, no arch mocking face peered at him through the bars. Yet as it swung to behind him David stood still, catching his breath with a gasp; a rush of overpowering perfume greeted his nostrils, here in the dead of the winter's night the frozen air was heavy with the scent of sweetbriar. As he staggered forward with a choking cry his feet sank deep in the soft mould of a newly-made grave.

THE ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY PRESS LIMITED