Author: M. E. Francis (Mary E. Blundell (née Sweetman)) (1855-1930)
Text type: Prose
Date of composition: 1907
Editions: 1907, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2017
Source text:
Francis, M. E. 1907. *Stepping Westward*. London: Methuen & Co.
e-text:
Access and transcription: December 2020
Number of words: 76.729
Dialect represented: Dorsetshire and Lancashire
Produced by Irene Gómez-Luis & Adrián González-Valverde
Revised by María F. García-Bermejo Giner

STEPPING WESTWARD

BY

M.E. FRANCIS

(MRS FRANCIS BLUNDELL)

METHUEN & CO.

36 ESSEX STREET W.C.

LONDON

[NP]

First Published in 1907

[NP]

TO

MY DEAR FRIEND

ELINOR, LADY D'OYLY

KNOWN AND BELOVED BY DORSET FOLK OF ALL GRADES

AND ALL AGES

"*Write me as one who loves his fellow-men.*"

[NP]

CONTENTS

	PAGE
TRANTER SALLY	1
"LWONESOME LIZZIE"	17
JESS DOMENY ON STRIKE	47
"JARGE'S LITTLE 'OOMAN"	70
ANN-CAR'LINE	86
ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS	105
HOW NED BLANCHARD EMIGRATED	120
FARMER BARNES' DILEMMA	150
THE MISSUS'S CHAIR	172
THE RULES O' THE HOUSE	187
LADY LUCY	209
A PRISONER OF WAR	244

THROUGH THE COTTAGE WINDOW 257
APRIL FOOLS 277

[1]

STEPPING WESTWARD

TRANTER SALLY

The wayside hedgerow, gay with its autumn tints, stretched its undulating length beside the rather stony lane that wound upwards from the high road, and lost itself amid a multiplicity of sheep-tracks on the down.

It was one of those mild days that here in the south country cheat the fancy with their likeness, not merely to spring, but to summer. The sky was blue and cloudless; the birds were singing; the blanks were still starred with many flowers: crane's-bill, mallow and scabious. Here and there the gorse was blooming afresh, and new blossoms of guilder-rose surmounted, incongruously enough, twigs with claret-coloured leaves that dropped at a touch. Here, indeed, the finder of autumn had left its trace, and all along the hedge were tokens of its magic. Such miracles of colour as the conjurer had wrought this year are rarely to be seen: such goldens and ambers, such scarlets and crimsons; stretching away beyond the hedge were fields still silvery with night-dews, and woods shining with the incomparable burnish of season.

Sol Bowditch, the hedger, had no eyes for any of these beauties, however; under the strokes of that

[2]

uncompromising bill-hook of his the glories of the hedge were shorn. Bending his vigorous young body backwards, he threw all his strength into the task, and with each rhythmical swing of his sturdy arm a fresh victim fell. Now a branch of maple that seemed to shower stars as it dropped; now a jagged wild-rose, heavily laden with ruby provender which later on might have made may a starving bird happy; now a hazel-twig with a few belated nuts still clinging to their shrivelled wrappings; now, with quick

sharp strokes, making short work of hawthorn and privet; again tearing, rather than cutting with his hook, long-tufted tendrils of jewelled bryony or hoary traveller's-joy.

Thus was beauty laid low and nature's kindly forethought set at nought. Farmer Hose cared little for the poetical aspect of things, and still less for the wants of the singing-birds; being apt, indeed, to speak of all wild creatures in a lump as "dratted varmint." It was Sol Bowditch's duty to please Farmer House, and so between them the birds' winter store was trampled under foot or scattered to the winds.

Sol Bowditch was a stranger, having recently tramped hither all the way from Bridport in search of work; but though he had travelled on foot and carried his worldly goods in a small bundle, he was unquestionably an honest and respectable young fellow. No one who looked at his brown face and clear eyes could doubt that fact, and as for the manner in which he wielded his bill-hook it was, as the farmer said, a treat to see him.

[3]

It wanted yet an hour or two of dinner-time when Sol, having paused a moment to finish tearing away an obstinate tangle of bryony, was startled by the approaching sound of wheels; and, looking up, saw the rim of the green hood of a carrier's cart slowly rounding the corner of the lane from the point where it descended from the down. The horse was apparently very old, for it proceeded slowly; and the vehicle creaked and jolted as if it too were ancient. As it jogged nearer Sol saw that it contained but a single occupant, that of the girl-driver, and when it came nearer yet he observed that she was young and pretty; her face, with its clear, yet delicate colouring, framed in curling brown hair, standing out against the background of the old green "shed" like a picture, as he said to himself. The girl's eyes rested on him for a moment as she jogged past, and he jerked his head at her sideways in a manner which implied as plainly as words: "Good day." She nodded back at him brightly, yet modestly, and the vehicle, which was, as Sol observed, filled with packages of various sizes, went rattling on its downward way, the horse stumbling and sliding every now and then, and being admonished in a high, clear treble.

Dinner-time came, and rest, and then work again, and finally, with a suddenness proper to the time of year, dusk. Sol was just in the act of putting on his coat preparato-

ry to leaving the scene of his labours, when he caught sight, in the far distance, of a wavering light, and presently heard the creaking and rattling of an ancient vehicle which

[4]

he inwardly decided to be the carrier's cart returning.

It was indeed the only cart of any kind which had passed his way that day. As he picked up his bill-hook and walked slowly to meet it, for his homeward path must perforce take him past it, he could see the outline of the girl's figure, and observe that it was bent forward; her voice at the same time was uplifted as if in anxiety or distress.

"Dear, to be sure! Whatever must I do now? Come up, Di'mond, you're shammin'. No, he bain't, poor beast."

Just as Sol was a pace or two away she threw the reins on the horse's back and leaped to the ground, the animal immediately halting.

"What be the matter here?" enquired Sol, as she lifted the lantern from its place and ran round to the other side.

"Oh, I don't know. He mid ha' picked up a stone or summat, or he mid only be lazy—you never can tell wi' he. Hold up, Diamond. That's all right; hold up again."

"There's a stone," cried Sol eagerly, "and wedged so tight as anything. 'Tis so big as a happle—I wonder it didn't throw en."

"Stand!" cried the girl, still in an exasperated tone, as she deposited the lantern on the ground, and hunted about for a larger stone wherewith to dislodge the pebble which was indeed jammed in Diamond´s hind hoof.

"Here, let me," said Sol. "Keep your fingers out o' the way else I'll be a-hammerin' o' they."

[5]

The rays of the lantern, striking upwards, revealed a flashing smile which belied the seeming gruffness of tone and words.

The girl straightened herself and stood back:—"Don´t be long about it, that's all!" said she. "I'm late as it is—and tired—just about!"

"Why, what be you a-doin' travellin' the roads so late?" enquired Sol, as he struck at the recalcitrant pebble.

"I do travel the road every day," returned she. "I do get my livin' by it. I'm a tranter."

Sol was so much astonished by the announcement that he was obliged to look up, whereupon Diamond immediately jerked away his hoof.

"I never did hear of a maid bein' a tranter afore!" remarked the hedger with a grin.

"An' what 'ud ye say to a old 'ooman of seventy-five bein' a tranter then?" returned she triumphantly. My grammer have only just left off a-drivin' o' this 'ere cart, an' now I do do it. E-es, we've done all the trantin' in our place for the nigh upon fifty year, I mid say."

"There! well now," commented Sol, as he recaptured the hoof, and resumed his labours.

"E-es, my granfer begun it, an' then when *he* died my father kept it on, an' when he died my grammer took it up, an' now I do do it. Can't ye shift that stone?"

"He be coming," returned Sol. " 'Tis queer work for a maid, an' lwonesome too."

" 'Tis a bit lwonesome just about here," she agreed. "I do generally have company part of the time, but nobody comes our ways much, an' this 'ere bit o'

[6]

lane an' the track over the down *is* lwonesome, once it do get so dark."

"There he goes!" exclaimed Sol, as the stone, yielding to an especially vigorous tap, dropped into the road. "I'll not trouble you."

Sol, without heeding this protest, picked up the lantern, a hand to assist the girl to mount. She accepted his help, seated herself, and gathered up the reins once more.

"Good night, and thank ye," said she.

"I'm comin' part o' the road wi' ye," said Sol, exactly as if he had made no such suggestion before.

She chirruped to the horse and it plodded on, Sol's tall figure keeping pace with it. Presently he rested one hand upon the shaft, the lantern-light revealing how strong it was, and brown.

"My name's Solomon Bowditch," he remarked.

"Oh, an' be it?" she returned faintly.

"E-es. What be yours?"

"Sally Roberts."

"Tranter Sally," remarked Sol with a laugh.

"They call me that sometimes," she conceded. "Here we be at the top of the hill, Mr Bowditch. I be goin' to make en trot now."

"I can trot too," said Sol, and indeed his long legs carried him along at a pace that shamed the shambling efforts of poor Diamond.

Sally protested, scolded, and finally laughed: Sol

[7]

took no notice of any of these modes of procedure, his tall figure jogged along at the same steady pace, just a little in front of the hood, so that the light fell full on his honest good-humoured face, and broad-shouldered frame. The cart went bumping and jolting over the uneven down track, now threading its way between patches of firs, now rounding a copse of stunted trees. At last a few twinkling lights came in view, shining fitfully from a not far distant hollow.

"That's our place," said Sally, pointing with her whip.

"You're safe now, then," returned Sol. "They'd hear ye if ye was to holler. Good night."

And with that he turned, and disappeared into the dusk, before she had time to thank him.

On the following day, at the same time, Tranter Sally jogged past Hedger Sol, and Sol looked up with a friendly word, and Sally smiled down rather shyly. When dusk came and the van was jogging home again, a tall, dark figure suddenly loomed beside it.

"I be a-goin' to keep ye company along the lwonely bit," remarked Sol.

" 'Tis too much trouble, I'm sure," returned Sally, but she made no further protest.

The next day the same order of procedure held good, but on the following morning no Sol appeared in the lane, for the hedge which bordered it was shorn as close as a

stubble-field. Sally looked about her eagerly, but detecting no signs of life, continued her journey with somewhat depressed spirits.

[8]

Nevertheless, in the evening, as the van slowly mounted the hill, she heard the sound of hasty steps behind her, and was presently overtaken by Sol.

"Did ye think I wasn´t comin'?" he enquired.

"I didn't think anything about you," returned Sally, mendaciously.

"Well, I've come, an' what's more I be a-goin' to go on comin' so long as it be so dark. It bain't fit for a maid to go travellin' alone so late."

"I can take care o' myself, thank ye," returned Sally.

"No, no," cried Sol with conviction, "no maid can do that. They was meant to be *took* care on, an' I be a-goin' to tale care o' you."

Sally tossed her head.

"Perhaps I've other folks to take care o' me if I choose to call 'em," she remarked.

Indeed it would not have been in girlish nature to submit to the masterful manner in which Sol tool possession of her.

"Be you a keepin' company wi' somebody?" enquired Sol with some anxiety. "Because there´s no use my comin' so far out o´ my road if ye be. I be workin' over t'other side o' the farm now that this 'ere job's finished, an' I've gone into a new lodg-in'—there´s no use my wastin' my time, my maid, if—"

"Oh, I'm sure I don't want ye to waste no time on my account!" cried Sally.

Her voice was unsteady, and she blinked hard to keep back the tears. No maid, she said

[9]

to herself, would like to be courted after such a fashion.

Sol sighed impatiently. As a practical man he was anxious to ascertain his posi-tion.

"Be there?" he enquired, with a self-restraint that was palpable and exasperating, "Be there another chap a-lookin' arter ye, or bain't there?"

As a matter of fact there was not, but Sally was not the girl to admit it. She remained, therefore, obstinately mute.

"Now look 'ee here, my maid," resumed Sol, after a full minute's pause. "I must have a answer to this 'ere question afore things get any forrarder. I´ll give ´ee till to-morrow to think it over, and then it must be 'yes' or 'no.' If ye've got a young man of your man of your own then ye may cry 'hands off,' an' I'll let 'ee alone. If ye haven't—there bain't no reason in life why you an' me shouldn't start keepin' company reg'lar. So think it over, maidie."

Having now reached the top of the slope, Sally whipped up Diamond, and the horse proceeded at its usual trot, Sol jogging beside it according to his custom. When Sally's home came in sight he disappeared into the darkness with a cheery good night, leaving Sally disconcerted, angry, and sorely perplexed.

She already liked Sol very much; she would probably like him more when she had time and opportunity to study his character, but to be pressed thus to come to a definite decision at so short a notice—it was unfair—it was cruel! Above all to be forced to own straight out that she had no other

[10]

lover—how could she bring herself to make such a humiliating confession?

Very little did Sally sleep that night, and when she looked up in the morning from her untasted breakfast and announced that she had a headache, she was sufficiently pale to alarm her grandmother.

"I don't think I can ever go joggin' off in that wold cart to-day," continued Sally, dismally. "Couldn't *you* go, grammer, for once? 'Tis a lovely day, look see, an' there bain't so much doin' of a Tuesday."

"Well, to be sure," grumbled the old woman, " 'tis a pretty notion. What's to become o' the wash if I'm to go a-traipsin' round the country wi' the cart?"

"Oh, I'll manage the wash!" cried Sally, eagerly. "The steam 'ull do me good, I think. 'Tis the neuralgy what be a-troublin' of I. I'll finish the washin' an' get on wi' the ironin', if ye'll let me, grammer?"

Mrs Roberts assented, after much murmuring and a good deal of sarcastic comment on the "neshness" of the rising generation. There was never no talk of newralgy or oldralgy neither when she was a maid, she said, an' she was sure she didn't know what the world was a-comin' to.

Nevertheless she duly started off, encasing her spare figure in Sally's warm jacket, and covering her head with an old sailor hat which had once belonged to the girl. Sally, indeed, had pressed these articles pong her grandmother with an exuberance of affection which had somewhat mollified that

[11]

old lady, and stood leaning against the door-post as Diamond and the van jogged out of sight. Her face was pink enough to denote that he "new-ralgy" was not in a very acute stage, and all at once she burst into a fit of laughter, and clapped her hands.

It was darker even than usual when Mrs Roberts, much exhausted after her round, set forth on her return journey. She drew back as far as possible into the shelter of the "shed," and let the reins drop loosely over Diamond´s back as he crawled slowly up the stony lane so often mentioned. Presently, to her great surprise, a figure leaped out from the shelter of the bank, and accosted her.

"I thought you was never comin'!" cried a man´s voice.

Grammer Roberts checked the exclamation which rose to her lips, and flattened herself yet more against the side of the hood, but she made no audible remark. To herself, however, she observed: "Ho! Ho! Miss Sally."

Diamond continued his progress as though nothing unusual had happened, and the newcomer paced beside him.

"There's no use your holding your tongue, my dear," he continued, after a pause, "because I'm going to have an answer, one way or another."

"A answer!" comment Mrs Roberts to herself. "We've a-been makin' the maid a offer."

"It must be 'yes' or 'no,' " continued Sol firmly. "If ye don't say nothin' I'll take that for a answer. Now listen to I—"

[12]

Grammer Roberts was not very quick of hearing, but she strained her ears to the utmost.

"I'll give 'ee till we get to the top of the lane, an' if by that time ye haven't spoke I'll take it ye're willin' to keep company wi' I. If there's another chap about ye, ye must make up your mind to say so."

"There bain't no other chap as I know on," reflected Mrs Roberts, "but I'd like to know a bit more about this one."

As though in obedience to her unspoken wish, Sol, after another pause, proceeded to set forth his circumstances.

"I bain't much of a match for 'ee, I dare say—"

Grammer shifted uneasily on her seat: she was sorry to hear that.

"But you mid go further an' fare worse. I'm earnin' sixteen shillin' a-week wi' the promise of a rise at Lady Day."

The battered sailor hat nodded approvingly in the shadow.

"I've not a got no dibs saved—"

"That's bad," commented Grammer inwardly; "a few dibs 'ud ha come in handy."

"In fact I tramped here from Bridport wi' just the clothes on my back."

"I don't like that," said Mrs Roberts to herself; "there were never no tramps in our family."

" 'Twas my mother's long sickness what cleared out all my savin's. I couldn't deny the poor wold body anythin'."

Here Mrs Roberts' countenance assumed a benign

[13]

expression: it spoke well for the young man that he should be so considerate to the old and weak.

"I'm young, I'm strong," summed up Sol energetically; "I'll look after you so kind as I can if you're willin' to keep company wi' I, an' I'll make ye a lovin' husband when the time comes for us to be married. Here we be at the top of the lane now, and as ye haven't spoke, I d' 'low ye're willin' to take me."

Mrs Roberts jerked at the reins, but she was not quick enough for Sol, who in a moment leaped into the cart, and took up his position beside her.

"Now then, my maid," he cried jubilantly, "we're sweethearts."

And with that he flung his arm round her waist, and endeavoured to plight his troth in the usual way.

But to his surprise, not to say stupefaction, a shrill cackle of laughter fell upon his ears, and his advances were repelled by a vigorous thrust of a hand that was certainly not Sally's.

"Dear, to be sure!" cried a quavering voice. "Did ever anybody hear the like? There now! well, well! Dear heart alive! I d' 'low you don't know your own mind, young man."

Still crowing with uncanny laughter, she stretched out her wrinkled hand, detached the lantern from its hook, and held it up to her face.

"Well, I'm—I'm dalled!" exclaimed Sol, utterly dumbfounded.

"Ho! ho! ho!" cackled grammer. "Shall I speak out now, or be it too late? I d' 'low 'tis too late an' we be sweethearts."

[14]

"Here! wait! whoa!" cried Sol, distractedly "Let me out!"

"Nay, now," returned grammer, clutching him by the arm, "bide a bit, bide a bit. Don't be in sich a hurry. P'raps there's a little mistake."

"There's a mistake, an' not such a very little one," replied Sol, indignantly.

"You was a-lookin' for another tranter, I recon," resumed grammer, archly. "Maybe you was a-lookin' for Tranter Sally."

"Maybe I was," admitted sol, relaxing.

"She's my granddarter," remarked the old lady.

"Oh!" said Sol, stiffening again. "She needn't ha' served me sich a trick then," he added somewhat inconsequently. "She needn't ha' made a fool on that way."

"True," agreed Mrs Roberts soothingly, "you *was* made a fool on, jist about!"

"I d' 'low I'll get out now," announced Sol for the second time, with sulky dignity.

"No, no, bide a bit. 'Tis lwonely here, an' ye know ye did promise to take care of I—he, he, he!"

After a moment's struggle Sol, too, broke forth into irrepressible laughter, and as the cart jolted over the downs the mingled sounds of their mirth astonished the sleepy wild things.

Mrs Roberts was the first to compose herself.

"So you be a-earnin' sixteen shillin' a week!" she remarked, sitting up and wiping her eyes.

"Yes, sixteen shillin' a week and the promise of a rise."

"We've a-got a nice little place down yonder,"

[15]

resumed grammer; "a tidy bit o' ground, too, but it wants a man to see to't."

"Oh, do it?" said Sol, in a non-committal way.

"It do! Ye haven't got no money saved, I think ye said?"

"Mrs Roberts," cried Sol desperately, "will ye tell me straight out, or will ye not? Be there another chap a-hanging round Sally?"

"Ye'd best ax her" chuckled the old woman. "Ax her same as ye did ax me, an' tell her if she means 'no' she must say it. We be just there now."

The cart, indeed, now began to rattle down the path which led to the hollow, and presently Mrs Roberts pulled up.

"Bide there," she whispered in Sol's ear, "bide where ye be, an' I'll send her out to ye."

"Must I unhitch Di'mond?" enquired Sally, appearing at the open door.

The firelight from within turned her fair hair to gold and outlined her slight figure, Sol felt the last trace of resentment melt as he looked at her.

"E-es, you can unhitch my dear, my dear; an' there's a bit o' rubbish in the cart what ye can have if ye fancy."

"A bit o' rubbish!" ejaculated the girl, pausing on the threshold.

"E-es, a bit o' rubbish what was give me, but what I haven't got no use for—so I make a present of en to you, my dear."

And with that Grammer Roberts clambered down, and hurried into the house, exploding with laughter as she went.

[16]

Though she was discreet enough to leave the young coupe to their own devices, she could not wholly conquer her curiosity as to the issue between them, and, pausing just behind the door, listened eagerly.

A startled cry, a man's voice talking eagerly, a peal of laughter—and then silence.

"Sixteen shillin' a week!" meditated grammer. "I hope they won't forget to unhitch the harse!"

[17]

"LWONESOME LIZZIE"

It was late on a bright spring afternoon when Mrs Caines betook herself to a certain out-of-the-way wood, in the midst of which her mother's cottage was situated. This wood lay at a considerable distance from the high road, and the nearest approach to it was across a number of ploughed fields, so that Phoebe Caines was hot and somewhat exhausted when she at least reached the longed-for friendly and familiar shade. There was a high wind that March day, and Phoebe's face had been blistered alike by it and the sun as she toiled along the road proper. Even in the fields the light soil, newly harrowed, had been caught up now and then by the mischievous wind and dashed into eyes and hair.

But here was the wood at length, and the narrow little moss-grown path along which she had so often tripped as a child. Phoebe had been born and bred in that wood,

as had her mother before her. The queer little thatched cottage in which the latter dwelt had been the old keeper's house, and there Mrs Sweetapple had first seen the light. Her father had been keeper in those far-away days, and both her husbands had been keepers too. If she had been blest with a son he would doubtless have followed the family traditions; but Phoebe was her only child, and the grand new two-storied brick

[18]

house which the Squire had built at a quarter of a mile's distance from the old cottage was inhabited by a stranger.

The Squire had not the heart to turn out old Lizzie Sweetapple, who was allowed to live in her tumble-down abode, and to keep cocks and hens in the empty kennels, and even to fancy herself extremely useful by bringing up a certain number of pheasants. No hens were ever so conveniently broody as Lizzie's, no pens so carefully sheltered, no young broods so well watched or tenderly nurtured.

Mrs Seetapple—"Lwonesome Lizzie," as her few acquaintances laughingly called her—was quite a celebrated personage in the neighbourhood, and though her apparently desolate plight won her much commiseration, she herself never complained of her solitude.

But Daughter Phoebe did not approve of the existing state of things, and frequently endeavoured to introduce her mother to take up her residence with her. The little pension allowed her by the Squire would more than pay for her keep, and why not tend children, of whom Mrs Caines possessed "a plenty," as well as cocks and pheasants? It was dangerous for her, living so entirely alone at her age, where nobody could look after her if she were taken ill; and if there were an accident, such as setting the house on fire or breaking her leg, nobody would be the wiser.

Though the old woman had hitherto stoutly refused to contemplate any such possibility as illness or mischance, and resolutely announced her intention

[19]

of remaining where she was, Phoebe returned to the charge periodically, and the present expedition was undertaken with the view of shaking her mother's determination.

Being a practical person, she wasted no time in looking about her now, but pressed on with as much speed as she could muster, occasionally repeating over to herself the arguments by means of which she hoped to convince the old woman.

Yet indeed the scene was lovely enough to have tempted a less business-like person to dally on her way. The young grass was springing up beneath the budding trees on one side, while on the other the ground was strewn with fir-needles and last year's beech-leaves. Grass and moss were alike emerald green, withered leaves and needles copper and gold. These tints were repeated again on the trunks of Scotch firs, on the boughs of the heavily-clothed spruces; while the elders and a few stray thorns had borrowed the living green of the herbage below. The sycamores were brave with little crimson tufts, and the larches most glorious of all at this hour, rising as they did their delicate tracery of pendant twigs against the luminous sky, imprisoning the light, as it were, in a golden cage, the floating bars of which were studded here and there with jewels—emeralds that would soon become tassels, rubies that in course of time would turn into cones. The bank on the right was studded with wild violets, and here and there primroses grew in profusion, their tender young leaves flaming in the evening glow almost like the blossoms they protected.

[20]

At the turn of the path Mrs Caines caught sight of the lichen-grown roof of the cottage, and heaved a deep sigh of relief. Increasing her pace she hurried on, unceremoniously bursting into the kitchen, into which the door opened.

" 'Tis you, Phoebe, love!" exclaimed old Lizzie, coming forward to meet her, dusting her hands on her apron as she advanced. "You'm welcome, I'm sure, my dear. I scarce looked for 'ee to come so late, though it be a goodish long while since I see'd ye."

"The children have a-had the whooping-cough," responded Mrs Caines, dropping into a chair. "Of all the tedious illnesses that be the worst—what wi' coaxin' o 'em to eat, an' a-watchin' of 'em so as they shouldn't cough an' a-make theirselves sick the

minute they *have* took their meals, it do fair wear a body out. Little Isaac, the way he do cough and the way he do choke, many a time I think he'll bust hisself. He do turn the colour of a turkey-cock, he do!"

"That's bad," said the grandmother placidly. "You was never much trouble, Phoebe, I'll say that for 'ee. Every sickness what come you did take so light as anything. An' there's some as ye did never have at all. 'Tis wi' livin' so much in the fresh air, I think. I'll just mix this bit o' meal an' take it outside to the little chicken, an' you mid pop o kettle, my dear, an' rest yourself a bit. We'll have tea so soon as I get back."

Mrs Caines unpinned her shawl, threw back her bonnet-strings, and set the kettle on the fire. Then she heaved a sigh, partly of exasperation, partly of fatigue, and looked about her. The room seemed

[21]

just the same as ever, the furniture a little older and a little shabbier than she remembered it of yore. The grandfather's clock stood in one corner, with the hands pointing to a quarter to twelve, as they had done ever since she could remember; the warming-pan to the right of the fireplace was not quite as bright as usual, perhaps, and the china on the upper shelf of the dresser was distinctly dusty.

"Poor mother, she be getting' past her work, I d' 'low," said Phoebe to herself; and the reflection strengthened her resolution.

Continuing her survey, she presently gave a little start of surprise. The old oak settle which ever since her childhood had stood with its back against the wall, being but a clumsy piece of furniture and never used, was now pushed forward in comfortable proximity to the blaze. What fancy was this? Surely her mother could not choose to sit on that hard uncomfortable seat, instead of in the cosy elbow-chair in which Phoebe herself was now reposing. The fellow to it which had once been her father's now, to her astonishment, was relegated to the place usually occupied by the settle.

When Mrs Sweetpple returned, her daughter at once questioned her on the subject, openly expressing disapproval, for to people of her turn of mind any change in household arrangements, above all any change carried out unauthorised, must necessarily be condemned.

"What in the name o' goodness ha' ye gone shiftin' thik wold settle for?" she exclaimed, in an aggrieved tone. "Sich a great ar'k'ard thing as it be, too heavy for your arms I d' 'low—an'

[22]

there's poor father's chair set standin' again' the wall!"

Mrs Sweetapple blushed all over her wrinkled, kindly old face, and answered confusedly:—

"It be jist a fancy o' mine—jist a notion! Some folks take some notions, an' some takes others."

"Well, but what be it *for*?" persisted Mrs Caines.

"Oh, 'tis jist a fancy I tell 'ee—a fancy o' my own to make the time pass of an evenin'. There, I do make poor Bartlett an' your own father take turn about to keep I company, an' this be Bartlett's week."

"What in the world d'ye mean?" gasped Phoebe, staring harder than ever, and flushing in her turn.

"Well, there, I've a-lived here all my life in this same little place as ye know—all the time I were a maid, an' when I wed poor Bartlett—scarce a year wi' he, an' nigh upon farty wi' Sweetapple, your father. By daylight I'm bustlin' about, ye know, workin' at one thing an' workin' at another, an' I don't seem to have no time for thinkin', but at night, when bolt's drawed an' window shut, and I do sit here by myself, I do seem to see their shapes an' hear their voices. It did use to bother I, thinkin' of 'em both, ye know, an' sometimes one 'ud seem to be there, an' sometimes the other. An' at last I hit upon the notion o' makin' 'em take week about."

She paused, drawing imaginary patterns with her forefinger on the polished seat of the old settle.

"Mother, you're raving!" exclaimed Phoebe aghast.

"No, my dear, no; I be in my senses right enough, an' 'tis wonderful how pleasant the time do pass when

[23]

I'm fancyin' I'm havin' sich company. When I do get the settle out, d'ye see, I do call to mind the time when Bartlett used to come here a-coortin'. Fathered be out on his rounds most like, and mother'd be busy wi' one thing an' another, an' him an' me'd sit here side by side on thik wold settle—there, I can call to mind as if 'twere yesterday—the very things he used to say, an' the way he'd put his arm round me."

She broke off, smiling to herself, her toothless mouth unconsciously assuming something of the archness with which doubtless she had responded of yore to Bartlett's amorous speeches, her dim eyes looking past Phoebe's astonished face, and past the smoke-stained wall beyond, to that far, far away past, when she was a maid, and her young lover sate beside her.

"He did use to talk a deal o' nonsense talk," she went on. "It do all come back to me now. I do seem to hear what he did say, an' what I did answer back, and sometimes I do find myself laughin' out loud, an' puss'll get up from the hearth an' walk over to I quite astonished."

"Well, to be sure!" ejaculated Mrs Caines, then stopped short, astonishment depriving her for the moment of the power of speech.

"Ees," continued Lizzie reflectively, "he wer terr'ble fond o' me—Bartlett were. Even arter we was wed, he did use to say every evenin' so soon as he comed in from his round: 'Now then, little 'ooman,' he'd say, 'let's have a bit o' coortin' same's in wold times.' An' I'd hurry up wi' my work an' pop on a clean apron, an' squat down aside of en

on the wold settle—an' then he do begin a-talkin' nonsense talk jist so foolish as ever."

She drew her withered hand pensively along the back of the settle as she spoke, and presently continued in an altered tone:—

"Thik wold settle. Twas here they did lay en when they carried en in arter that there accident wi' his gun what killed en. An' I knelt down as it mid be here" (pointing with her hand), "an' he couldn't speak nor yet move, but he jist looked at I, an' I looked back, an' I took his poor hand an' kissed it, an' then when I looked again he wer' gone."

"I'm sure ye didn't ought to be thinkin' o' sich things," burst out Phoebe, with an irritation that was part real, part feigned, to conceal her alarm. "What call have 'ee now to be fetchin' 'em up arter all they years—fifty year an' more, I'm sure, what have gone by since. If ye must think o' anybody why don't ye think o' poor father? The best husband as a woman need wish to be tied-to, I'm sure; him as was allus so kind an' worked for ye so faithful—why, you was his wife for farty year very near."

"Farty year and ten month," said Mrs Sweet-apple. "I do think of en, my dear, frequent," she continued mildly. "There, as I do tell 'ee, him an' Bartlett takes it week about. I do push back settle to the carner, d'ye see, where it did bide all the years him an' me lived together. I could never seem to have the heart to leave it in its wold place here arter Bartlett died. So I do push it back to the earner, an' I do pull out Sweetapple's chair, an' I do set it where he did use to like it anigh the fire, an' I do sit in my own where you be a-sittin' now, an' I

[25]

do fetch out a wold sock an' make a purtence o' darnin' it. An' I do look up now an' again, an' fancy to myself I do see en a-sittin' there in his shirt sleeves same as he did use to do, an' a-smokin' of his pipe. An' I do say to en by times: Well, Sweetapple, an' how be the young birds a-lookin'?'

" 'Wonderful well,' he d' say, an' then us'll say nothin' for a bit till by an' by I'll maybe tell en about a hen what I think 'ull soon go broody, or a clutch o' young pheasants what I do think 'ull turn out very well. Why, there's times when I do actually take en out o' door to look at the pens. I do light lantern an' carry it, an' I do fancy I hear his steps aside o' mine so plain—"

"Mother," exclaimed Phoebe, "do you truly mean you do go out at nights wi' the lantern an' all? Why, ye'll be getting' lost in the woods so sure as anything, or maybe settin' the whole place afire."

Mrs Sweetapple gazed at her, smiling again and rubbing her hands.

" 'Tis only a bit o' nonsense, bain't it?" queried her daughter anxiously, struck by a sudden thought. "You do jist fancy you do go out-o'-door same as you do fancy you be talkin' wi' my father—you don't truly do sich a thing, do ye?"

Mrs Sweetapple appeared to reflect:—

"Well, I don't rightly know, my dear," she replied after a pause. "There's times when I mid fancy it, and there's other times when I do truly think I do go out to show father the pens. Last week 'twas—'twas father's week ye know—I did get my shoes quite wet, an' I did have a bit of a cold for a day or two. I

[26]

think it must have come along o' takin' father out to see the pens."

Mrs Caines gazed resolutely at her mother, the colour once more overspreading her already sufficiently rosy face.

"It's time there was an end o' this," she announced firmly. "You'll be tumblin' down the well some night, or else maybe go wanderin' off the Lard knows where. No, Mother, there's no use talkin', the time's come for 'ee to shift. Lady Day's very near, an' 'twill be so good a time as any other. I'll speak to Squire about it He'll send a waggon to move as many o' your things as be worth takin', an' you can come an' bide along o' us. The children 'ull be better company for 'ee nor they crazy notions o' yours, an' if ye do want to do a bit o' mendin' of a evenin' ye can dam Caines' socks."

"Nay, now, nay Phoebe, nay indeed," cried the old woman in a shaking voice, her eyes becoming round with alarm, and her lips quivering. "I couldn't shift, my dear, I couldn't bide nowhere but in the wold place where I was barn, an' where I do look to die. The only shiftin' I'll do 'ull be then. I'll shift to the New House, Phoebe, my dear, whenever it be the Lard's will to take I, but not before."

"I'll speak to Squire about it," persisted Phoebe. "Summat awful 'ull be happenin' if you do go on this way. 'Tis time that he should see to it."

"No, don't 'ee go for to speak to Squire," pleaded Lizzie. "What be the good o' carryin' tales to Squire? I be so happy as anything here. I don't want for nothin', an' I do never feel lwonesome. If you do go

[27]

puttin' notions in Squire's head—but you wouldn't be so unkind, would ye, my dear?" Phoebe made no answer; the kettle boiled at this juncture, and gave an excuse for rising and rescuing it from the fire. She insisted on making tea for her mother, and, instead of reverting to the vexed topic, chatted throughout the meal so incessantly, and on such a variety of topics, that Lizzie became a trifle bewildered; and, imagining from her daughter's altered demeanour that the latter had come round to her views, smiled pleasantly, and put in a word now and then whenever she could catch the drift of the conversation. For, if truth be told, her wits had become duller than of yore, and remarks and smiles alike were a trifle vague.

Mrs Caines rose at last to take her departure, straightened her bonnet, donned her shawl, and kissed her mother affectionately.

Lizzie had already washed up and put away the tea-things, and after returning her daughter's embrace, pulled down her cuffs and shook out her apron with a preoccupied air. Almost before Phoebe had left the room she had installed herself on the settle, and was gazing expectantly at the door.

"Now don't go out tonight, whatever happens," urged Phoebe. "There's a good soul! I can see ye've got a bit of a cold hangin' about ye still."

"Nay, my dear," responded Lizzie, with a small secret smile. " 'Tis Bartlett's night, ye know. I do never ha' time to think o'-chicken an' sich when Bartlett be here."

Phoebe stared; then, taking her umbrella, left the house. She heard Lizzie bolt the door behind her,

and walked away, shaking her head and pursing up her lips. After proceeding fifty yards or so she paused, and presently turning retraced her steps as noiselessly as possible. The kitchen window was already shuttered, but Phoebe knew there was a wide chink beneath the hinge, and making her way towards it, peered into the fire-lit room.

Old Lizzie was still seated on the settle, in the far corner, so as to leave plenty of room for the other imaginary occupant. She was smiling, and glancing now up, now down, with that revived coyness of her youth.

Now she stretched out her trembling old hand with a curious little gesture, as though stroking something—the crisp brown locks perhaps which had been so long hidden away in the grave; now she was laughing.

"I never did hear any chap carry on like that," she said. "Why we be old married folks now—six month wed come Tuesday."

Phoebe turned away from the window and stepped forth briskly through the twilight. Her mind was irrevocably made up.

A wilful woman must have her way, we are told, and Mrs Caines' way appeared so very reasonable that even the Squire fell in with it, though reluctantly. That he himself should take active measures to turn old Lizzie out of her cherished little house was certainly a most disagreeable necessity; nevertheless he appeared to have no choice. The old woman's actual plight was undeniably dangerous, and she would no doubt be more cheerful as well as better looked after amid her daughter's family.

[29]

Somehow or other, Lizzie never quite realised how, it was made clear to her that the Squire wanted her cottage for some important purpose, and moreover wanted possession of it so soon that she must turn out at once. Event succeeded event with such rapidity that she found herself uprooted almost before she had time to grasp the full extent of her misfortune, and was installed by Mrs Caines' hearth and surrounded by Mrs Caines' noisy little flock while still pleading and protesting.

"Now here you be, mother," announced Phoebe, whisking off her parent's bonnet and shawl, and firmly tying on her black net cap, "here you be so right as anything. Here be your own chair, d'ye see, for ye to sit in, and yonder's the dresser—how well it do look in the earner, don't it? Us'll unpack the china by and by, and wash it and set it out—that's summat to do, bain't it? An' there's father's chair opposite yours, same as usual."

"Ah," murmured Lizzie vaguely, "this be Sweet-apple's week. 'Ees, sure—'ees, there be his chair. "Where be— "

Her eyes wandered round the unfamiliar room.

"Where be," she was beginning again, when Phoebe adroitly interrupted her.

"This be father's chair, as you do say, mother, an' this be his week to be sure. There you can talk to en so comfortable as can be."

Lizzie glanced round again with a deep sigh.

John Caines, Phoebe's husband, worked in the Branston brewery, and they lived in consequence in the town. Theirs was a six-roomed semi-detached house with a dusty little yard in the rear, and a tiny

[30]

grass-plot in front, on which Phoebe sometimes spread out linen to dry. It was situated near the station, and many vehicles passed that way, creating much dust, and making a considerable amount of noise.

Phoebe presently commented on this fact to her bewildered mother.

"Tis nice an' cheerful to be so near the road, bain't it?" she remarked pleasantly, tilting up as she spoke a corner of the muslin blind. "Ye can look out, look-see. That's the 'bus from the Crown, an' there's Sibley's cart, and look, look—there's a motor."

The children all rushed to the window to investigate this wonder, Isaac pausing midway to whoop violently. Lizzie bent a vacant gaze upon the window, and then drew back into her corner.

" 'Tis awful lwonesome here," she said, "terr'ble lwonesome—there, that noise an' the dust an' all; it do fair make my head go round."

Phoebe burst out laughing:—

"Dear, to be sure, that's a queer notion! How can ye be lwonesome wi' so many folks about?"

Lizzie rocked herself backwards and forwards in her chair, half moaning to herself.

"I can't find nothin' what I'm used to. I can't seem to hear nothin'—wi' so much talkin' an' that there terr'ble noise outside, an' I can't find—"

She broke off suddenly, sitting bolt upright.

"Where be the settle?" she cried, in a loud, anxious tone. "Where be the wold settle? Ye've never been an' left that behind?"

Phoebe was taken aback for a moment: as a matter of fact, she had purposely left it behind, not only

[31]

because it seemed to her worthless in itself, but because she thought the sight of it would conjure up those crazy notions which she was so anxious to dispel. It was all very well that her mother should dwell on the memory of Phoebe's own departed father; she might look at his chair as much as she liked, and accomplish a bit of darning for the family, under the impression it was for him; but it was quite a different matter to go on in such a foolish way about a man who had been in his grave for more than fifty years, and to whom she had been wed but for a few months. The neighbours would think Mrs Sweetapple daft indeed if she were to regale them with such tales as she had recently related to her daughter.

"Where be the settle?" repeated Lizzie, with a shrill cry.

"There, don't ye take on," said Phoebe soothingly; "there wasn't room for't in the cart, d'ye see, an' us'll have to send to fetch it. 'Tis so heavy—the poor harse couldn't ha' dragged it so far wi' so many other things."

"It must be here by end of the week," said Mrs Sweetapple. "It must be here by Sunday. It'll be Bartlett's week, come Sunday."

"We'll send for it—we'll send for it," exclaimed Mrs Caines. "There now, mother," returning to an argument which she had before found efficacious, "don't ye go for to forget as this be father's turn. Poor father—ye didn't ought for to forget he."

"I don't forget en, my dear, I don't forget en," said Lizzie, dropping her head upon her breast. "I do feel a bit confused—I bain't used to childern, ye

[32]

see, and—I do feel terr'ble lwonesome; I did ought to be feedin' chicken now," she added, half rising, and then dropping back again. "What's become o' the chicken, Phoebe?"

"Why, don't ye know?" responded Phoebe, cheerfully. "Mr Foster—Keeper Foster, ye know, he did take 'em all off your hands. He'll see to the little pheasants right enough, and he did pay money down for the chicken. I've got it safe for 'ee. I did tell 'ee all about that."

"So ye did, so ye did," murmured Lizzie. "I was forgettin'—it do seem strange to ha' no chicken to see to. I d' 'low father 'ull miss 'em so well as me.

"Eh?" said Mrs Caines, staring.

"I d' 'low father'll miss 'em," repeated Lizzie. "He'll be lookin' to go out wi' me last thing to see how they be a-comin' on."

"My dear 'ooman," exclaimed Phoebe, "you can't go walkin' out in the street o' nights here, fancy or no fancy. Ye mid be runned over an' killed straight-off."

"Runned over!" exclaimed Lizzie. She looked about her vaguely, and then sank into silence.

Mrs Caines drew her John into the privacy of the back kitchen as soon as he appeared, and, with many shakes of the head, explained to him the state of affairs.

"Poor mother be queerer nor ever to-night. Us mustn't lose sight of her for a minute; there's no knowin' what she mid do. There, she've been carry- in' on about takin' father out to see the pens and about bein' so lwonesome—lwonesome here in the

[33]

town, ye know. She says the noise an' the voices an' all do make her feel lwonesome."

John Caines removed his pipe in order to grin at ease, and then put it back again; he was a man of few words.

"So I was thinkin'," continued Phoebe, "you'd best keep an eye to her while I'm getting' childern to bed, an' then so soon as I do come down I'll look after'her. She'd best get early to bed herself, poor wold body, she be fair wore out."

Caines removed his pipe again: "But what must I do if she should take a notion that I'm the wold gentleman—your father, I mean?" he enquired in some alarm.

Phoebe caught at the idea. "That wouldn't be a bad thing at all," said she. "I d' 'low that 'ud keep her so quiet as anything. Jist you go an' sit down in father's chair an' if she do say anything ye mid jist nod back or say a word or two—my father was never

a man of much talk. I d' 'low if anything 'ull pacify her that will, but mind you don't let her take up wi' any notion o' getting' out o' door. Here, wait a minute, I'll come wi' ye."

She ran upstairs, presently returning with two or three socks, and preceding John to the kitchen, held her mother in play while he seated himself in old Sweetapple's chair.

"Here, mother," she cried, "here be some socks what want mendin' awful bad. See, I'll light lamp an' set it behind ye. They be father's socks, ye know—Sweetapple's socks."

Lizzie's face lit up. "Ah, sure," she replied, "Sweet-apple's socks—this 'ere be Sweetapple's week."

[34]

She endeavoured to look past Phoebe towards the chair, but her daughter's portly figure blocked the way.

"Here be the needle, look-see, an' here be the mendin'. The socks be terr'ble broke at heel, bain't they?"

Turning towards the light the old woman threaded the needle, and Phoebe taking advantage of the opportunity thus created, stepped towards her husband:—

"Don't ye offer to talk to her," she whispered, "without she speaks first."

He nodded in reply, and going towards the window she pulled down the blind and jerked the curtains across. As she left the room she paused to gaze at the two; John was leaning back in his chair, placidly smoking, and Lizzie, who did not seem to perceive his presence, was intent on her work.

Some minutes after her departure he bent forward and tapped his pipe upon the hob, and his mother-in-law looked up, gazing towards him through the semi-darkness with a pleasant smile.

"Ye've got your baccy pouch handy, Sweetapple, haven't ye?" said she.

John nodded, and she dropped her eyes on her work again.

Presently a heavy waggon went lumbering past without, and Lizzie looked up again.

"Wind blows hard," she said. "D'ye think there's a starm coming?"

"Shouldn't wonder," murmured John, indistinctly.

Lizzie picked up her sock once more, but presently paused.

[35]

"I'm not sure if I covered the pens," she said. "Shall us go out an' cover the pens, Sweetapple?"

John stared in alarm. What was he to do now? Phoebe had not given him any instructions as to what he should say if her mother suggested going out to see to the pens.

"They young pheasants," went on Lizzie, talking rapidly to herself, "they be terr'ble nesh. If a heavy starm of rain was to come on they mid all be dead in the marnin'. Where be the lantern?"

She rose hurriedly, looking round her with a startled air. John rose too, thoroughly frightened.

"Missis!" he shouted, "Phoebe! come down this minute! Here be the old lady a-wantin' to go out!"

Phoebe hurried down with all speed, finding her husband planted with his back against the door for safety's sake, while Lizzie, also standing, was staring at him piteously.

"Sweetapple!" she gasped, "Richard—what be gone wi' Richard? I can't think where I can be! What's this strange place—and who's this man?"

"Why 'tis John, mother. Don't ye know John? You be here in our house. You've a-come to bide along o' we. Don't ye mind—Squire settled it."

"Squire?" echoed Lizzie. "Ees, I mind it now. I mind it."

She came back to her chair without another word, and said no more until her daughter presently took her up to bed.

"I don't know as we've done so very well to toll mother here," remarked Phoebe, when she came down again. "She do seem to be frettin' quite

[36]

sensible by times, an' at others she'll carry on wi' nonsense same as ye heard."

"I don't think 'tis such a very good notion, to go playin' games wi' her," responded John. "I'll not do it no more. I couldn't think what was comin' next."

Lizzie seemed comparatively tranquil on the morrow, however, though she had slept but ill and was very low in spirits. She looked at the children with the same bewildered air as on the previous day, and started at the noises in the street, but she made no complaint, except once when her daughter asked her to repeat some phrase which she had murmured to herself.

"I only said there don't seem to be no birds here," said Mrs Sweetapple, half apologetically.

"It do feel lwonesome wi'out no birds."

"Ye don't look for birds in a town, do ye?" retorted Phoebe, sharply.

"Of course not," agreed her mother. "I'm not used to towns."

Towards evening she became restless again, and Mrs Caines despatched her family to bed earlier than usual in order that she might keep guard her-self; her lord and master found it more convenient to keep out of the way.

"Father's chair" was duly set forth, and Mrs Sweetapple sat and watched it, making an occasional remark; whenever these disjointed phrases were of a dangerous tendency Phoebe took care to recall her mother to the sense of her actual situation.

No catastrophe occurred that evening therefore, and as the days passed Mrs Sweetapple seemed

gradually to accustom herself to her surroundings; towards the end of the week, indeed, she became as silent during the evening hours as since her arrival at Branston she had proved herself throughout the day.

When Sunday came, however, all was different. She went to church in the morning, and behaved as well as even her daughter could wish; she seemed pleased and interested, and as much excited as a child. She had not been to church for many years, and all was new to her.

The unwonted exertion tired her, and she was even more quiet than usual all that afternoon, dozing in her chair for the most part. Towards evening, however, she woke up with a start.

"What's gone wi' the settle?" she cried. "Wher-ever be the settle? Bartlett 'ull be here in a minute an' he'll not ha' nowheres to sit."

The children began to giggle, and even John could not repress a smile. Before the perplexed Phoebe had time to formulate any soothing re-joinder, Lizzie started from her chair.

"I'm fair dathered among ye," she cried out. "Where be the settle, I say? The settle what my father did make wi' his own hands and what poor Bartlett did always sit on. I'll not be robbed on't."

"Robbed! Dear, to be sure, sich a notion! Who'd ever go for to steal such a thing. We did leave it in the wood, don't ye mind? 'Tisn't worth shiftin'—there, I'd ha' thought ye'd ha' forgot about it by now."

"Nay, I've not forgot—an' Bartlett, he've not

[38]

forgot, I'll go warrant. He'll be that vexed when he do come. There, Phoebe, I never thought you'd go for to play I sich a trick. You did promise I sure as anything, I should have it by the week-end, and here be Sunday, an' Bartlett 'ull be comin', an' he'll not find it ready."

"Well, ye shall have it to-morrow. We'll send for it sartin sure to-morrow. Ha' done, childern (in a fierce aside to the youngsters), I'll not ha' ye makin' a mock o' your grammer. Stop that, or I'll gie ye summat as 'ull make ye laugh wrong way round. There, mother, ye'd best come upstairs and get to bed. 'Twill make to-morrow come all the sooner. An' I'll see en fetch the settle by then."

"But Bartlett 'ull be comin'," murmured poor Lizzie, who was shaken with the pitiful dry sobs of the old. "He'll come an' he'll not find I here, an' he'll not find settle here."

"Nay now, mother, nay now. He'll not come—he could never find his way to our place. These houses warn't built in Bartlett's time. Why so like as not," she continued

soothingly, struck by a sudden inspiration, "as like as not he's waitin' for ye down in the wood—at the wold place, ye know. Don't ye think so, John?"

"Ees," said John, controlling his features, " 'Tis better nor likely he'm waitin' there."

"Bidin' there all alone," sighed Lizzie. "The house be empty now, and everything be changed. But the settle's there."

"Ees, the settle's there," responded Mrs Caines briskly. "An' he'll set on't jest so comfortable as can be. Now you come along o' me, mother, an'

[39]

get to bed. Don't you bother yourself no more about Bartlett—he's all right."

Mrs Sweetapple made no further objection, but went upstairs quietly enough, suffering her daughter to undress her, and getting into bed in obedience to her command.

When Alice, the eldest grandchild, who shared her room, came up, she thought the old woman was asleep. But Lizzie was not asleep. She lay there very wide-awake on the contrary, forcing herself to keep quiet with difficulty, until the family should have retired to rest.

At last the house was absolutely still: a duet of snores from the neighbouring room announced that Mr and Mrs Caines were sunk in slumber; but Lizzie lay motionless for an hour or so longer; until, in fact, she had heard the church clock strike twelve, and had noted the extinguishing of the street lamp opposite her window.

Even then she lay still for a while longer, until the lamplighter's steps had died away, and the little town itself, which had ever seemed to her so noisy, was wrapped in unbroken silence.

Then, stealing noiselessly from the bed, she began to put on her clothes with as much haste as the necessity for caution would admit of. The moonlight streamed in through the uncurtained window, and she could find her way with ease about the little room. The bandbox containing her bonnet was here, on top of the chest of drawers, her cloak hung on one of the pegs beside it; here were her boots, but she would not put them on until she found herself safely in the street.

[40]

Out of the room she crept, and down the narrow stairs; John and Phoebe snoring unbrokenly on. Here was the door—the back door—oh, what a noise the bolt made in shooting back I She paused breathless, but no sound ensued, either of a hurried foot upon the stair, or of an alarmed cry. With a gasp of relief Lizzie crept out into the night. Sitting down upon the doorstep she donned her boots, the clock striking one just as the operation was completed.

One! How late it was! Would Bartlett be tired of waiting? Would he have gone before she reached home?

Down the hill she went, as fast as she could, and then across the market place. How quiet all the houses looked as they stood thus with shuttered windows and roofs shining in the moonlight Now over the bridge and under the chestnut trees, the cool breath from the river catching her heated face, the delicious fragrance of the half-opened leaf buds filling her nostrils.

Here was the turn now, and here the long, long hill. Bartlett and she had trodden it once together when they had come back from that famous outing to Shroton Fair. They had got out of the waggon which had given them a friendly lift, just at the bridge, and had walked home together in the moon- light. She had hung on to Bartlett's arm, and he had talked courting-talk all the way, just as when they were lovers.

The old woman smiled to herself as she tottered onwards. It had been moonlight then and it was moonlight now, and she was going to meet Bartlett.

[41]

"He'll wait, Bartlett 'ull wait," she said to herself. "He'll not disappoint I."

But, dear to be sure, that was a very long hill, and Lizzie was quite exhausted when she reached the top. She paused, gasping, while she surveyed the prospect before her. There were the woods before her on her right, the fir-trees sending out spicy scents which might have refreshed her had she been less anxious to get on; on her left the fields sloped away behind the hedge. They were asleep, too, fields and hedge, like the

houses in the town; nobody was awake but Lizzie and poor Bartlett, waiting yonder, in the empty house.

But that dreary white road, how long it was? First a dip down and then a climb up—a long tedious climb, and the comer round which she must turn so far away that it was out of sight; and even when gained there was still more road, long and straight and weary, before she could reach the short cut which led across the fields to her own wood. While she considered the greatness of the distance and the lateness of the hour Lizzie became quite frightened, and wishing to make the most of the downward incline, she set off at a kind of hobbling run. Then, all of a sudden, she never quite knew how, something hit her in the face; her whole frame jarred through and through; stretching out her hand she groped about her blindly for she could not see, and felt grass and a tuft of weeds: it must have been the ground which had risen up to buffet her. But even while turning over this new idea in her mind she lost consciousness.

"Hullo, Mrs Sweetapple!"

[42]

Lizzie opened her eyes and smiled vaguely; somebody had raised her head and was dusting her face with a cotton handkerchief: Lizzie sat upright, feeling still dizzy, but happy and hopeful. She had had dreams—curiously pleasant dreams—and was at first astonished at not finding herself in her bed; but presently remembered. Then a spasm of anguish crossed her face. The moon was set, the gray light of dawn shone on her companion's face and showed forth the ghostly world about her. Would Bartlett still be there?

"I couldn't think whatever it was," continued the man. "Me an' Jinny was a-joggin' along so quiet as anything, wi' our load, when I see'd summat a-lyin' aside o' the road. First I thought 'twas a bundle, then I see'd 'twas a 'ooman, an' then I turned ye over an' says I: ' 'Tis Mrs Sweetapple.' You've a-had a bit of a tumble, haven't ye? Ye did seem stunned-like when I did pick ye up."

Lizzie, looking at him vaguely, supposed she must have catched her foot in something.

"Whatever be you a-doin' out-o'-door at this time o' marnin'?"

Lizzie collected her scattered thoughts, and resolved to make the most of this unexpected opportunity. This was Jim Frizzle, the corn-merchant's man, who had so often driven past her house, with corn for the pheasantry and forage for the keeper's pony, and who had even now and then halted at her own door, to deposit a bundle or two of straw for her private use.

"Be you—be you goin' up—along our way?"

" 'Ees, I be a-takin' a truss or two o' hay to Keeper'

[43]

Foster's, an' a sack o' Injun carn. There's lots o' room in my cart; would ye like a lift?"

"Thank ye kindly, Mr Frizzle, I would indeed. It be a good thought; I be jist about tired."

"Well, you'm afoot early. What brings ye out at this time o' mamin'?"

Lizzie considered.

"Well, 'tis nice an' cool," she said falteringly. She was learning to be cunning. People looked so strange and spoke so sharp when she told her secrets that she was now resolved to keep them to herself. If she were to let on to Jim Frizzle about Bartlett he might, as like as not, go and send Phoebe after her.

Jim let down the tail-board of the cart, and lifted her in.

"Now you'm all right," he said, as she sank down between the trusses of hay. "You'll be so snug as anything there. You'll a wonderful active body for your years, I'll say that. I heerd ye'd shifted," he continued, after a pause, "but I s'pose that bain't true."

Lizzie considered again.

"I've been a-biding wi' my darter for a while," she returned presently, "jist for a while—I'm goin' back now."

Jim jerked the reins, and lit his pipe, and they proceeded on their way in silence, Lizzie dozing now and then, and waking with a start. Their journey took a considerable time, for Frizzle could not avail himself of the short cut across the field and was obliged to proceed by road, approaching the wood at length by a narrow green lane.

[44]

Lizzie opened her eyes wide when they turned into this lane, and raised herself a little, gazing eagerly towards the longed-for goal.

The sun was up now, and all the fresh and dewy April world rejoicing. The grey-green fringes of the larches swung in the breeze, busy birds fluttered from bough to bough, sending forth ecstatic little notes; a rabbit scudded across the path just as the cart entered the wood; Lizzie clapped her hands and laughed. Jim turned round on his seat, and gazed at her in surprise.

"What be that for?" he asked.

"I don't know," answered Lizzie, abashed; " 'twas seein' the rabbit, I think. Did ye notice the rabbit, how he did kick up his little feet and whisk his little tail?"

"Most rabbits does that," commented Jim.

On they went, and now the cottage came in sight, the desolate cottage with its smokeless chimney and shuttered windows.

"Why it be all shut up," exclaimed Frizzle, as he stopped before the closed door. "There b'ain't nobody about, nor yet nothin' stirrin'."

He gazed towards the empty kennels and the piled up heaps of pens which the keeper had not yet found time to remove. But Lizzie did not heed him; she had risen to her feet and was endeavouring to descend from the cart.

"Here, bide a bit, 'ooman, bide a bit. Ye can't get down by yourself. Wait till I help ye."

He let down the tail-board and assisted her to alight, and Lizzie, staggering towards the door, beat upon it with her open palm.

[45]

"Oh, I must get in—I must get in," she cried. "I forgot about door bein' locked! Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do! He'll be gone!"

"There, there, that's a job that's easy managed," responded Jim, and, applying his vigorous shoulder to the door, he sent it swinging inwards on its hinge.

Peering curiously in he saw a dismantled little room, dark, save for the shafts of light which pierced their way through the chinks of the shutters and down the chimney to the fireless grate, and dismantled, save for a clumsy old oak settle which stood near the hearth. But to his surprise Lizzie uttered a cry of rapture, and tottered forward into the room.

"I knowed I'd find ye waitin'!" she exclaimed.

"I think I'd best look in again on my way back," said Jim, as he clambered into his cart again after depositing his load at the keeper's. "I'd no notion the old body was so childish as that. I never thought someway she'd rid house altogether—"

"Oh, she've shifted for good," interrupted Keeper Foster. "Her darter came and carried her off, and none too soon either. There'd ha' been some mischance so sure as anything."

"Well, I thought it a bit queer to find her out on the road so early. She'd had a tumble too, mind ye, one side of her face was all bruised. But 'twasn't till I heerd her call out, 'I knowed I'd find ye waitin',' in the empty room, that I knowed for certain she'd gone silly."

"You must take her home—along wi' ye," said the

[46]

keeper. "It's not safe to leave her, and Mrs Caines'll be in an awful state. Here, I'll come with ye, and we'll persuade her between us."

He got into the cart too, and they drove together to Lizzie's cottage. The door stood open as before, and the room was very still. Lizzie was crouching in a comer of the settle, with her hands outstretched, and a smile upon her face. In the green wood without the boughs were waving, and the birds were singing. "Lwonesome Lizzie" was lonesome no more: she had found Friend Death waiting for her in the deserted house, in the guise of the husband of her youth.

[47]

JESS DOMENY ON STRIKE

The hay in Farmer Old's biggest field had been duly mown and tossed, and his whole staff were now employed in carrying it. But the day was intensely hot, with a brooding sultriness which seemed to betoken a coming storm. Dust lay thick upon the hedges, and the ground was iron hard; rain was badly needed, no doubt, but Farmer Old devoutly hoped it would hold off just a little longer until the crop was saved. He was a wonderfully energetic man, was Farmer Old, and spared himself as little as those who worked under him. All the long, glowing hours of that languorous day he had toiled as manfully as any of his labourers; but now, at length, he had left them to their own devices for a short time, and the men breathed more freely in consequence. The rattle of the hay-rake ceased as the driver, having reached the corner of the field, paused to wipe his brow before turning the horses. A little knot of men, deputed by the farmer to ensure against any possible waste by following in its wake with the humble wooden implements in vogue before its invention, insensibly drew nearer together. One of their number expressed the natural longing for a drop of beer, and another incautiously provoked envious feelings by announcing that at Farmer Ink-pen's the men had as much beer allowed them as they could drink at busy times.

[48]

"He do send it out to 'em reg'lar" said Martin Fry. "Ees, my brother James, what works for Farmer Inkpen, do say that they do be carr'in' the jugs backwards and forrards fro' the house to the field so reg'lar as if 'twas but the family theirselves what was working. There, it do make I dry wi' naught but thinkin' on it."

Jess Domeny looked up from the long roller of hay which he had just raked together, and surveyed his comrade vengefully.

"An' it mid well make ye feel dry, Martin!" he cried emphatically. "It mid well make ye feel dry. Sich a day as this be, an' us a-workin' so many hours at a stretch."

Jim Stuckey, perched aloft on the seat of the hay-rake, drew the back of his hand across his lips, and remarked that it was the drouthiest weather he'd a-knowed since he was a lad, an' he'd see'd a good few hot summers too.

"I wish," resumed Martin, voicing the sentiments of the party, "our measter was so thoughtful for his fellow-creeturs as Farmer Inkpen do be, accordin' to my brother James, but I truly believe a ma's tongue mid drop out of s head wi' drith afore he'd take a bit o' notice."

"Measter b'ain't mich of a drinker hisself," hazarded a lover of fair play, "or else I d' 'low he'd have a bit more feelin' for sich as we together."

"He did ought to ha' feelin'," cried Jess, vehemently. "A man same as Measter what be makin' sich a sight o' money, takin' prizes for cam an' layin' by the dibs so fast he can scarce count 'em, did ought

[49]

to have a bit o' mercy on them what do have to earn their bread by the sweat o' their brow."

"Measter do sweat too," put in an impartial bystander mildly. "He do sweat like anything, Jess. I've a-see'd the big draps a-standin' on's face."

"What I d' say is," continued Jess, after pausing to glare at the last speaker, "a man I' Measter's place what be set up over his feller-men by the hand o' Providence, did ought to act providential-like. When the weather be that mortial hot a man gets thirsty sittin' in a chair, them what's set over him did ought to see as he had a drap or two to m'isten his tongue wi'."

There was a murmur of approval, and then the men prepared to continue their labours. But Jess stayed them by an admonitory gesture.

"If ye wasn't all sich a poor-spirited lot we wouldn't be put upon the way we be now," he remarked. "There's no way o' bringin' measters to reason if men wo't stick up for theirselves."

"Stick up for theirselves," echoed Jim, with a startled look.

Jeis transferred his wooden rake from his right hand to his left, and, fumbling in the pocket of his corduroys, produced a small greasy slab of newspaper.

"Did ye chance to notice what the cab-drivers in London done when they wanted their wages rose?" he asked. "They went on strike—there, ye can read it for yourselves."

Martin Fry stretched out his hand for the paper, and slowly spelt out the paragraph designated by Jess's horny finger; then he returned the grimy

[50]

sheet to its owner, with a shake of the head and a pursed lip.

"I was readin' a while back," continued Jess, without heeding these signs of disapproval, "how some colliery chaps what was wantin' shorter hours got their way—they did go on strike too. The measters had to give in. Well, why shouldn't us go on strike for a drop o' beer at haymakin' time?"

The others looked at each other and then at Jess, who, with his battered chip hat pushed back upon his stubbly grizzled head, returned their gaze defiantly.

"I'd stait it soon enough," he observed, "if I could get the rest o' ye to back me up; but ye haven't got no more spirit nor a pack o' mice."

At this moment the farmer's stentorian voice hailed them from the gate.

"Now then, now then, what be doin' over there?"

The gate creaked violently on its hinges, and swung to with a re-echoing bang behind the master, whose long legs carried him towards the idlers at a prodigious pace, while, as he strode along, he kept up a flow of sarcastic admonitions.

"I d' 'low you folks do seem to think 'tis safe to let the grass grow under your feet these times, but I tell ye I do want to save this crop afore thinkin' about another...Jim Stuckey, I hope ye be restin' yerself so well as the harses. Well, Jess, ye be awaitin' for the rain to fall, I d' 'low."

He had reached the group by this time; Jim was already almost out of earshot, the rattle of his machine drowning the last words. But Jess heard them. His comrades had already resumed their

[51]

labours, but he remained standing still, leaning upon his rake, and surveying his master with a lowering gaze.

"Don't hurry yourself, Jess," observed Farmer Old, with a sneer.

He was a tall man, but spare of figure, with long wiry limbs, and a face burnt mahogany-colour and fringed by a grey beard; his small black eyes were as expressionless as sloes, but there were certain humourous lines about his mouth.

"Talkin' o' rain," observed Jess sternly, "a man mid very well wish for it these times; a drap or two mid m'isten his tongue."

Mr Old was so staggered by this remark, which, under the actual conditions, appeared to him almost blasphemous, that he found himself for the moment unable to reply.

"Some folks," resumed Jess, "as we was a-sayin' just now"

"Speak for yerself," growled Martin, uneasy under the gaze of his master's sloe-black eyes.

"Well, an' I will sp'ake for myself, an' I'll sp'ake out," cried Jess with spirit. "I say, Measter, a man wi' a heart in his body 'ud take a bit o' thought for his men, an' 'ud not let 'em go wantin' a drap o' beer on such a day as this."

"A drap o' beer!" ejaculated Old with a relieved laugh. "That's what be the matter, be it I d' 'low, Jess, ye've a-had a drap too much a'ready."

"I'll take my oath I haven't!" exclaimed Jess, much incensed at this undeserved accusation; indeed the mere suggestion appeared to intensify the longing which he was supposed to have partially

gratified. "I haven't a-had a glass to-day, Measter, nor likely to, seein' it's Friday, and my wold woman she do never allow I a penny at the back-end o' the week."

" 'Tis because you do get through your 'lowance at the beginning," returned the farmer, preparing to move on.

"Nay, now, bide a bit, sir—I'm dalled if I don't sp'ake out as I said I would. There's Measter Inkpen, what haven't a-got so big a farm as you've a-got, an' what b'ain't a-layin' by so mich money—well, when his men be a-workin' so hard as what we be a-doin' to-day, he do send 'em out some beer to the field. Martin Fry was a-tellin' us about it—wasn't ye, Martin?"

"Well," said Martin uneasily, "I did hear some sich talk fro' my brother James what works up to Inkpen's, and I mid ha' mentioned it, but I don't want no argyment about it."

"No need to have no argyments," returned the farmer blandly. "Measter Inkpen have a-got his notions, an' I've a-got mine. An' I'll tell ye straight out, my bwoys, I've got no notion o' sendin' out beer to folks what be a-earnin' good wage an' can buy for theirselves so much as' is good for 'em. A man's better wi'out it to my mind."

"If *that* be your notion, Measter, I'm sorry for ye," shouted Jess, whom the last remark had incensed beyond bounds of caution. "There, 'tis treatin' your human fellow-creeturs worse nor the beasts of the field. Look at them cows yonder—ye'd never think o' lettin' them go dry. Wasn't we standin' up to our knees in muck last spring a-cleanin' the pond for

'em. There's one a-standin' in it now a-drinkin', an' a-coolin' his legs. I d' 'low 'tis enough to make a body envy the dumb brutes."

Farmer Old fixed him with his expressionless gaze.

"Well, Jess," he returned, with a provoking mildness which added fuel to Jess's wrath. "I b'ain't a onreasonable man, I hope. I have no objection at all to your goin' an' standin' in the pond to cool your legs and refresh yourself. 'Ees, I'll allow ye five minutes."

The men's laughter rang out loudly at this sally; the distant rattle of the hay-rake ceased for a moment as Stuckey drew rein, and turned in his seat in the hope of ascertaining the nature of the joke. But Jess threw his rake from him, and turned upon his master with anger tempered by dignity.

"Then I'll tell ye what it is, sir," he cried. "Flesh and blood can't bear it no longer. I be a-goin' on strike."

Mr Old surveyed him for a moment; then he glanced at Jess's fellow-workers, just the fraction of a gleam being perceptible in his inscrutable eyes. But Martin and his companions raked away as if their lives depended on the speed with which they accomplished their task.

"Oh, ye be goin' on strike, be ye?" he observed. "Goin' to strike all by yourself seemingly."

Again he glanced at the gang of rakers, whose efforts became if possible more strenuous than before, and who appeared quite unconscious of what was going on; then he set his legs a little more wide apart and whistled.

[54]

"Ye want a rise of wages, I suppose?" he continued calmly.

Jess considered, and then threw out his hand impressively. There was a certain appearance of tension about the bent backs of the workers. It would be a queer thing if, after all, the master were going to give in to Jess.

"No, Measter," said the latter with a virtuous air. "Ye rose me last year an' I b'ain't the man to ax for more now; but a drap o' beer's another thing. I be goin' on strike, Measter Old, till you agree for to send us out a drap o' refreshment at such times as these."

"I'm glad ye didn't ax for more wage, Jess," returned Old, still mildly, "because ye wouldn't ha' got it. As for sendi' out refreshment, as I did tell ye jist now, I've got no notion o' doin' no sich thing."

"Well, Measter," responded Jess, "I'm sorry for to disapp'int ye but I'll ha' to knock off work till ye give in."

"Jist oblige me by handin' me that there rake," said the farmer. "There's a couple o' teeth gone—I'll have to fine ye three-pence for that. Ye shouldn't throw my property about that way. I can pay ye the rest o' your wage now if ye like. Tomorrow comes off, of course."

"Of course," echoed Jess, staring a little blankly however. He did not expect that Mr Old would accept his resignation with so much promptness and such evident placidity.

The farmer now produced a greasy leather purse and counted out the sum of twelve shillings and nine pence.

[55]

He doled out the last-named fraction in pennies, and as each chinked upon his palm Jess's countenance fell more and more.

"I don't know but what I've let ye have a bit over," observed Mr Old, with a dubious look. " 'Tis a bit ar'kard to make a calculation all in a minute like this. But there, you've worked for me nigh upon ten year now; I'll not be too close wi' ye."

Jess pocketed the coins and shambled away without speaking. After twenty paces or so, however, he turned. Nobody was looking after him; his late master was now plying his own discarded rake; his former comrades were working with the same fury of zeal which had seized them from the instant of Mr Old's appearance. At the sight, Jess's long- gathering fury broke forth.

"So that's how you treat I!" he exclaimed. "Me, what's worked for 'ee ten year. You do pack me off wi'out a word. Ees, n'arn o' 'ee has so much as a word to throw at I, what's done my best an' worked along o' ye these years and years."

Martin Fry glanced up with a stricken look, but apparently found nothing to say; somebody did murmur inarticulately that he was sure he wished Jess well, an' couldn't say no more nor that, but none of the others could be said to respond to his appeal. Farmer Old gazed at him with apparent amazement.

"Ye be a-plaisin' of yerself, b'ain't ye?" he enquired. "Ye be a-goin' on strike to plaisc yerself?" Jess rallied his pride.

"In course I be, but I be a-goin' on strike along o' bein' treated so bad."

[56]

"Well, ye'll not ha' no more bad treatment to complain on now," returned Old. "Ye be a-plaisin' o' yerself, as I do say. I do like folks to plaise theirselves."

Jess walked away.

Considering the strain of the recent struggle, the uncommon heat of the day, the abnormal thirst from which he was suffering, and the fact that he would shortly be called upon to face his wold 'ooman, it is not surprising that he should have turned into the "Three Choughs" before proceeding on his home- ward way. At the last-named hostelry he recovered some portion of the valour which had possessed him in the field, and

which had been damped by the attitude of the farmer and his men, and indeed felt himself to be a hero. Ten minutes' conversation with the missus, however, sufficed to disabuse him of this idea, and he went to bed in a puzzled and chastened frame of mind. Mrs Domeny had impounded the remainder of his already curtailed wage. She had also asked certain questions which Jess found it difficult to answer, such as who did he suppose would give him work now? what would become of her and the children? how were they to meet the rent if he were to be long out of work? each query being coupled with the persistent refrain, wasn't he ashamed of himself?

With the dawn, however, fresh courage came. He had done what was only right in the interests of himself and of his colleagues, and must surely triumph in the end.

The threatened thunderstorm had blown over, but nevertheless it was a busy and critical time for

[57]

farmers. Mr Old would no doubt be glad enough to come to terms now, that he, too, had had a night to sleep on the matter. They would be cutting the Twenty Acre to-day—the grass was almost over ripe and there was Sunday coming—Mr Old might possibly invite Jess to come back, and might even render the reconciliation more enduring by making the required concession.

"What's a drap o' beer to sich as he?" murmured Jess, as he hastily donned his garments; he himself knew how much it meant to him. If Farmer Old did not come round there would be no beer for Jess for a considerable time.

He arrived at the Twenty Acre a little before the usual time of starting work, but found to his surprise that the two mowing-machines had already begun operations. Farmer Old himself was driving the one which usually fell to Jess's share. Jess stood leaning across the gate with a pleasant smile on his face until the last-named machine drew near him.

"Marnin', sir," he remarked, hailing the farmer in a genial tone. "You do seem to be early at work."

"We be a bit shart-handed, ye see," responded Mr Old, with a grin which displayed his remaining teeth.

This was the opportunity Jess had hoped for; he grinned back expectantly.

"It do seem a shame to see ye sittin' up there. Farmer. It must be a good few year since you drove a mower."

"Ees," agreed Mr Old. "Tis a good few year now. Tis a nice change."

[58]

He flicked at the off horse's ear as he spoke, and the machine went rattling up the field again.

Jess waited till it turned, and then marched round the gate with a determined air, taking off his coat as he advanced, and setting his hat firmly on his head.

"Come, sir," he cried, laying his hand on the reins. "This here job be altogether too much for ye. You get down, an' let me pop up in your place. I can't bide to see ye a-makin' a slave o' yoursel' same as that."

"Thank 'ee, Jess, thank 'ee," responded the farmer, clambering down with great alacrity." Ees, I'll not deny I'm getting' a bit stiff for this here work. I reckon it 'ud ha' tried me a bit."

"I can't forget as I did work for ye for ten year," observed Jess, eyeing him sharply; he felt it would be the proper thing now for the other to own he was in fault on the previous day. But Mr Old appeared to have no such intention. He handed over the reins with a beaming face, and watched Jess take his vacated seat with evident satisfaction.

"I do call it real handsome of ye to lend a hand same as ye be a-doin'," he said, "Real handsome, but no one do know better nor you that these be busy times."

Jess's countenance assumed a dubious, not to say depressed, expression, as he set the mowing-machine in motion; what did the master mean? Surely he could not think Jess such a fool as to lend a hand out of mere neighbourliness? His doubts increased when at dinner-time the farmer renewed his expres-

[59]

sions of gratitude; something very like a twinkle appearing the while in his habitually expressionless eyes.

"I'll not expect ye to come back this afternoon," he observed. "Ye'll have lots o' little jobs to do at home. Nay now, a favour's a favour, an' I'd never be one for to ax too much."

Jess stared hard, scratching his jaw, and the other resumed.

"I've a-heerd o' folks going on strike before, but I will say I did never hear of a man what acted so goodnatured. There, most strikers do look on the masters as they've a-left, as regular enemies, 'Tisn't many as 'ud offer to do a good turn on a busy day same as you be a-doin'. Your missus did ought to allow ye a glass o' beer to-day," continued the farmer handsomely. "I'm sure ye do deserve it."

"Well, I'm dalled," growled Jess, under his breath, however, for he had sufficient self-respect to accept the situation. He walked away with as jaunty an air as he could assume, and the farmer stood watching him for a moment or two, shaking with silent laughter.

Jess passed a very dismal Sunday. His friends looked at him askance, for his conduct had occasioned much talk, and he was regarded in that little community in the light of a dangerous firebrand. His missus lost no opportunity of impressing upon him her views of his recent action; Farmer Old passed him with a smile which he could not but think savoured of malicious triumph, and Martin Fry, whom he chanced to encounter on his way from

[60]

church, delivered it as his opinion that he had made a sammy of himself.

The very indignation provoked by this remark, which, as he thought, came ill from the man whose incautious speech had first evoked in his hearers a sense of personal ill-usage, suggested to Jess a new plan of action. Why not offer his services to Mr Inkpen, who would know so well how to reward them? He could not but feel gratified at the thought that it was in vaunting his generosity, and in endeavouring to force Old to follow his example, that Jess had lost his place.

He strolled round to Inkpen's premises at a convenient hour of the evening, when he would be likely to find the master disengaged. Fortune seemed to favour him: Mr

Inkpen, very much at ease in snowy Sabbath shirt sleeves, was leaning across his gate, smoking a ruminative pipe.

"Fine evenin', sir," began Jess.

The farmer nodded a trifle sourly.

"Ye haven't a-got all your hay in yet, I see," proceeded Domeny.

Mr Inkpen removed his pipe from his mouth.

"I'd like to know what business it be o' yours whether I've a-got it in, or whether I haven't?" he returned, with what seemed to Jess uncalled-for asperity.

"No offence, sir, no offence," faltered the latter.

"You do seem to meddle a deal too much in my affairs," continued the farmer. "It don't matter to you, as I can see, whether I do give my men beer or whether I don't. *You* haven't got to drink it."

"No, sir, that's true. I only wish I had the

[61]

chance," said Jess with a sinking heart; it did not seem a promising opening of negotiations.

"Well, then, why must ye go bringing up my name to Mr Old, an' a-tryin' for to make trouble wi' his folks? Mr Old an' me be good neighbours, an' don't wish to be nothin' else. I don't meddle wi' his business, and he don't meddle wi' mine. 'Tis a pretty bit o' impidence for the likes o' you to go a-puttin' your word in."

" 'Twas a mistake," stammered Jess. "Measter Old he did take I up a bit too shart. I did but chance to mention to en how kind and good-natured you'd showed yourself. I did tell en he did ought to follow your example and send out a drap o' beer to the men at busy times, same as you do do—"

"Who's been makin' a fool o' ye wi' such tales?" shouted Inkpen, thumping the gate with his fist.

"I d' 'low he was as big a fool as yourself, whoever he mid be. I did gi' the men a drink once when they was workin' arter time—but as for makin' a reg'lar practice of it, I b'ain't no more of a sammy nor my neighbours. Well, I hear Old has gived ye marchin' arders, an' a good job too. It do sarve ye right."

"Plaise ye, sir, Measter Old didn't notice me. I be on strike."

Inkpen glowered at him for a moment, and then burst out laughing.

"On strike, be ye? Well I hope ye'll like it. All I can say is any master 'ud be well shut on ye. I wouldn't have such a mischievous chap as you among my folk for a hundred pound."

"If that's what you think, sir, I wish ye good

[62]

evening," said Domeny, endeavouring to summon up some semblance of dignity.

" 'Tis what I think," retorted the other. "I think you be a fool—a mischievous fool, an' I'm sorry for your wife an' family."

Jess betook himself home again in a very low-spirited condition indeed. Would all the masters think the same—would everyone look on him as a mischievous fool, and if so, what would become of the wold 'ooman and the children?

His presentiments were but too well justified. Nobody was anxious to employ a revolutionary who might at any moment foster discontent and promote disorder among his peaceful fellow-workers, or harass his employer with unreasonable demands.

Two or three days passed by, and Jess began to feel seriously uneasy; the long hours of enforced idleness wearied him and weighed upon his spirits. It seemed so strange to feel that there was no need to get up early, and no work waiting for him to da. His missus, indeed, provided him with a good many odd jobs which occupied him at first, but on one particular morning he found himself absolutely at a loss.

Mrs Domeny was elbow-deep in suds; the children had all gone to school; he had finished weeding the garden, and cleaning the hen-house, and chopping the sticks; positively nothing remained for him to do. There was no use proceeding towards the "Three Choughs," for his pockets were empty, and the land-lord had long ago refused to allow him credit. He sauntered down the little flagged path and leaned over his own paintless garden-gate. Old Bright, who was crippled with rheumatism, was leaning over his,

[63]

a little lower down the row; Mrs Stuckey's two youngest children were making dust pies near their own gateway. Domeny's eyes wandered from one to the other; no one was at home at this busiest time of the busy day, except the women at their wash- tubs, the old folks, and the babies; and here was he, Jess Domeny, standing idle.

The air was full of the scent of newly-cut hay, there was a ceaseless rumble of distant waggons bumping in and out of the fields; he could even hear the clanking of harness and the distant voices of the men. Every hand was wanted on such a day as this, but Jess's hands hung limply over the gate.

By and by he passed through, and sauntered in an apparently purposeless manner up to Old's farm. It was a comfortable house, conspicuous at present for the bright yellow of its new thatch and the glowing masses of crimson phlox now in full flower. On his way thither he passed the field where hay-making was still in full swing; Mr Old himself was plying a rake. He looked up as Jess paused uncertainly on the other side of the hedge.

"Ye be hard at it still, I see, sir," hazarded Jess.

"Ees, hard at it," responded the farmer, cheerfully.

"'Tis to be 'oped as you wont upset yourself," said Jess hesitatingly; he was anxious to ingratiate himself, but had no desire to bestow a further mead of service gratis.

"I d' 'low it do do I good," returned Old. "There, a man do never know how much he can do till he tries. I'stead o' findin' myself a man shart, I'm reg'lar vexed to think how long I've a-kept a man too many."

[64]

Jess echoed his laugh in a half-hearted way, and then, finding Mr Old's jocular humour a trifle trying, strolled on towards the farmhouse proper. Here all was cheerful bustle. Jenny Old was hanging out a basketful of linen on the clothes-line which reached from the corner of the house to the gnarled apple- tree; Polly, who was not so strong as her sister, was sitting in the sunshine with a pile of garments in need of mending; young Bill Hopkins was staggering across the yard carrying a huge bucket of pig-wash. At the sight Jess's interest quickened, and at the same time he was conscious of a spasm of active jealousy. It had been his office to attend to the pigs, and he had ever taken pride

and pleasure in every detail connected with his chaises, from the moment when they first ran squeaking about the yard till they became bacon.

"Be the new litter come yet?" he enquired in as casual a tone as he could assume.

"Lard, yes! Never see'd a finer lot—eleven they be wi'out countin' the littlest what did die last night. But 'twarn't worth rearing anyway."

"I'd ha' reared it though," said Jess. "What be bringin' the sow?"

"Oh, he be getting' on nicely. He'll do all right on the usual stuff."

"He did ought to have a meal drink," said Jess firmly.

"Haw, haw! You be terr'ble free wi' your drinks I" said Bill, slyly.

Polly Old tittered at the sally, and Jenny, catching the sound of mirth, uplifted her shrill voice to enquire the cause. Bill repeated the joke with a

[65]

guffaw so loud that it brought out Mrs Old from the house, with soapy hands and an enquiring face. She too laughed on hearing of Bill's jest.

"Ah, ye may all laugh," cried Jess passionately. "But it b'ain't no laughin' matter to I. Ye think ye may cheek me now, Bill Hopkins, because I be down in the world, but I tell 'ee, Mrs Old, if I did sp'ake a word about the sow 'tis because I—I—well there! I don't like to see the poor beast punished for want o' proper care."

Mrs Old stopped laughing.

"Ye was always a careful man, an' very knowledgeable about pigs," she observed, thoughtfully.

Jess, encouraged by these words of commendation, proceeded to lay down certain rules of diet appropriate to lady pigs, and Mrs Old listened in silence, nodding now and then.

At the conclusion of his harangue she ordered Bill sharply to go back for the barley-meal, and desired her daughters to give over gigglin' and glenin' and get on wi' their work; then, meditatively wiping her hands on her apron, she strolled towards Domeny.

" 'Tis a pity, Jess, ye don't have so much sense for yourself as ye do have for the dumb beasts. B'ain't ye tired o' bein' on strike?"

Jess looked round him cautiously, and then back at her shrewd, kindly face.

"Well, mum," he said, with the faintest dawning of a sheepish grin upon his face, "I won't say but what—well, I don't know."

"I've been a-talkin' for your missus," continued Mrs Old.

[66]

"Oh, and have ye, ma'am?" said Jess doubtfully.

"Ees," said Mrs Collins. "I d' 'low *she's* tired of it poor soul, if you b'ain't"

"Well, ma'am," said Jess, "it do seem as if I'd ha' done better to ha' left measter alone."

"It do look like it," agreed Mrs Old, with twinkling

She paused, polishing the top of the gate with a fore-finger crinkled from its recent immersion in the suds. "Maybe if ye was to say summat o' the kind to he, he mid overlook it."

For a moment Jess's pride struggled with his secret longing; then the pride broke down.

"I wonder would ye sp'ake to en for me, mum?" he hinted.

"No, no. Best say whatever ye do have to say yourself," returned Mrs Old hastily. "So like as not he'd tell me to mind my own business. He b'ain't one as likes a 'ooman's interference."

"Well," faltered Jess, after another interval of inward struggle, "I'll foller your advice, mum."

"Mind," cried Mrs Old, as he was turning away, "I don't say for certain as he'll take ye back. He was a-sayin' t'other day as he'd done the right thing to make a example of ye."

Jess stared at her blankly and then went slowly back to the field, more deeply depressed than he had yet been, since the fatal day when he had asserted himself. Mrs Old's words were ominous indeed: Jess had desired to be a leader among his fellows, to be imitated and admired; not to be set up as it were in a kind of moral pillory. He stood long

[67]

looking over the hedge at the labours of the farmer and his men. At last Mr Old, attracted by his gaze, came towards him.

"Want to take a hand again, Jess?"

"Nay, sir—leastways—I can't afford to take a hand for nothin'. Tisn't in rayson. But—"

He broke off, quailing beneath the farme's gaze, now mildly enquiring.

"The missus—my wold 'ooman, be terrible upset," he went on, "and there's rent-day to think on, and—'tis a bad job for I to be out o' work jist now, measter."

" 'Tis a pity ye didn't think o' that afore," said Mr Old. "I d' 'low ye'll be a bit wiser in your next place."

"I don't know when I'll have another place, sir," said Jess, babyish tears springing to his eyes. "There, I can't get nobody to take I on—'tis a terr'ble bad look-out for I."

" 'Tis, 'tis indeed," agreed the other heartily.

"I were thinkin', Measter Old, maybe ye'd overlook the past, an' take I back. Ye wouldn't ha' no fault to find wi' I again. I'd serve ye so faithful as ever I did, an' I'd—I'd never say nothin', nor ax for nothin'."

He stopped with a kind of gasp. Old turned his rake upside down and thoughtfully investigated a splintered tooth.

"Well, 'tis this way, ye see," he said, after a moment's meditation. "I did say I were a-goin' to make an example o' you. I did say it to myself an' I did say it to the men; an' I b'ain't a man what likes to go back on his word."

[68]

Jess looked at him piteously, his round ruddy face almost convulsed with anxiety. Farmer Old, who was a good-natured man, could not withstand its pathetic appeal.

"Well, I'll tell ye what: I'll do," he cried; "there's one way I mid take ye back wi'out breakin' my word. I said I'd make an example of 'ee, an' dalled if I don't do it. There, I'll take ye back at same wage as before if ye'll turn teetotal."

If Jess's expression had been pathetic before, it was downright tragic now; he stood silent, with goggling eyes and a dropping jaw.

"Ye see," resumed the farmer confidentially, " 'twas the beer—or the wish for it what did bring all this trouble upon ye. If ye pledge yourself to drink no beer ye can't wish for it."

Jess however was dubious on this point

" 'Twill be sich a disgrace," he stammered presently.

"Disgrace!" repeated the farmer. "Nothin' o' the kind! Ye'll be an example to the men, I tell 'ee—they'll be all a-lookin' up to 'ee, an' a-praisin' 'ee."

Jess's countenance cleared in some slight measure; he took the rake which his master proffered him, in silence, and forthwith fell to work with great vigour and good-will.

Jim Stuckey, jingling past with the hay-rake, halted beside him.

"Be come to help again?" he asked, with a grin.

Domeny looked back at him solemnly.

"I b'ain't on strike no more," he observed. "I've a-come to my senses again, an' I''ve a-come back to work. I be come," he added, straightening his back, and raising his voice for the benefit of the others;

[69]

"I be come to set ye all an example. I be a-goin', Jim, for to give up drink altogether. I be a-goin' for to turn teetotal."

"Well, to be sure," cried Jim, much impressed.

"Ees," resumed Jess, after a moment's pause, during which he had searched his memory for an appropriate text, which he now produced in a some-what jumbled condition. "I have found out my sin an' I be a-goin' for to forsake it. I be a-goin' for to turn teetotal out an' out."

No one was more rejoiced to hear of this doughty resolution than Mrs Domeny; though from certain heated altercations which sometimes took place on Saturday nights between the couple, it might be inferred that in spite of his pledge the good fellow was

still troubled by certain rebellious hankerings. It was even whispered that now and then—on market-days for instance—Jess's gait was wont to become unsteady and his speech a trifle thick, almost as of yore; but Farmer Old never appeared to notice these lapses from the path of rectitude, and Jess lost no measure of the respect with which he had inspired his fellow-labourers since he had first proposed to set them an example.

[70]

"JARGE'S LITTLE 'OOMAN"

IT was eight o'clock on a summer's morning, and Farmer Ellery's haymakers had duly assembled in his yard preparatory to setting forth for the field.

The long spell of fine weather appeared likely to break up at last, and if the hay in the forty-acre was to be carried that day, every hand was needed.

The farmer, mounted on his stout black horse, kept a sharp look-out as the folk came up, and those who were disposed to lag and to gossip quickened their pace as they took note of his expression. Several things had happened to put the master out of temper. One of the horses had suddenly gone lame, a wheel had come off the biggest waggon, and what was most provoking of all, though every pair of hands was wanted, as has been said, every pair of hands was not forthcoming.

Old John Robbins was down with his rheumatism again—and where was George Grumpier?

"Where's George Grumpier?" Farmer Ellery enquired aloud, taking a rapid and frowning survey of the groups who had surrounded horses and waggons.

"Be Jarge Grumpier here?" echoed an officious voice.

And then the answer came, first from one side and then the other,

[71]

"I han't seen nothin' o' Jarge this marnin';" and "He hain't here, sir—I d' 'low he hain't"

The farmer tightened his reins with an ominous look.

"He's been at his tricks again, I suppose?"

While he was yet speaking a figure turned in at the gate and made its way quickly up to the "maister"; the figure of a short, thick-set woman in a print dress and sunbonnet. Drawing near, she uplifted a round, sunburnt face, and laid her hand tremulously upon the farmer's rein.

"Please ye, sir, I'm sorry to say my 'usband bai't so very well this marnin'."

"Oh, isn't he?" retorted Ellery, with a short, angry laugh. "He's been taking something that hasn't agreed with him, I suppose; it's happened once or twice before."

"He've had a fall," the little woman nervously stammered.

"A fall, yes—it's not the first time either. Cut his head open as usual, I suppose?"

The bystanders looked at each other, and a smothered "Haw, haw!" sounded here and there.

"He fell into a ditch once," resumed Mr Ellery, with stem sarcasm. "Was it a ditch this time, or did he chance to knock himself against a wall?"

"He tripped over a log of wood," returned Mrs Grumpier, diffidently; and the laughter of the by-standers began afresh.

"Here, you folks," shouted the farmer, raising himself in his stirrups, "what are you all idling about for? Because one man's an idle, good-for-

nothing chap, are you *all* to lose your time? I'm going to make an example of George Grumpier, and I'll make an example of everyone what thinks he can play the fool and treat me this way. Stand out of my way, Mrs Grumpier—you know very well, and George knows very well, what he has to expect I told him plain the last time he went drinking that if ever I lost another day's work through him I'd send him packing. So he needn't trouble himself to come here again. Let go of my rein."

But Mrs Grumpier clutched it fast

"Please ye, sir," she said firmly, "there's no occasion for ye to be at the loss of a day's work along o' Grumpier bein' laid-up—I be come to take his place,"

"What," cried Ellery, "you!"

"E-es, sir," rejoined Mrs Grumpier with a kind of modest assurance. "I can work just so well as he. There's nothin' what he do do as I can't do if ye'll let me try."

"Can ye drive a hayrake, then?" cried the farmer, with a laugh that was half-fierce and half-amused.

"Not a hayrake, no, sir," rejoined the little woman after a moment's reflection; "I shouldn't like for to undertake a hayrake—but a cart or a waggon—I d' 'low I could drive either o' them just so well as anybody. And I could use a hand-rake, or I could toss up hay wi' a pitchfork."

"Yes, you've got such fine long arms, haven't you?" rejoined Ellery, eyeing her diminutive proportions.

But Mrs Grumpier was not discouraged: "They

[73]

mid be shart, sir, but they be terrible strong," she returned; "feel o' them."

The farmer laughed again, but this time more good-naturedly.

"If you was to give me a trial, sir, I think you'd be satisfied," pleaded Mrs Grumpier.

"Oh, you can try as much as you like," returned the master, twitching the rein from her hand, and eyeing her with a smile that was not unkindly. "I don't suppose you'll make much hand of it, but you're welcome to try."

"Thank 'ee, sir," she responded, fervently. "What be I to do then, please, sir?"

"Why, we'll try what your arms are made of, since you're so proud of 'em. You'll find a pitchfork in that shed yonder. Be sprack and get it, and follow the rest o' the folks up along."

He chuckled as he watched her cross the yard and dive into the shed, reappearing in a twinkling with a pitchfork as tall as herself. Having seen her shoulder this and hasten away with it, he put his horse to a trot, and presently forgot all about Mrs Grumpier in attending to more weighty matters.

The little woman's appearance in the field was greeted with a shout of laughter; but, nothing daunted, she made her way to the nearest waggon.

"I be come to lend a hand," she declared; "I be come to take Jarge's place."

The announcement was treated as a good joke; old Joe Weatherby grinned down at her from the waggon, while Bill Frost paused with an immense bundle of hay poised on his fork.

"It bain't much of a hand what you'll be lendin',

[74]

Sally; I d' 'low your arms won't reach much further nor a child's."

"You'll soon see that," returned Sally valiantly; then, smiling up at Joe, she continued, "I d' 'low a woman bain't fit for much if she can't take her husband's place now an' again when he be laid by the heels. How's that to start wi'?"

She drove the prongs of her fork into the nearest haycock, and adroitly tossed a goodly truss to Joe, who proceeded to spread and trample it after the recognised fashion. "Now then, here's another."

Sally's fork went backwards and forwards with so much speed and energy that Joe presently pleaded for mercy, announcing that she was ready for him before he could get ready for she.

But Bill laughed sardonically. "It be all very well now the wain be near empty. Bide a bit till the load do begin to grow."

As the hay mounted higher and higher, indeed, in response to the combined efforts of himself and Mrs Grumpier, the poor little creature found the work more difficult to accomplish. She made strenuous efforts, holding her pitchfork at its extreme end, tossing the hay with all her strength, even jumping occasionally; but over and over again the truss tumbled down from her fork before she could cast it into its allotted place.

"I d' 'low ye'll have to give in," said Joe, gazing down at her from his eminence.

"I 'on't then!" said Sally; and then she burst kito tears. "I can't!" she explained between her sobs. "If I can't do Jarge's work the maister 'ull turn en off. He said so. Here, I'll try again."

[75]

"Nay now, nay now," said Joe, "ye mid have the best 'eart in the world yet yer arms midden't be no longer. Tell 'ee what—ye can be rakin' the stuff together, while me and Bill do finish this lot, an' when we do bring the waggon back ye can take my place on it."

Sally dropped the apron with which she had been wiping her eyes, and thanked him gratefully; then, exchanging her fork for a wooden rake, she turned energetically to her new task.

By-and-by the waggon went creaking out of the field, and presently returned empty, whereupon Mrs Grumpier proudly clambered up on it Her good-will and energy were certainly unfailing; nevertheless, she presently discovered that something more was required for the successful loading of a waggon. It was very difficult to spread the hay evenly, and, trample as she might, she could not get it to lie as firmly as when Joe was in possession.

When Farmer Ellery rode round, he paused for quite a long while watching her operations, and though Sally worked feverishly hard, and feigned to take no notice of him, her heart beat so fast that she could scarcely breathe, and when he presently called her by name, she gave such a start that she dropped her pitchfork.

"I don't think this job is altogether in your line, Mrs Grumpier," said the farmer.

Sally timidly raised her eyes to his face, but could make nothing of it, half-hidden as it was by his great brown beard.

"I bain't getting' on so very bad, thank 'ee, sir," she answered, curtseying as well as she could on top of

her load. "I'll—I'll be able to manage better with a little more practice"

"Yes, and while you're practising my hay will be sliding about all over the field," he rejoined gruffly.

"You'd best get down again and give up your place to Joe."

Mrs Grumpier meekly slid to the ground, and came up to the farmer, remarking with an ingratiating smile which belied her anxious eyes, "I d' 'low I'm best at rakin'."

"I d' 'low you are. But you undertook to fill George's place. I don't pay George for doing boy's work."

Mrs Grumpier cogitated with a troubled face for a moment, and then her brow cleared.

"I could come two days for Jarge's one," she cried triumphantly. " 'Tis to be hoped he'll be all right to-morrow and able to do his work, but I'll come up this way, sir, if ye'll let me."

"Well, you're a plucky little soul, I'll say that for you," remarked the farmer, more good-naturedly than he had yet spoken. "There, get your rake then."

Mr Ellery's words of eulogy were repeated by many voices when the men assembled at the dinner hour in the shady corner near the pool. Mrs Grumpier elected to go home for that meal, remarking cheerfully that she thought Jarge would be pretty well hisself by that time, and would be lookin' out for a bite o' summat.

"Maister hissel' did tell her she was a good plucked 'un," said Bill, "and so she be. I d' 'low there bain't many 'oomen as 'ud gie theirselves all that trouble for a chap like Jarge."

[77]

"I could wish my missus 'ud take a leaf out of her book. There, the way the 'ooman do go on if I do take so much as the leastest drap."

"My wold 'ooman wouldn't put herself out for I neither," said another.

As they sat and watched the retreating figure of Mrs Grumpier hastening across the field, they felt themselves more and more injured, and were disposed to vent their grievances on their own women-kind, who presently appeared to minister to them.

"A few spuds," remarked Bill, discontentedly prodding at the little basin from which his wife had just removed the cloth. "A few spuds and hardly so much grease to 'em as 'll m'isten 'em. We've a- had a little 'ooman among us to-day as could show 'ee summat, my dear."

"A 'ooman I" cried Mrs Frost, instantly on the alert

"Oh, e-es," responded Bill, shaking his head. "A 'ooman as knowed summat of the duties of a wife, didn't she, Ed'ard?"

"Jist about," said "Ed'ard" with his mouth full.

"A 'ooman what come down to take her husband's place along o' his bein' a bit drinky to-day an' not able to work. She did come to the maister so bold as a lion, an' she did say, 'Here be I, so well able to do a day's work as he'—didn't she?"

"Ah!" put in Joe, raising his head from a mug of cider which had just found its way into his hands, "an' when she did find she couldn't get on so fast as us menfolks, she says to maister, 'I can do two days' work then,' says she, 'to make up for it' That's a 'ooman!" With a further shake of the head as a tribute to the absent Mrs Grumpier, Joe applied

[78]

himself to the cider-mug again, but this last remark was taken up by several of his neighbours.

"That's a 'ooman, indeed," they said, and every man whose better-half chanced to be in attendance looked reproachfully at her as he spoke.

"Well, I'm sure," exclaimed one irate matron, catching up her empty basket, "she must be a wonderful faymale whoever she mid be, but I'd like to know who looks after the house while she be traipsin' about I' the fields. Some folks has one notion o' dooty an' some has another. To my mind it's more a 'ooman's duty to see to things at home—to get her husband's dinner an' that—"

"There, 'tis just the very thing what she've gone home-along to do," shouted Bill.

"An' so tired as the creature was, too, wasn't she?" said somebody.

"Ah! that was she," rejoined somebody else. "There she was fair wore out. The perspiration was a-pourin' down her face. 'Sit down an' rest, do, my dear,' says I. 'No,' says she, 'I must run home so quick as I can to get my Jarge's dinner.' "

"Jarge!" said Mrs Frost, with withering scorn, "Jarge! It'll be that poor little down-trod Mrs Grumpier they be all keepin' up such a charm about," she explained contemptuously to her neighbour with the basket. "Mrs Grumpier—that poor little plain-faytured—"

"Handsome is as handsome does," interrupted Bill; "I d' low Jarge do think Sally hasn't her match I' th' world."

" 'You be a plucky little 'ooman,' " chanted old Joe, gazing maliciously at the crestfallen assemblage of

[79]

matrons; "them was Farmer Ellery's words: a plucky little 'ooman. Be there any cider left?"

"Just a little," said Bill.

"Hand it here, then," cried Joe with a virtuous air; "we'll drink Mrs Crumpler's health."

"Well," said Mrs Frost, turning away with an indignant air, I wouldn't like to have Mrs Crumpler's conscience, however plucky she mid be. A body would have thought 'twas bad enough to have a drunken husband wi'out teachin' other folks to get into bad ways. Drink her health, indeed! Somebody did ought to speak to her."

The suggestion was warmly taken up, and a select deputation of three immediately turned their steps in the direction of Mrs Crumpler's cottage.

The matron with the basket, one Mrs Dewey by name, had volunteered to be spokeswoman; but she stopped short in the open doorway conscious of a certain diffidence, for Mr Grumpier, very pale in complexion and watery about the eyes, was up and seated in his elbow-chair by the fire.

Sally, who with a flushed and tired face was making hasty preparations for dinner, turned as Mrs Dewey paused on the threshold, and smiled cheerfully.

"Come in, do, Mrs Dewey, I haven't a minute to shake hands—I be terr'ble busy. There, my poor husband did have a accident last night, an' I be takin' his place in the hay-field."

"So we heared," rejoined Mrs Dewey sedately.

She stepped in, followed by Mrs Frost and Jenny Weatherby, the remaining member of the deputation, a spinster with a father just as troublesome as

[80]

anybody else's husband. All took their seats in response to a hurried wave of Mrs Crumpler's hand.

"Oh, ye've heared!" said Sally, looking from one to the other with a somewhat awkward laugh.

"E-es," said Mrs Dewey, "we've heared. An' we did hear the cause o' your doin' it, too."

"Oh, an' did you?" said Sally. Mr Grumpier cleared his throat in an absent-minded kind of way, and looked abstractedly at the fire.

Mrs Frost, after waiting a second or two to see if Mrs Dewey would take the initiative, shot a severe glance in his direction, and then addressed herself to his wife, who, with symptoms of gathering irritation, not unmixed with perturbation, was now laying the table.

"E-es, Mrs Grumpier," she said, in a loud, clear voice, "me and Mrs Dewey an' Jenny Weatherby there, us felt it our dooty to step up an' say a word or two to ye about it. 'Tis terr'ble bad example what you've a-been a-givin' to-day, Mrs Grumpier."

"Bad example I" gasped Sally, clapping down the tumbler which she had been ostensibly polishing, and whisking round sharply.

"Well, I don't know what else you can call it," put in Mrs Dewey indignantly. "I'm sure the men is hard enough to manage at the best o' times, an' when a 'ooman like you goes encouragin' of 'em in their bad ways and wickedness, 'tis a shame and a disgrace, Mrs Grumpier."

"A public shame, so 'tis," exclaimed Jenny.

Sally turned quite pale.

"Why, what have I done?" she cried.

[81]

"Done!" echoed the deputation in chorus.

"What have I done?" repeated Sally, with a stamp of the foot, and raising her voice so as to drown the outcry. "When my husband found hisself onfit to do his work this marnin' I went out an'did it for en, so as maister shouldn't turn en away."

"Ho, yes," said Mrs Dewey, folding her arms, "that was what ye done; we all knows that well enough. Ye was a-boastin' an a-braggin' of it loud enough, I'm sure, settin' yourself up an tryin' to make every man o' the place discontented and upset"

"Me!" exclaimed Mrs Grumpier indignantly. "I'm sure I never opened my mouth to get a-boastin' or anything o' the kind."

"Oh, didn't ye!" retorted Jenny. "I heared my father say as you went an offered maister to do two days' work to make up for one your husband had a-lost through bein' drinky."

"Well," rejoined Sally, whose blood was now up, "that wasn't boastin'."

" 'Twas a-settin' yourself up above the rest of us and a-puttin' notions into the men's heads what be bad enough as 'tis," cried Mrs Dewey.

"Why, they'll all be expectin' of us to do the same," exclaimed Mrs Frost, "to be sure they will. The very next time Frost gets drunk he'll up and ax me, as like as not, why I don't do his work for en, same as Sally Grumpier."

At this point, Mr Grumpier, whose shoulders might have been observed to heave during the last few moments, suddenly pushed back his chair and burst into a roar of laughter.

[82]

"Well done!" he cried. "Well done, Sally! I d' 'low there b'ain't a man in the place but what envies me."

Thereupon the deputation turned upon him as one woman.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" asked Mrs Dewey.

"You did ought to want to go and hide your head," exclaimed Jenny.

"Sich a man as that didn't ought to look honest folk i' th' face" remarked Mrs Frost witheringly,

But Jarge laughed on, eyeing the three the while with so quizzical an air that they were positively discomfited. Finally he rose and made his way to the door—walking quite straight by the way—and politely requested the ladies to step out.

This they did, overturning a chair or two in their hasty passage.

Jarge closed the door, but, apparently struck by a sudden thought, opened it again and thrust his head through the aperture.

"I b'ain't ashamed o' myself, good souls," shouted Mr Grumpier after the retreating figures, "but I tell ye what—I be jist about proud o' my little 'ooman."

Mrs Grumpier remained, however, somewhat discomposed by the recent event, and when she took her way fieldwards again, it was with a downcast countenance. Jarge would have accompanied her, but for the fact that, though he had regained control of his legs and could speak with comparative clearness, he continued to see double.

[83]

"An' that mid be a bit awk'ard wi' so many harses about," he confided to Sally.

Moreover the wound in his head was sufficiently painful to make a further rest advisable. Sally set forth therefore alone, feeling tired and miserable enough. She was the most modest little creature in the world, and was filled with dismay at the notoriety she had so suddenly acquired. As the afternoon advanced she shrank more and more into her shell, for if the ill-will of the women had vexed and perturbed her, the boisterous admiration of the men annoyed her almost beyond endurance. The rough jests, the officious offers of aid, the loudly expressed praise were equally obnoxious to her. It was with unbounded relief that she saw the last waggon loaded, and pre- pared to depart from the field. She had shaken out her skirts, and was in the act of straightening her sunbonnet when she found herself suddenly seized from behind, and almost before she realised what was happening, was hauled by a dozen strong grimy hands on to the apex of the piled-up hay and there enthroned.

"Three cheers for the Queen o' the Day!" shouted someone, and the cry was taken up by a score of lusty voices.

"Three cheers for the best wife in Riverton!"

"Let me down," gasped Mrs Grumpier faintly; but an extra pair of horses had been harnessed to the waggon, and it was now rumbling forward at what seemed to her a dangerously rapid rate.

There sat the poor little woman on her sweet-smelling throne, the reluctant centre of all eyes,

[84]

while the waggon went out of the field and down the village street surrounded by a shouting band of haymakers. Outraged matrons stood in the doorways raising indignant eyes to Heaven, delighted children ran after the convoy, adding their shrill voices to the chorus; last of all Jarge Crumpier himself, startled by the outcry, made his way to his own gate just as the triumphal procession drew up before it.

"Three cheers for the best wife in Riverton!" shouted Bill Frost; and "Hooray, hooray!" cried the bystanders.

"Jarge himself, infected by the enthusiasm, shouted "Hooray" too, just as little Sally, very red in the face, came sliding down from the waggon.

As she heard him she stopped for a second, threw a reproachful glance at him, and then, bursting into smothered sobs, hurried into the house.

After a pause of bewilderment he hastened after her, while the haymakers, with a farewell cheer, continued their progress at a more leisurely pace, with a dozen children clinging to the tail-board of the waggon, and one or two of the more adventurous perched on the load itself.

Sally was crouching behind the door with her apron over her head, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Missus!" said Jarge, becoming quite sober all at once, and seeing only the very distinct outline of one little sorrowful figure. "Missus!—little 'ooman!"

[85]

Sally jerked down her apron and gazed at him with eyes that were fierce through their tears.

"You did ought to be ashamed o' yourself," she cried brokenly.

Jarge looked down at her ruefully and drew a long breath.

"Well," he said, "I d' 'low I be!"

He repeated this statement on the following morning when he presented himself to Farmer Ellery, humbly petitioning that his fault might be overlooked, and promising to work an hour or two "extry" every day to make up for the time which had been lost.

"For I shouldn't like my missus to come out a-workin' any more," he explained.

The farmer looked at him sharply, grunted, and finally agreed.

"I'll give you another chance," he said, "but I don't know how long you'll keep straight."

"I be a-goin' for to turn over a new leaf," said Jarge firmly, and to everyone's surprise he actually did.

[86]

ANN-CAR'LINE

Lambing time is a very important epoch to farming folk, and particularly to farming folk in Dorset. The popular idea which associates the advent of these innocents with primroses and daffodils, budding hedges, and all the other, adjuncts of spring does not obtain in this pre-eminently sheep-rearing county. It is in November when days are at their shortest, when the earth is at its barest, when cold rain falls, and not infrequently sleet or "snow-stuff," as it is locally called, that the misguided younglings of the flock look their first upon a sodden and gloomy world. Midway in October their quarters are got in readiness, preferably in a corner of some upland field; the shepherd's wheeled hut takes up its position in the midst of a sheltered space in the lewth of the hedge, straw-padded hurdles mark the enclosure, and sundry pens are made ready for the new arrivals and their dams. By day the shepherd himself may be seen, crook in hand and dog at heel, taking stock of his premises; and often at dusk the uncertain light of his lantern may be noted from afar.

On one particularly gloomy November evening young Timothy Kiddle, Farmer Hounsell's new shepherd, made a careful inspection of his charges, lantern in hand; and after completing the tour of the fold sat down in an angle of the hurdle fence to

smoke a quiet pipe. His hut had not yet been conveyed to its destined site, and till now he had slept at home; but one of the ewes seemed somewhat uneasy in her mind, and all things considered Timothy decided that it would be better to spend the night amid his charges.

He intended, of course, to watch, but having been exceptionally busy all day, soon dozed, and presently indeed fell into a sound sleep. This was no doubt highly reprehensible under the circumstances, particularly when one remembers that a lighted pipe was between his teeth, and that the whole place was strewn with straw.

He awoke with a start and a terrific throb of conscience, and was relieved to find himself in the dark; his pipe had dropped harmlessly into his lap, and the very lantern had burnt itself out. He rolled on to his knees, feeling cramped after his long sitting, and was about to stand upright when his attention was suddenly arrested by a curious sight

At the further end of the long field, outlined against the hedge, and thrown into strong relief by the light of a lantern which stood on the ground beside her, was a girl, digging. He could see her distinctly, and could even note that she wore a white apron, that her sleeves were tucked up, and that she had no hat or covering of any kind on her head. She laboured with a will, but presently flung aside her spade, and, kneeling down, drew something from her bosom which she thrust into the hole she had made. As she bent over it, Timothy watching breathlessly from his post behind the hurdles saw

[88]

and recognised her face. It was Ann-Car'line Bartlett, who lived in one of the cottages down in the dip yonder. Timothy had seen her several times, for she came regularly twice a day to buy milk at Hounsell's farm. She had even seemed to him a nice, modest, quiet-spoken maid, and he wondered much at the nature of the task she was now accomplishing. Soon she was on her feet again, shovelling back the earth with feverish energy; then, taking up her lantern, she stepped towards the hedge, and stood there for a moment or two; but her back was turned towards Timothy, and, crane his neck as he might, he could not see what she was doing. Presently she turned about again, caught up

her spade, and, squeezing herself through a gap in the hedge, walked away down the lane.

Timothy rose cautiously to his feet and looked after the bobbing lantern till it vanished from his sight, and then, feeling in his pocket for a fresh bit of candle, put it into his lantern, lit it, and ran to inspect the mysterious spot. First he examined the hedge, and after a minute scrutiny discovered a small cross cut deep into the bark of a stout holly sapling, which was evidently intended to serve as a landmark; next, carefully inspecting the ground in the neighbourhood, he came to the place where the earth had been recently disturbed. The field was a turnip field, and it would have been difficult on the morrow to distinguish the precise locality without some such precaution as the girl had taken; as Timothy knelt down to pursue his investigations he mentally commended her wisdom.

Depositing his lantern on the ground he scratched

[89]

away the loose earth with his vigorous hands, and presently came to a little bundle. This, on being withdrawn and held to the light, proved to be a cheap printed cotton handkerchief which was carefully knotted about something hard and round. Timothy breathlessly removed this outer covering, and discovered to his astonishment a gold watch. A gentleman's gold watch, as he said to himself, for it was a fairly large size, and there was a monogram on the lid, and two or three seals and charms—fallals Timothy dubbed them—appended to the ring.

Timothy sat back on his heels, opening eyes and mouth in astonishment.

"Well, I'm dalled!" he ejaculated under his breath. "That there nice, vitty little maid. Who'd ever think she'd be that artful. And that wicked!" he added severely.

After turning about the watch, and examining it on every side, he wrapped it up again, and restored it to its hiding-place.

"She must ha' stole it," he said to himself, as he threw in the earth again. "Certain sure, she must ha' stole it. A poor maid like her doesnt ha' gold watches to throw about. If it was given to her she wouldn't go and bury it in a field half a mile away from her home. No, 'tisn't very likely. She stole it. That's what she's done, and she've a-hid it

away here to keep it safe till she can pop it, or maybe sell it. Nobody 'ud ha' knowed if I hadn't chanced to look over the hurdle. It do really seem quite providential," continued Timothy, who loved to use a long word, now and then, even in communion with himself, "to think I should ha' failed asleep, and my

[90]

lantern should ha' went out like that, else the maid 'ud never ha' dug so nigh to where I was sittin'."

He rose to his feet now, stamping down the earth over the filled-in hole, and then loosening the surface with the toe of his big boot; as he turned away he laughed to himself.

"The maid little thinks as I do know her secret. I'll watch—ah, sure, I'll watch. I'm not wishful for to get her into trouble, but I'll watch. When she comes to dig her treasure up again, I'll ha' summat for to say to her."

With this resolution he made his way back to his charges; but throughout his oft broken slumbers that night he was haunted by the remembrance of Ann-Car'line's secret; when he was not in fancy holding the watch in his hand or replacing it in its wrapper, he was sternly questioning the girl and receiving numerous and widely differing explanations of the mystery.

When he went about his work at early dawn he frequently glanced in the direction of the hiding place, and saw in imagination the little round packet lying snug at the bottom of its hole. A chance passer-by on the rough track on the other side of the hedge made him start—would he be likely to detect that the earth had been recently disturbed in that particular spot which Timothy knew of? Even when Mr Hounsell came up as usual to inspect the little flock, Timothy was careful to place himself immediately in front of him, whenever the farmer chanced to glance in the direction in question; so that his own burly form might serve as a screen to Ann-Car'line's indiscretion.

[91]

"What be you a-turnin' and a-turnin' round me like that for?" enquired his master presently, with some sternness. "There you do make I quite giddy. You be jist same as a weathercock."

Timothy had no answer ready on the moment; he looked up at the sky, and then at the distant horizon, and finally remarked that he didn't think the wind was shiftin' that much.

"I don't say it be," responded the farmer emphatically, "but I do say as you mid be a weathercock the way you do go on a-twistin' and a-turnin'—there ye be again! What be the matter, man?"

Timothy set his hat more firmly on his head, cleared his throat, spat in his hands, and caught up a pitchfork, remarking that there was a deal to be seen to, and that weathercock or no weathercock, he ought to be shakin' out the straw.

"There's one o' the ewes here as I don't so very well like the looks on," he said persuasively, jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards a quarter which 1ie felt to be perfectly safe.

Thereupon Mr Hounsell forgot to animadvert further on his underling's oddities, and immediately became immersed in more practical matters.

By chance the shepherd was obliged to be-take himself to the farm that day on some errand; and, as be was hurrying back to his charges, he encountered Ann-Car'line, leisurely driving a flock of ducks towards a wayside pond. She had slung her sun-bonnet on one arm, so that her pretty hair caught such pale sunshine as was available on that November afternoon; and in one hand she held a long elder switch with a few yellow leaves

[92]

dandling at its extremity. She responded to Timothy's greeting with perfect serenity, her placid blue eyes appearing more limpid even than usual as she returned his gaze. When he was a few paces away from her, picking his steps carefully among her waddling flock, he heard her trill out a song as suddenly and sweetly as a robin might have done.

"Well, that beats all I" commented the shepherd. "There she do look I in the face so innocent as a baby, and she do sing out like a—like a angel. I can't make nothing of it—nay, I can't indeed."

His hut had now been put into position, and he occupied it that night, and might have slumbered peacefully enough, for his sheep were quiet; yet he could not rest for thinking of Ann-Car'line and her secret.

"She mid ha' found that watch," he said to himself, "or she midn't ha' knowed 'twas wrong to take it There, to think of it a-layin' out there so as anybody what liked mid just stretch out his hand and take it. What 'ud the poor maid do then? She'd ha' no chance of giving it back, or anything."

Impelled by these reflections, Timothy presently got up and made a second pilgrimage to Ann-Car'line's hiding-place. In a very few minutes he had withrawn the watch from its wrapper, dropped it into his own pocket, and replaced it by a round smooth stone. He chuckled to himself as he folded the handkerchief about this and laid it in the hole.

" 'Twill be a rare treat to see the maid's face," he said.

For greater safety he continued to carry the watch about his person, carefully testing his pocket

[93]

night and morning to make quite sure there was no suspicion of a hole.

The knowledge of this possession made him look quizzically at Ann-Caroline when next he came upon her; and strange to say he found himself obliged to pass her house on the following day. She was busily engaged in scrubbing the doorstep, and on hearing his footfall turned round; and perceiving that he smiled, though somewhat oddly, smiled back, gaily and innocently enough.

"Dear, to be sure!" exclaimed Timothy, pausing; "you do seem in very good spirits, my maid."

"Why, so I be," replied the girl. "I han't got nothing to make me sad, have I?"

"I don't suppose you have," said Timothy. "You was a-singin' yesterday so gay as a lark."

"Oh, I'm often singin'," replied she. "I'd sing all day if I was let; it do help to pass the time away."

"You can't sing and scrub, though, I shouldn't think," said Timothy, tentatively.

"Can't I?" retorted Ann-Car'line, and immediately dipped her brush in the pail and simultaneously lifted that marvellous clear voice of hers.

It was a marvellous voice—fresh and true and ringing; she could send it up, up, to the very limit of the gamut, as it seemed, yet never lose sweetness or roundness.

"Can't I sing and scrub?" she repeated, pausing to take breath and to soap her brush afresh.

"I never heerd nothin' like it I" replied Timothy, enthusiastically. "Says I to myself yesterday, 'It mid be a angel singin', 'I says."

"Oh, and did you?" said Ann-Car'line, growing

[94]

pink with pleasure as she vigorously polished the doorstep.

"Yes, I did indeed," returned the shepherd earnestly. "I should think you was a angel—or very near," he added hastily, for at that moment he chanced to thrust his hand into his pocket, and came in contact with something hard and round.

"Very near—or, perhaps—I mid say"

"I mid ha' been summat very like a angel," replied Ann-Car'line, squatting back on her heels and looking at him seriously. "I mid ha' been a fairy."

Here she lowered her voice and looked round cautiously.

"What do you mean?" enquired Timothy, stooping over her and speaking in the same tone.

"Hush! It's a secret. Don't let mother hear ye!"

The shepherd straightened himself again. "Ah, you've got secrets," he said dispassionately; "yes, young maids has secrets what they don't like the wold folks to hear on. But secrets is dangerous, my girl."

And thereupon Timothy fingered the watch once more.

"There, what be so long a-doin' for?" called out a sharp female voice from within the cottage. "I could ha' cleaned that doorstep forty times while thou'rt thinkin' on it."

Ann-Car'line gathered up pail and brush, and hastened indoors, leaving Timothy to meditate on her mysterious words as he made his way towards the fold.

[95]

He frowned as he walked along, and struck at the hedge savagely with his crook.

"Fairies is nonsense-folk!" he exclaimed aloud once and again; "I can't think as thikky maid can be so artful as she do seem."

On the following Sunday, by some accident, he found himself next her in church, and, perceiving that he had no hymn-book, Ann-Carline was kind enough to permit him to share hers. She looked as fair and innocent as a flower, and sang with all her heart. Timothy was quite carried away. Artful indeed! There wasn't her match in the whole county of Dorset for looks, and he'd go warrant she was as good as she seemed.

When they emerged from the church he asked her to walk with him, and before half an hour had passed had begun to court her in form. He actually forgot, for the time being, all about the watch and his suspicions connected with it, and it was not until Ann-Car'line had unexpectedly broken a somewhat long and contented silence by a fragment of some gay little song—not a hymn-tune—that he remembered the phrase which had so much puzzled him a few days before.

"What was that you was a-sayin' about bein' a fairy?" he enquired, abruptly.

Ann-Car'line's little white teeth flashed out in a mischievous smile. "I was axed once if I'd like to be a fairy," said she. "Don't ye think I'd make a very good one?"

"There's no such folks as fairies," returned Timothy. "Nobody couldn't ha' axed ye such a thing."

[96]

"They did though!" retorted Ann-Car'line. "Says they, 'You be a pretty maid—you'd make a very good fairy. Would you like to be one?"

"Now that's a nonsense tale," said the shepherd firmly. "I'll not put up wi' no such stories. If you and me be to walk out, and to—and to—carry on reg'lar same as

we've a-made up our minds to do, you did ought to have more respect for I. So don't ye be a-comin' to I again wi' such made-up tales."

The girl laughed again in a queer, little secret way that annoyed him still more.

"There must be truth between us," he said, almost harshly. "You must tell me the truth about everything."

He broke off, looking at her oddly; he did not intend to let her know how much he had found out for himself. She must confess everything to him of her own accord, and then he would stand by her through thick and thin.

Ann-Car'line, however, did not seem in the least impressed; she went on singing to herself under her breath, glancing maliciously at Timothy from time to time.

"I can't help it if you don't believe me," said she, "and there's nothin' more as I can tell ye."

"Nothin' at all?" enquired the shepherd sternly. He thought he saw her change colour, but she shook her head emphatically.

"That'll do," said Timothy fiercely. "We've made a mistake, my girl, and 'tis best to say so straight out. If ye can look I in the face and tell I they things, ye b'ain't the maid for I. Ye can find somebody else to keep company wi'. I'd sooner live

[97]

lonesome all my days nor have a wife as wasn't to be trusted; so I'll bid ye good-day. But there's one thing," he added, turning round suddenly, "ye may find yourself in trouble sooner than ye think for, and ye may be glad enough to own up then. I'll not be your sweetheart no more, but if ever you're in trouble and will own up I'll stand by ye."

She looked at him for a moment oddly, half-fearfully, but recovering herself, turned upon her heel, muttering something about a likely tale, coupled with certain ejaculations intended to prove her entire content with the actual condition of affairs, and her scorn of the recalcitrant lover.

Timothy went home in high dudgeon, and taking out the watch gave it a little indignant shake.

"I've a good mind to put thee back where I found thee," said he. "Yes, it 'ud serve her right if I put thee back and took no more notice of either of ye."

But after a moment's fierce reflection he put the watch back in his pocket again, and decided to wait.

Days passed and became weeks; Timothy frequently met Ann-Car'line, greeting her with a surly word or two, to which she responded by a saucy nod; sometimes he would hear her singing in the lanes, and would pause to listen when he thought himself unnoticed; and on Sundays, though they no longer shared the same hymn-book, his eyes frequently wandered to her face, and he was forced to confess to himself that though he knew her to be an artful, untruthful little maid, she looked, as he had so often said, "like a angel."

[98]

At last the long-expected actually came to pass. He woke up suddenly, very early, one morning, and saw a lantern glimmering at the further end of the field. He immediately rose, put on his coat, and opening the door of the hut a little wider peered out into the darkness. It was not yet five o'clock, and here in the open field all was still as at mid- night. The weather had "taken up" lately; the keen crispness of frost was in the air, and the sky was full of stars. The bobbing light yonder seemed to blink like one at first, but presently became steady, and all at once he heard, or fancied he heard, a faint cry.

"She's found the stone," said Timothy, and grinned to himself.

Now the light began to waver again, and, as Timothy expected, approached the hut. As it drew near, Ann-Car'line's voice was heard calling piteously, "Mr Kiddle! Timothy—Timothy!"

The shepherd winked to himself, and answered with a low and muffled roar, intended to indicate that he had just been aroused from profound slumber.

"Oh, Timothy Kiddle!" cried the voice, "please come out a minute, I don't know what to do. Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"Hold hard a minute!" cried Timothy. "I'm coming!"

He lighted his lantern and sallied forth. There stood Ann-Carline, pressing close against the hurdle fence, the light which she held up falling upon her white scared face, and upon the handkerchief in her hand.

[99]

"What be doin' here, my maid, at this hour?" enquired the shepherd sternly. "You did ought to be at home and a-bed. Tisn't respectable to be wanderin' about in the fields in the dark."

"Oh, don't be so cross," pleaded the girl. "I wouldn't come if I could help it. Oh dear! Oh dear! I'm in such trouble. You said I was to call you if I was in trouble."

"I said you was to own up," said Timothy, grimly.

"You must start wi' that."

"I thought you'd be a bit kinder," moaned Ann-Car'line, and two big tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I—I—I had summat as I didn't want the folks at home to see—I haven't got nothin' what locks—so I made a little hole at the bottom of the field yon—and I buried it. An'—an'—somebody's been an' stole it away, an' put a stone in its place."

"That's a queer tale," said Timothy "Very near as queer a tale as the one you did tell I about bein' axed to be a fairy."

"Oh, but i's true—it's really true," cried Ann-Car'line earnestly. "And the worst of it is the thing—what I hid—wasn't mine."

Timothy deliberately set down his lantern, and folded his arms on the top of the hurdle.

"You'll have to come out wi' the whole truth, my girl," said he; "what was the thing ye hid?"

" 'Twas a watch," gasped the girl; " a gold watch."

Timothy whistled under his breath. "And 'twasn't yours, ye say?" he remarked after a pause. "Ye stole it then, did ye? Ye'll be put in prison so sure as I be a-lookin' at ye."

[100]

"Stole It!" ejaculated Ann-Car'line with a little scream. "I did no such thing. 'Twas give me, but I didn't want to take it an' I said I'd give it back—and now I can't," she added with a burst of woe."

"Now look ye here, maidie," cried Timothy, in a voice that had suddenly grown extremely wrathful, "this'ere tale's worse nor what I looked for. Who gave ye that watch? Come, make a clean breast on't—else I'll not lift a finger to help ye. It'll have to come out first or last, and there's less shame in telling me—what's your friend"

"I'm not ashamed," interrupted Ann-Car'line, throwing back her head. "I have not done wrong. 'Twas a gentleman give me the watch, there!"

"Well, then you have done wrong!" said the shepherd, sternly. "What right had ye to take gold watches from gentlemen as ye dursen't let your mother see. It bain't a very nice story, that. Who is the gentleman?" he added fiercely. "What did he give ye the watch for?"

Standing up to the hurdle he seized the girl by the wrists, pinioning her fast.

"Lard, Timothy! Don't pinch me so vicious—you be hurtin' I. There, 'twas a actin' gentleman what come wi' a lot o' others to the town in the summer. They was actin' a play at the Corn Exchange, wi' a lot o' singin' and dancin' in it. This one was the head o' the actin' folks. I went there along o' father, and he said he see'd me all the time the play was goin' on"

"Your father said that?" queried Timothy, sharply.

[101]

"No, the actin' gentleman. He come upon me the next day, walkin' along the lane and singin'—as I mid be the first day you did talk to I—and he did stop and speak."

"What did he say?" growled Timothy, tightening his grip upon her wrists.

"Oh, he axed I a lot of questions, and he did say I wer' a very pretty girl, and he did ax I would I like to be a fairy?"

"It was him said that," interrupted the shepherd. "I never thought there was a word o' truth in the tale."

"There was, though. He meant a play-actin' fairy, o' course. He said all I'd have to do was to sing a bit, and dance a bit, and look nice, and I'd get a lot of money and see the world too."

"So he said, and what did you say?" asked Timothy, as she paused.

"First I said I didn't think mother could spare me, and then I said I didn't think I'd like it, and then I said straight out I wouldn't. But he wouldn't take No," said Ann-Car'line, opening her eyes very wide. "The more I hung back, the more he pressed—and at last he pulls out that watch an' says he, 'Now, my dear, think it over. We'll be comin' back again about Christmas-time,' he says. 'I'll give you from now to then to make up your mind. And meanwhile there's my watch for you to keep,' says he—' 'twill show you I'm in earnest, anyhow. You can mark the flight of time with that,' says he—he spoke so funny, ye know—'and with every day that passes you must be the nearer to making up

[102]

your mind to sayin' Yes.' Wasn't it a queer notion?"

"A very queer notion, indeed," said Timothy, grimly. "Well, and now ye've lost the watch—and what be ye goin' to do.?"

"Oh, I don't know, I'm sure," returned Ann-Car'line, sobbing afresh. "I shall never be able to look him in the face, when he comes for his answer."

"So much the better," said Timothy, rigidly.

"He'll not be in such a hurry to meddle wi' young maids again, p'raps."

"Oh, but he'll be sure to think I sold it, or pawned it, or summat—he'll maybe have the law on me."

"Is that all what's troublin' ye?" said the shepherd, fixing her with a piercing gaze. "If anybody was to find that watch for ye, you wouldn't want to go turnin' into a fairy or any sich tomfoolery?"

"I shouldn't—indeed I shouldn't," she cried earnestly. "Oh, Timothy, will ye help me to find it?"

"I don't know but what I will," said he—"if you'll promise me—promise me faithful—faithful, mind, not to take no more notice at all of that play-actin' gentleman. I'll find that watch if ye'll let me take it back to the man myself, and tell en so."

"I will—I'll promise," sobbed she.

"It's a bargain I" said Timothy, firmly. "Now then—let's see what can be done. Was there nobody at all in the field when you did chance to bury that watch? Somebody

must ha' see'd ye do it, ye see, and then so soon as your back was turned, gone and dug it up again."

"Oh, there was nobody there," replied the girl,

[103]

emphatically. "I watched and waited for ever so long before I made the hole—there wasn't a sign of anybody. Your hut wasn't up here then—I shouldn't h' done it if it had a-been there, for I'd ha' been afeard ye mid see me."

"Yes," agreed Timothy, "that's true. I mid ha' seen ye."

"And nobody could tell where 'twas hid," she pursued mournfully. "I scratched up the earth and made it look same as all the rest o' the field. I shouldn't ha' found it myself if I hadn't ha' made a little sign to know it by."

"Sich as a mark in the hedge?" suggested Timothy.

She stared at him.

"A little cross, as mid be, cut in a holly stem?" continued the shepherd.

"O-o-oh," cried Ann-Car'line, "you horrid, unkind, teasin' chap! I d' 'low you was spyin' on me all the time!"

For all answer Timothy dived to the depths of his pocket and produced by slow degrees, first the chain, and then the watch itself

Ann-Car'line, uncertain whether to be more angry or relieved, burst into a series of disjointed exclamations, and finally ordered her lover to give her back that watch immediately.

"Nothin' of the kind," replied he, dropping it into his pocket again. "I'll keep it for ye same as I've a-been doin' all along. Says I to mysel' when I see'd what you was arter—'That there maid'll be getting' into trouble,' I says, 'wi'out somebody interferes,' And so I—'"

[104]

"Oh, Timothy, did ye?" cried Ann-Car'line, melting all at once, "but ye needn't ha' gied me such a fright."

"Ye shouldn't ha' had secrets from I, then," returned he. "Well, we'll h' no more secrets now, my girl, shall us? I'll gi'e that watch back to the chap and send en about his business."

"But he'll think it so queer, won't he?" said she, simpering.

"He'll not think it a bit queer when I do tell en I be a-courtin' of ye."

"Oh, Timothy!" sighed Ann-Car'line.

And then Timothy Kiddle set his lantern on the ground, and, leaning over the hurdles, kissed her with great earnestness and satisfaction.

"Nothing like having a thing settled I" said he.

[105]

ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

Old Mrs Spencer picked her way daintily along the path which led from the Frisbys' little gate to their house-door. The path in question had been raked and was devoid of weeds, and if it had not been for a presumably recent addition of bones and broken crockery in one corner, and a large pool of dirty water, from which shallow streams were slowly making their way to the gate aforesaid, would no doubt have been tidy. The old lady hopped from side to side in the attempt to keep her neat little feet dry, and when she came to the pool itself, on which rings of suds were eddying, stopped short with a disgusted air, and raising her voice, called for Mrs Frisby.

The door slowly opened, and a slatternly-looking woman stood upon the threshold. A stout two- year-old child sat on one arm, while the other hand held a penny novelette. A wisp of hair hung loosely over her face, which was as dirty as that of the child; the bodice of her dress was held together by pins, and she altogether presented a most uninviting appearance. She started at sight of the visitor.

"I beg pardon, m'm," she said. "I wish I'd known you was comin'. Thursday is a busy day with us."

"So I see," responded Mrs Spencer, suffering her

[106]

eyes to wander over the woman's figure, and thence towards the comer of the garden, where she could see some dingy-looking clothes hanging on the line. "Most people have finished their washing by Thursday, but you are evidently in the middle of yours."

"Yes, m'm," admitted Mrs Frisby, dolefully.

"There, with all those childern, ye know, m'm, and Frisby coming in and making so much mess, 'tis hard to get on with the work."

"It's a curious thing," remarked Mrs Spencer, "that you should prefer to empty your suds out of the front door—and do you find you get on quicker with your work if you read while you're doing it?"

"Well 'm, I'm sure, m'm, I had but just sat down for a minute. Little Harry was a bit peevish, and I couldn't let him cry—he chanced to prick his finger with a pin, ye see, m'm"

"If there'd been a button there," said Mrs Spencer, "or a hook and eye, that accident couldn't have happened. And pray"—peering at the dreadful little book with her sharp eyes—"were you reading 'Lady Selina's Lover' out loud to amuse the baby?"

During the confused pause which ensued, the little old lady made a leap across the muddy space, and, waving Mrs Frisby on one side, entered the house. Such a house! Dirty windows, a dirty floor, a grate which had not been cleaned for several days, and beneath which was such a pile of cinders and ashes that the fire would scarcely burn. Everything in the room was dusty, and in

the very middle of the floor lay a pair of man's muddy boots.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, m'm," said Mrs Frisby. " 'Tis a dreadful untidy place for you to come into. Dear to be sure, just look at Frisby's boots! He've left them there ever since last night, and I can't get him to so much as clean a window for me."

"Can't you really?" said Mrs Spencer. "No, I don't think I'll sit down, thank you. So Frisby won't clean the windows or put his boots on one side? Well, you know, there are some wives, Mrs Frisby, who would think it a little hard to ask their husbands to clean windows when he had been working all day, and who would even put away his

boots if he did chance to leave them on the floor. The husband, after all, is the bread-winner. Frisby works very hard—I'll say that for him—and he's earning good wages, and is always ready to earn a little more by doing odd jobs after hours. Then, when he's finished those, he has his allotment to see to, and the garden here, which would, I see, be very tidy if you did not allow your children to strew things all over the place."

"I'm sure I'm always telling the childern not to throw their rubbish about," said Mrs Frisby, tear-fully, "but what am I to do? I can't be indoor and out too. Frisby might very well see to the childern in the garden, I think, when I'm busy in the house."

"It's all Frisby's fault, in fact," said Mrs Spencer, pursing up her lips. "I suppose," she added, looking round the room, "he ought to

[108]

dust, and clean the grate, and scrub the floors too."

The old lady spoke so seriously that Mrs Frisby stared hard without replying.

"I must say," continued the former, after a pause, "your husband has worked on my estate for nearly ten years—since he was quite a little boy, in fact—and I have always found him extremely industrious, good-tempered, and obliging. I can't understand how it is that you seem to give him such a different character."

"Well'm," said Mrs Frisby, shifting the child from her right arm to her left, "I don't altogether complain, but I do think Frisby might be a bit more good-natured, knowin' how poorly I feel, and so many childern to see to."

"Somebody told me," said Mrs Spencer, "that Frisby very often helps to dress the children."

"Well 'm, and if he do they're his childern so well as mine. I get faint now and then."

"I don't wonder," said the other. "Do you by any chance ever open a window here?"

Mrs Frisby burst into tears. "I think 'tis very hard o' Frisby to go complainin' of me," she sobbed. "A body can but do their best. With four childern and such poor health as I have, I think it's wonderful I can get along at all. And as to cleanin' up after Frisby (casting a sour look at the boots), I'm sure I can't be expected to do that."

"Good morning," said Mrs Spencer, turning sharply round and walking out of the house.

As she drew near her own home she came upon Frisby himself, looking hot and tired, and walking

[109]

with a lagging step. There had been no preparations of any kind for dinner at his cottage, and she wondered if the poor man would be obliged to get it himself, while his wife read her trashy paper, and dandled the big child, which could perfectly well have been taught to amuse itself happily while its mother was busy.

"I've just been to your house," she remarked, as she came up to him.

Poor Frisby murmured something about wishing he had known, and fearing she had found things a bit upset.

"Now listen to me, James," said the old lady. "I've known you too long to let you go downhill so fast without trying to help you. I've been turning over a plan in my mind, which may possibly make that wife of yours think a little more seriously of her duties."

James got red, but listened in silence while Mrs Spencer began to talk in a low rapid voice. He looked more and more astonished as she proceeded, and finally burst out laughing.

" 'Twould be a good notion," he said, "a very good notion, but——"

"Try it for a week," said Mrs Spencer. "That's all I ask, try it for a week; I'll undertake that you shan't be the loser, and of course you must not say a word to your wife about having met me."

" 'Tis past six, Jim," said Mrs Frisby on the following morning, as she stood by the bed, after having reluctantly clothed herself. "Didn't ye hear church-clock go?"

[110]

"I heard it," said Jim drowsily. "I'm not feelin' so very well, this mornin', my dear; I don't think I can get up."

Mrs Frisby, in real alarm, questioned him as to the nature of his malady. Did his head ache—was his back bad—was he feeling his heart any ways queer?

Her husband, after reflecting for a moment or two, replied that it was just "all-overishness," and that he thought a rest would do him good.

"Dear!" exclaimed Mrs Frisby, "but I haven't a drop of water in the house. Who's to fill the bucket at the well?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to do it, Sally," returned Jim. " 'Tis very unfortunate—very, I'm sure, but I can't think how else it is to be managed."

"Well, I'm not going to do it, then," cried Sally. "I never heerd of such a thing! You great lazy fellow, lying in bed with nothing the matter with ye."

"I tell you," repeated Jim, "I'm all-overish, same as you be so often. My heart don't feel quite right neither. If ye was to bring me up a cup of tea, same as I do when you're not feeling yourself, I fancy it might just keep it off."

"If ye expect me to go cartin' your breakfast upstairs you're much mistaken," said Sally. "I'm a poor eater myself at best of times, and I don't care whether I have my breakfast or not. But I'll not go drawin' water for you."

"A pipe o' baccy is as good as a breakfast to me any day," said Jim, reaching out his hand for his pipe. "I dare say I'd be well enough to mind the

childern while you was busy, Sally," he continued, mildly. "I can manage the childern very well. You can turn 'em all in here while you'm a-cleanin' up. P'raps 'tis just as well I should be at home once in a way," he added, pleasantly. "You always say you can never get on wi' your work wi' the little ones in your way. Now they'll be out o' your way."

"Ye can fetch childern yourself if you want them," retorted Mrs Frisby, marching indignantly downstairs.

Jim crept cautiously out of bed and went to the window, chuckling to himself as he presently saw her laboriously filling her bucket at the well. He dressed himself with

great speed and dexterity for one in his delicate condition, and, going into the adjoining rooms, roused the children and washed and dressed the younger ones, directing the others to do the same for themselves.

When he brought them downstairs presently, the kettle was already boiling, and Mrs Frisby, with a flushed face was getting down the teapot; if truth be told, she was not at all averse to her breakfast.

"Just in time," observed Jim. "It doesn't take so very long, you see, my dear, to get the childern dressed if ye take a bit o' trouble wi' 'em. Now, shan't we put a cloth on the table?"

Sally murmured indistinctly something about lazy people not deserving to be cocked up with cloths.

"Meaning me?" said Jim. "It's me what pays for the cloths, though. See, Rosie, it's yonder on the dresser. Take it down, there's a good little maid, and spread it nice—that's the way."

[112]

"If ye can't do your own work, I don't see why ye need come interfering with mine," remarked Sally.

"I've more time to see to things when I don't go out to work myself," explained her husband. "I'm going to train Rosie a bit. She's getting a big girl, now, and could easy learn to be useful."

"You're not going to work!" gasped Sally.

"I don't feel up to my work to-day, you see," said Jim. "I'll just sit quiet in a corner and rest me. Have you got a book handy? What have you done with that nice book you were reading yesterday?"

" 'Tis very ill-done of you to make a mock of me," cried his wife. "I'm sure you didn't ought to grudge me the little bit of amusement I took after working so hard all day—washing and all."

"I don't grudge it to you, my dear," responded Jim. "I'm going to imitate you, that's all. I work hard, week by week, month by month, and year by year. I'm going to take a bit of amusement now, and I'm sure you won't grudge it to me. Now then, Rosie,

set the cups out, and the plates—the cups at the top, ye know, and the plates all round. Jack, fetch Daddy's boots there, and I'll tell ye what to do with them."

The little boy obeyed, and Jim in spite of his feeble state, found himself able to take the child out to the shed at the back, and there instruct him in the art of boot-cleaning, of which he proved himself a capable scholar. By the time they returned breakfast was ready.

[113]

Mrs Frisby looked up with an attempt at a smile as they came in.

"I am glad to see you are better," she said. "Maybe you'll be able to go to work after all."

But Jim shook his head with a despondent air.

"No use expectin' too much," he remarked, quoting one of his wife's favourite speeches; then, as she stared, "I'll jist see to the little uns an' help ye a bit with the cleanin' if I don't find it knocks me up too much."

Mrs Frisby finished her breakfast in silence, and Jim, after disposing of his meal, turned his attention to the children.

"Now then, let's see how useful you can make yourselves. See, I'll carry the things over to the sink, and Rosie can wash 'em up, and Jack here can dry them."

"Ye'll have 'em smashed to atoms," said Sally sulkily.

"Not a bit of it; they're a deal more in danger of getting smashed lying about, as they generally do, half the morning."

He superintended the carrying out of both operations, and then desired the children to wash their hands and smooth their hair before going to school.

"Dear!" he exclaimed, as he clumsily tied a pinafore string. "All your things do seem in terr'ble need of mendin'. I tell ye what, Sally, while you do a bit o' cleanin' up I'll see if I can't make shift to sew on a button or two."

[114]

"I thought you was too bad to work!" exclaimed Sally tartly.

"Anybody can do a bit o' sewin'," said Jim.

"Now, my dear, as soon as ye've taken away tea-things, ye can begin on the grate."

Having procured needle and cottons and a card of buttons, a trifle damaged on account of Baby Harry having been allowed to chew it on the day it had been bought, Jim set to work, while Mrs Frisby reluctantly knelt down before the hearth.

"Take out the big cinders, Sally," he directed, "and put 'em on one side. It 'ud save ye a deal o' trouble," he continued mildly, "if ye'd do it first thing in the morning, for then the children 'ud give ye a helpin' hand. Now I *think*," said Jim, leisurely threading his needle, "that we'll have a bit o' black-lead, my dear. It's wonderful what a difference it makes to the look of a place."

Sally worked away in gloomy silence, and Jim sewed on buttons, and whistled under his breath. If truth be told he soon grew extremely tired of the operation, and longed to be digging potatoes or hoeing weeds. He continued, however, to direct his wife, and, though Mrs Frisby felt herself very much aggrieved, she did not dare to disobey his orders.

Presently the couple migrated to the bedrooms, for Jim found himself so indisposed he was obliged to lie down while Sally gave the three rooms a thoroughly good cleaning. Angry as she was it was wonderful how quickly she managed to

get through her work on that particular morning, for with Jim's eye upon her she could neither sit down to read, nor stand staring out of the window.

Jim, meanwhile, had taken charge of little Harry, and though he neither dandled him nor played with him, he contrived so well to teach him how to amuse himself that the child was quite happy. It was true he found time to say an encouraging word now and then to the little fellow, and made a safe plaything for him out of three or four empty cotton reels securely fastened to a piece of white tape. These Harry could rattle, or slide up and down, and they were safer to chew than linen buttons on a shiny green card.

After dinner Jim thought the air might do him good. He strolled out into the garden, therefore, itching to be at work, but resolutely keeping himself in check; and presently he invited Sally to clean herself and bring her sewing out there too.

By and by Mrs Frisby joined him, looking quite tidy, and gazing almost in alarm at her husband. She half expected him to request her to do a bit of gardening, but he only smiled as she approached, and told her she looked downright bonny with her face so nice and clean; more like the girl he used to court in by-gone days than he ever thought to see her again.

Putting his arm round her he made her sit down on the little bench beneath the apple-tree, and there the couple passed an hour or two in great content,

[116]

till Sally remarked that it was time to go in and get tea ready.

"Do," said Jim, "and mind ye sweep up the hearth, my dear. It do make it look more cheerful."

The hearth actually was swept up when he entered, and all the children sitting round the table with smooth hair and clean faces and hands.

"If we was to get a door-mat it would keep the place nicer," Sally observed. "I could train the childern to wipe their feet on't"

She announced this fact with the air of one who had made an important discovery, and Jim, delighted with the turn affairs were taking, agreed with alacrity.

"It puts more heart into a man if he finds things is made good use of; but when you go spendin' an' spendin' all what you've worked hard for to get, knowin' they'll be let fall to pieces for want of a stitch, or else ruined with rust and dirt, you have no pride or pleasure in doin' anythin'."

Sally did not answer, but looked penitently at her husband.

After tea, when the children were in bed she came and stood by his chair.

"I hope ye'll be able to go to work to-morrow," said she.

"I hope so, I'm sure," he replied. "Tis a bad thing when ye come to think on't, Sally, for the man to be laid by—him as has to earn the money to fill all the little

mouths. Wet or dry, sick or well, off he has to go to his work. If a man didn't do his work reg'lar he'd get turned off pretty quick.

[117]

The women don't remember that when they sit idle at home, without ever giving a thought to their husbands' peace of comfort. Yet, if the husbands wasn't there, what would become of them all? Did you find it hard work fillin' that bucket this mornin', Sally?"

"Terr'ble hard," said Sally, with a quivering lip.

"Ah, I'm sorry for that. D'ye think ye'll be able to chop sticks for to-morrow's fire?"

"Ye oughtn't to ask me to do such work," said she, with a sob. "Ye know I'm not fit for it."

"Winter an' summer, year in, year out, I fill that bucket—and every evenin', no matter how tired I may be, I chop them sticks. When I had the lumbago last year, I filled your bucket all the same, and when I sprained my wrist I managed to use the chopper with my left hand. Yet, if you've the least little ache or pain, you never do a hand's turn, Sally. I ask you straight, is that fair?"

Sally gazed at him in silence, her lip still trembling, her eyes filled with tears.

"An' if ye'd take a bit o' pride in yourself an' the childern," he went on, "there'd be some pleasure in comin' home. Yes, and I'd be glad, too, to save up an' take ye for an outing now and again. But when I look at ye with the clothes dropping off ye, and a face that hasn't as much as nodded at cold water, I feel—well, I feel that, if I wasn't a proper temperance man, it's to the public I'd go every night of my life."

Sally looked down still without speaking.

[118]

"Just think of it," he went on; "you have your share of work, no doubt; but I have mine too. If we each do our own, and pull together, we can get along right enough. Come, little 'ooman, see how nice you've made the place look—it didn't take so very

long, did it? A' what a lot of mendin' ye did this afternoon—not to mention the buttons I sewed on for ye," he added, with a twinkle in his eye— "it wasn't so very much trouble once ye set about it. Now, shall we make a fresh start? I'll go to work to-morrow morning if you'll get out your needles and thread, and throw them nasty silly story books in the fire. And let's make the childern useful, my dear—a little bit o' light work is as good as play to a child."

Sally glanced up with an odd look, in spite of the tears that were still upon her face.

"I never heard ye make such a long speech in your life, Jim," said she. "I wonder—I wonder if anybody's been putting you up to all the games you've been playing this day. Mrs Spencer now—she called here yesterday——"

"She did," said Jim, beginning to laugh a little.

"Well, I'll tell you the truth, Sally, the notion did come from her. Ye mustn't be vexed, my dear; but I think 'twas a good notion. 'If ever any folks should bear one another's burdens/,' says the mistress, 'it's husband and wife.' Come, Sally, I'll do my best for you if you'll do your best for me."

Sally dried her eyes, and held out her hand to her husband: "I will," she said.

She actually kept her resolution, and Jim had

[119]

good reason to be grateful to his mistress for that happy thought of hers, though he sometimes said with a laugh, that she had taught him a lesson too, and that he would rather plant cabbages all day than sew on a dozen buttons.

[120]

HOW NED BLANCHARD EMIGRATED

ALICE BLANCHARD was wheeling the perambulator slowly along the most rutty curve of the "Drove," or steep lane which led from the high road to the downs, when she caught sight of her father's sturdy figure behind the almost leafless hedge. Farmer Bolt was a short, thick-set man, with more brown in hair and beard than was usual in a

man of his years, and with a corresponding amount of unlooked-for vigour and energy in his sturdy frame. He was at work now on a task that would have been despised by most men of his standing. He was clipping one of his own hedges in fact, wielding his bill-hook with a rapidity and dexterity which did not prevent his keeping a sharp look-out on the movements of the men who were carting swedes at the further end of the field.

Alice wedged the "pram" firmly against the bank, pulled on the baby's hood, which had fallen back, arranged its golden fluff of hair so that a becoming tuft appeared beneath the frill, and then going to the other end of the small vehicle made little Abel sit straight and smoothed out the creases in his pinafore.

"Ye've got your face all of a mess wi' blackberries," she said, in a vexed tone. "I don't know whatever granfer'll think of 'ee. There, I reckoned

[121]

to tidy thee up in grandma's room afore he see'd thee."

As Abel was strapped fast in his seat, and could by no possibility have procured the blackberries without his mother's aid, the reproach seemed a trifle unreasonable; but as Abel had not yet reached a time of life when he could discourse on feminine inconsequence, he merely smiled broadly, and repeated the word "blackberries" in an expectant tone.

"Bless your little heart," said Alice. "That's granfer, look-see, t'other side o' the hedge. Ye must call out 'granfer,' when we get a-nigh en."

She shook out her own dress, a somewhat faded print, and set her hat straight, apparently anxious to present as brave an appearance in her father's eyes as in former days she had to those of her admirers.

A few years ago Alice Bolt had been the handsomest girl in the parish, and even now, though her figure had lost much of its roundness, and her curly dark hair was arranged with less skill, was pretty enough to call for a second glance from all who passed her.

But her blue eyes had acquired a scared look of late, and the bloom had faded in her cheeks. What else was to be expected? The wolf was always at the door, and the fear of it was perpetually present in the heart of the wife and mother.

Farmer Bolt, in the intervals of chopping at his twigs and superintending the leisurely tossing of "roots" into the cart, found time to scan the windings

[122]

of the Drove, and had indeed observed his daughter long before she had caught sight of him. It may be presumed that he took note of her hasty endeavours to make herself and her family presentable, yet he appeared to be absorbed in his own labours when she halted beneath the bank on which he was stationed.

"Be that you, father? Look, Abel, look-see, 'tis granfer!"

Mr Bolt parted the thin screen of shoots surmounting the hedge and peered over.

"Tis you, belt?"

"It's me. I be just goin' down to the house to have a chat wi' mother."

"Ah," said the farmer.

He lifted his bill-hook and examined it as though he had never set eyes on it before; then he ran his finger thoughtfully along the edge.

"That's granfer, look-see," repeated Alice in a tone of assumed cheerfulness. "Look at granfer's hedgin' hook, Abel! Call 'Granfer,' lovey!"

"Gran-fer!" cried Abel, obediently.

It was the first time his grandfather had heard the child pronounce an articulate word, and at sound of it he was unable to resist the impulse to lean forward a little more and gaze down at the perambulator and its occupants.

"Learnt to talk, has he?" he enquired, ungraciously enough, yet eyeing the little fellow with a sort of curiosity.

"Well, he can only say a few words," explained the mother, almost stammering in her haste to bring out the information before the grandfather's interest

[123]

had waned. " 'Granfer' was one o' the first words he said. He says it very plain, don't he?"

"Plain enough," responded the farmer, gruffly, and he let the twigs which he had been holding slap back again into their ordinary position.

"He've come on a good bit since ye see'd him last," hazarded the mother. "Folks about us thinks he's come on wonderful. Don't ye think he's come on, father?"

Her father parted the screen of twigs again, and as the bearded face was thrust forth once more, Abel junior tilted himself back in his place and gleefully shouted "Cuckoo!"

For the life of him the grandfather could not help smiling. He did not speak, but gazed at the child for a moment or two, the lines of his countenance relaxing.

"Cuckoo!" cried Abel junior, anxiously watching the upper twigs of the hedge.

"He thinks you'm playin' a game wi' en," explained the mother tremulously.

"Oh," said Farmer Bolt, reflectively. "Do he? It's more in my line to work nor to play though." He loosed the twigs which immediately flew back into place, and Baby Abel, imagining that this was done solely for his benefit cried "Cuckoo!" again, and watched the top of the hedge with dancing eyes. When the farmer, with apparent inadvertence, looked forth again, he threw himself back once more with uproarious laughter, kicking out at the same time with sturdy little feet, clothed in very battered boots.

"He do seem a jolly little chap too," said the

[124]

elder Abel, with the air of one making a concession. "T'other's a girl, bain't it?"

"Ees, she's a girl. I called en Margaret after mother, same as the bwoy be Abel after you. We do think little Abel terr'ble like you, father."

The farmer surveyed his descendant dubiously; and the two pairs of blue eyes met; the child's twinkled in expectation of the renewal of the game, and by-and-by the old man's began to twinkle too. As he glanced at the baby, however, his face clouded over.

"The maid be a regular Blanchard, though," he said, in a vexed tone. "Yellow hair an' all. There, when she do laugh she be the very image of her grammer, what used to drive a little donkey-cart wi' rags and bwones, an' sich, an' what died in the Union."

"The child can't help that, an' neither can Ned," said Alice, with a sudden flash in her eyes. "The poor body did die when he were quite a little chap. 'Twas none of his fault if she did die in the Union. So soon as he could work he kept hisself"

"It mid be none of his fault that his mother was what she was, but I d' 'low 'tis your fault that my grandson should be what he is, belonging to trampin' folks, wi' a father as was born i' the Union, and as'll die i' the Union I shouldn't wonder. Did ever anybody see a 'ooman so downtrod as what you be, an' you as was such a handsome maid. Why can't the chap keep ye in a bit more comfort now he's got ye? That's what I want to know."

"We've had a deal o' trouble, father," faltered

[125]

Alice. "What wi' the childer comin' so fast, an' what wi' Ned breakin' his leg this spring, we've been put about terr'ble."

"Well, there's no use cryin' about spilt milk," said her father, roughly. "Ye took the crooked stick an' now ye must put up wi' en. You as mid ha' married as well an' better nor any maid i' the place, ye must go an' take up wi' a beggarly feller as I hired out o' charity to begin wi'."

"Ned always worked hard for his wage," interpolated Alice, hotly, "always! He was worth the money ye paid en."

"Ees, but I didn't know that at first I took en straight fro' the Union wi'out no more character nor what the master up yonder could give en. An' when I did do that I didn't look to bein' robbed o' my only child. There, there's no use talkin'. I must get on wi' my work. Get along and chat wi' mother if ye want to."

"Cuckoo!" cried little Abel as the twigs were once more released; but Granfer did not respond. After an admonitory shout to one of the carters who had spent what he considered an undue time in consideration of the horizon, he resumed his labours with the bill-hook.

Mrs Blanchard trundled her perambulator onwards with a sore heart and an anxious face. Her transient anger had left her, and she reproached herself for having lost her temper.

" 'Twas a bad start," she thought, ruefully, "a very bad start. I d' 'low I've spoilt my chance."

Mrs Bolt was peeling potatoes when her daughter came to the door, but she laid down her knife with

[126]

an exclamation of delight when she caught sight of her.

"Tis never you, my dear, so early an' all, an' sich a long ways to come! To think o' your travellin' seven mile at this time o' mamin'! Dear, to be sure, how Abel have come on! There, I never see'd a child shoot up like that Bless his little heart, he be a fine child. An' Baby too, she be a-comin' on jist about."

"Feel the weight of her," said Alice, taking the child out of the perambulator and laying her in her mother's arms; there was a pretty flush in her face and a light in her eyes.

Mrs Bolt weighed her small namesake, and uttered various disjointed exclamations of rapture.

"She be getting' sich a lot o' hair, look-see," continued the proud mother, jerking off the child's hood. "An' she's got two teeth very near through. She be cuttin' them early, bain't she? An' sich a good baby. There, she do sleep right through the night, an' by day when I'm busy at my work, ye know, she'll sit an' suck at her titty wi'out a murmur."

"She be a-lookin' for it now," remarked grandma.

The much chewed indiarubber ring was unearthed from beneath the baby's cape, and the flat lozenge-shaped adjunct thereto thrust into her mouth, both women laughing delightedly on noting its possessor's satisfaction.

"Come in, my dear, an' sit down, do," said Mrs Bolt. "I'm sure ye must be jist about tired. Come, Abel love, an' see what grandma's got for 'ee. A ripe apple won't do en no harm," she

[127]

added, turning to Alice. "They golden pippins be beautiful to-year—jist so sweet as honey. I do r'ally think that dear child favours his granfer," she exclaimed, as having reached the living-room, she divested Abel of his hat

"I do wish father 'ud take to en!" ejaculated Alice, dropping into the elbow-chair. "We met en jist now hedgin' in the Drove. He did seem to notice him a bit at first, but then he turned nasty about Ned as he do always do, an' began glenin' an' carryin' on about the Union."

"There, love, don't ye mind en; ye do want a lot o' patience wi' father. Tis what I do always say. Who's to know it if not me? But he'll come round in time—he'll come round."

" 'Tis easy to say' in time,' " groaned poor Alice, "but we do find it so hard to get on now, mother. We've a-had sich bad luck, ye see. Ned had to spend the bit o' money he'd saved on the furniture we wanted, an' stockin' the garden—'tisn't as if we'd anybody to help us."

Mrs Bolt eyed her daughter compassionately. She was a good-looking, fresh-coloured woman, with a kindly, good-natured face. Her daughter resembled her in complexion and build, but not in disposition, for Mrs Bolt was placid and easy-going, while Alice had inherited her father's energy and quickness of temper. Mrs Bolt had been as much grieved as her husband at Alice's un- prosperous marriage, but, having protested in vain, resigned herself to the inevitable, and had indeed forgiven her daughter before the ceremony took place. Mr Bolt, too, had, to outward seeming,

[128]

become reconciled with his daughter, though he steadily refused to permit her husband to cross the threshold, and to help the hapless couple in any way. Alice, too, was proud, and when her mother would have surreptitiously bestowed on her sundry dozens of eggs and pecks of potatoes, she had rejected the gifts.

"I won't take nothin' o' father's wi'out his consent," she said once, bitterly. "An' you do know so well as me, he'd rather let us all starve nor help Ned."

" 'Tis very hard, I'm sure," said Mrs Bolt, now in a commiserating tone. "I did hope your husband 'ud better hisself, an' earn better wage nor what father gived en. But he's worse off now it seems."

"He's terr'ble bad off," agreed Alice gloomily. "Jobs be so scarce round our way. An' when Ned was out o' work last spring along o' his accident, we got into debt. There's the interest to pay along wi' everything else. We couldn't afford to be too particular. Ned had to take the first place he could get—'tis but ten shillin' a week he's earnin' now, along o' havin' a house free, ye know. But ten shillin' a week's soon gone."

" 'Tis, sure," agreed her mother dolefully.

Alice looked up at, the handsome, ruddy face now puckered with sympathetic distress, and hesitated.

It is sometimes harder to ask a favour from our nearest and dearest than from a stranger. "I wonder if you could guess what's brought me this morning, mother?" she asked.

[129]

Mrs Bolt did not commit herself.

"Ned chanced to meet Jim Pike at Wimborne the other day. He had to go and haul coal, you know, fro' the station. And Jim did tell en he were thinkin' o' leavin' father arter Christmas an' goin' out abroad."

"Ees," said Mrs Bolt. "Jim be a-goin' to emmy-grate, that's what he be a-goin to do. He've a had a letter from his brother what be livin' out yonder in America, and do want en to j'ine en out there. Jim be fair set on the notion."

"He did tell Ned as father had rose his wage to fourteen shillin' a week. 'Tis good wage that, an' there's the house too. 'Tis a deal more nor what Ned be earnin'."

"Oh," said her mother, sinking her voice and casting a scared glance at her. "You was thinkin' maybe father 'ud give your 'usband Jim's place when he've a-left?"

"Well," rejoined Alice, instantly on the defensive, "it do seem hard as father should be willin' to pay away all that to a stranger when his own flesh an' blood is pretty nigh starvin'. There! mother, I do assure 'ee there's times when I wonder where I'm to get the next bit to put in little Abel's mouth. Many a time I go hungry myself, an' that's not so very good for me nor for baby."

"Dear heart alive!" groaned Mrs Bolt, dropping into the opposite chair and resting a hand on either knee. "God knows I'm broken-hearted to think o' your bein' in sich trouble—broken-hearted I be!"

"That little house o' Jim Pike's 'ud do us nicely,"

[130]

went on Alice eagerly. "Tis a snug little place, an' it 'ud be nice to be near you, mother."

"It would," agreed Mrs Bolt, sucking in her breath, and exhaling it again with a deep sigh. "It would jist about I'd love to have the childern trottin' in an' out, an' you an' me could help each other, Alice."

"We could," agreed Alice, eyeing her mother with pathetic anxiety.

"But father be sich a terr'ble one for stickin' to a notion," went on Mrs Bolt gloomily. "He've reg'lar took again' your 'usband, reg'lar took again' him he have."

"Well, 'tis a hard world," said Alice, rising hurriedly. "I'd best go home-along. There's not mich use my bidin' here—but I did have hopes. 'Tisn't as if I was axin' for a favour—I only want Ned to get the chance father be willin' to give any other man. But we'll never have a chance here—I see that. I wish to the Lard we could scrape up enough money to take us out abroad too. I'd be willin' enough to emmygrate, and so would Ned—nobody wants us here!"

Mrs Bolt gazed at her daughter meditatively, laying a restraining hand upon her arm to prevent her departure.

"Jim Pike's brother Robert, what emmygrated first, went travellin' by hissel'," she observed.

"He didn't take his wife an' childern wi' en—he couldn't afford the expense, d'ye see, but as soon as he were doin' well he sent for 'em to come an' j'ine him."

"Well?" said Alice doubtfully, as she paused.

"Well," continued her mother, "there, sit ye

[131]

down, my dear. I can't say all what's in my mind if I think you'm ready to rush off every minute. Sit down an' let's talk proper. Now see here, the notion did come to I all at once while ye was talkin' jist now. Why shouldn't Ned go out abroad wi' Jim Pike an' look for work out in Ameriky? You could come to us while ye was waitin'—father 'ud be pleased enough to have you an' the childern."

"Mother!" exclaimed Alice indignantly. She would have started from her chair again had not Mrs Bolt pinned her to her seat with one large heavy hand.

"Now don't ye fly out like that, don't ye," went on the good woman, impressively. "I am but thinkin' what's for the best. You'm our own flesh an' blood, as ye say yourself, an' so's the childer; father'd be fond enough o' the childer if he was to have 'em nigh en. 'Tis but Ned as he've a-took again'."

"Well, but I bain't a-goin' to desert Ned," cried Alice, hotly. "My own 'usband what I've a-chose and what have a-been sich a good 'usband an' sich a good father. I'm sure he'd work his fingers to the bwone for me an' the childern!"

"Bide a bit, bide a bit," returned Mrs Bolt. "I've been a-piecin' of it out in my mind. If you an' the little ones was once here, ye'd soon get round father—I d' 'low he'd never want to part from ye again. There, ye be the only child what was spared to us. I can't but think so soon as there was talk o' your j'inin' Ned in Ameriky he'd tell ye to send for him to come back again, sooner nor let ye go.'

[132]

Alice was silent for a moment, struck in spite of herself, by the idea.

"Tis true," she said. "There mid be a chance o' that. Father used to be awful fond o' me when I was a little maid, an' I couldn't but see he noticed the childern to-day. He said Abel was a jolly little chap. Abel was tryin' to play cuckoo wi' his granfer. He's sich a friendly little feller, I can't but think as father'd soon take to en."

"I d' 'low he would," agreed Mrs Bolt, eagerly.

"As for poor baby," went on her daughter, in an aggrieved tone, "I can't see no sich great likeness to the Blanchards. Father will have it she takes after Ned's mother—I can't see that"

"Nor I, agreed the living grandmother, gravely, considering the sleeping baby.

"But still," went on Alice, suddenly reverting to the main point from which she had been momentarily diverted by the various side issues which seemed to present themselves, "I couldn't let Ned go travellin' all by hisself. I couldn't ever part wi' en. Summat mid happen as I mid never know. An' he midn't get on out there—an' he midn't be able to find the money to come home wi' if father was to let him come—Oh, mother!"

This latter exclamation was uttered in a totally different tone. She caught her breath with a gasp, her countenance suddenly illuminated.

"What's to do?" cried Mrs Bolt eagerly. Little Abel, who had finished his apple, came trotting across the room to share in the excitement. But he was not destined to hear what was going on. Mrs Blanchard, leaning forward in her chair, whispered

[133]

eagerly in her mother's ear. The latter's face, at first astonished, grew gradually alarmed, but finally assumed an expression of admiring delight.

"Well, I shouldn't wonder but what it mid answer," she said slowly. "I know fathered be overj'yed to have you an' the childern here. But whatever 'ud your husband say?"

"Oh, I'll manage Ned if you'll manage father. 'Tis worth tryin'. Dear to be sure, how happy we mid be all livin' together!"

"Father 'ull be fit to kill us all if he do find out."

"He won't find out. He can't be vexed wi' you anyhow. Ye need only say that I've a-told ye so, an' axed ye to speak to en for I."

"Well, that's true. There, my dear, I'd be simply out o' my wits wi' joy. I've missed ye—there, I can't tell ye how much I've missed ye."

They clung together, half laughing, half weeping, and the remainder of Alice's visit was spent in the congenial task of building castles in the air.

Farmer Bolt was rather taciturn at dinner-time, and his wife deemed it more prudent to postpone operations till a more favourable moment. In the evening, however, when milking was done, and tea over, and Mr Bolt drew up his chair to the fire and filled his pipe, he himself gave her the opportunity for which she had been hoping.

"Ye had Alice wi' ye to-day?"

"Ees, she told me she'd passed ye in the Drove—how did ye think she was lookin'?"

The farmer smoked for a moment or two with a gloomy expression.

[134]

"She've fell away" he said at last. "Fell away terr'ble."

"She have," agreed his wife with a sigh. "I d' 'low 'tis a hard struggle for she. There, she were a-tellin' me she be often put to it to find a bit to put in little Abel's mouth—them was her very words. 'An' I do often go hungry myself,' says she, 'An' it bain't so very good for me or baby.' "

Farmer Bolt removed his pipe and glowered fiercely at his wife, as though she were responsible for this pitiable state of affairs.

"An' what could she expect," he demanded, "when she took up wi' that dalled chap? She threw herself away on en—wouldn't hear a word again' him, an' he can't so much as keep her. What's the chap good for if he can't earn enough to keep his wife an' childern"

"He's a good worker, ye know," said Mrs Bolt tentatively; "ye did never have no fault to find wi' en when he were wi' us."

"I find fault wi' en now, though," shouted her lord.

"Why don't he do summat? Why don't he turn his hand to summat? He's all my daughter have got to look to now. I says to her when she took en, 'Alice,' I says, 'ye must choose between Ned Blanchard an' me.' An' she chose Ned Blanchard. Well, let him do summat, then."

"He be just a-thinkin' o' doin' summat, my dear," returned Mrs Bolt mildly. "Alice were tellin' I to-day he were goin' to emmygrate."

"What!" exclaimed the farmer aghast. "He be goin' out abroad—he be goin' to tole our Alice an' them two little bits o' childern out across

[135]

the sea? Well, mother, how ye can sit lookin' at me——"

"Nay now, my dear, it bain't so bad as that," said Mrs Bolt, in the same meek and ingratiating tone. "He be a-goin' to look for work, that's what he be a-goin' to do; an' so soon as he've a-found it an' have a-got a comfortable home ready, then he'll send for our Alice an' the childern to j'ine en. That's the notion."

"Oh," said her husband, staring at her hard. "That's the notion, be it?"

He sucked at his pipe for a moment or two, still fixing his unwinking gaze upon her; finally, he enquired in a stem and disapproving tone what she supposed would become of their daughter and her children in the meantime.

"Well, that's just it," said Mrs Bolt gently. " 'Tis that what brought our Alice here to-day."

The farmer grunted without speaking.

"The journey to Ameriky 'ull take every single shillin' Ned Blanchard can scrape together," she continued.

"He be a-goin' to send Alice an' the childern to the workhouse I d' 'low," remarked Mr Bolt, hitching his chair a little nearer to the hearth and holding up one foot to the blaze. "He be a-goin' to scuttle off wi' hisself to Ameriky an' leave his wife an' family on the rates."

"Nay now, nay now," protested Mrs Bolt in a soothing tone. "You'd never be the one to allow that. Bolt, you know you wouldn't."

"Me!" said Bolt, turning round with an expression of great surprise. "What have I got to do wi' it?"

[136]

"Why, ye know very well, my dear, you'd be the last to let sich shame overtake your own flesh an' blood. If Ned was once away, you wouldn't ha' no objections to your own daughter a-comin' back here for a while, an' your own grandchildern, would ye? They'd bring a bit o' life about this place, an' it 'ud be nice to have our Alice goin' about the house again."

There was a silence; Mr Bolt stirred up the con- tents of his pipe with the end of a match and lit it again.

"Little Abel be wonderful like his mother in his ways," went on Mrs Bolt; "the very moral o' what she used to be at his age. There's her little chair in the corner, look-see. He found it out to-day an' fetched it over aside o' your chair, an' sat hisself down in it—there, I declare for a minute I thought our Alice was a child again."

Mr Bolt squinted round at the chair, but did not commit himself by speech. He was not an imaginative man, nevertheless the vision rose before him of the curly-headed child who used to sit in that chair, and whom he had loved as the apple of his eye. His wife put his thoughts into words.

"Ye mind our Alice, how pleased she used to be when ye called her over of an evening? Dear to be sure, what a bonny little maid she was, and what a pride we used to take in her. And now to think that poor creetur' what come here to-day is her. There, I could ha' cried to see her in that wold patched dress—'ees, an' I did cry when she did tell I how she do often go hungry."

"Well, I'm dalled if she shall go hungry while she

bides wi' us," cried the farmer, sitting suddenly upright in his chair. "Let Master Ned emmygrate so soon as he pleases, an' let the poor maid come to us—an' the brats too. She'll know what 'tis for a while, to eat wi'out stintin'. Let her come an' bide so long as she likes—the longer the better, say I—the longer she's shut o' that n'er-do-weel o' a husband the better pleased I'll be."

The following week Alice and her children took up their abode at her old home. Alice was pale and nervous at first, but soon regained her self-possession. The farmer was almost boisterous in his welcome.

After tea Mrs Bolt, with a wink at her daughter, installed the little boy in the chair before referred to, at his grandfather's side, an arrangement in which the latter acquiesced silently, yet with evident pleasure. Abel watched him with round inquisitive eyes while he filled and lit his pipe, and leaning back in his chair, crossed his legs luxuriously. Presently, possessing himself of a bit of stick which lay beside the hearth, the child wedged it in a corner of his own small mouth, and trotting back to his chair, settled himself in it, in as close an imitation of his grandfather's attitude as the differences of age and size, and a slight difficulty in distinguishing his right leg from his left, would admit of Abel the elder stared for a moment, and then, realising the state of affairs, nudged his wife with a delighted chuckle.

"Look at that," he exclaimed. "He be a sharp little chap if ever there was one. Ye shall have a better pipe nor that to smoke, sonny."

The farmer was as good as his word, and on the

[138]

next day purchased a supply of sugar-sticks, one of which he gravely handed to his grandson every evening before lighting his own pipe.

Whether it was because the little fellow was won over by this practical proof of consideration and regard, or whether the affinity which the women-folk were so fond of talking about, really existed, it is certain that before the Blanchard family were a week in the house, the two Abels were practically inseparable. Whether toddling along a furrow in his grandfather's wake, or riding one of the farm horses, or perched on top of a pile of mangolds, the child was his grandfather's constant companion.

Alice almost insensibly fell back into the ways of her girlhood, and, as the days passed, her youth itself seemed to return to her. She grew plump and rosy, sang as she went about her work, played with her little ones as though she were a child herself. Had it not been for the presence of the children, indeed, Mrs Bolt often declared she could have fancied old times were back again, and their maid had never left them. The good food, the freedom from petty anxieties, had no doubt much to do with this happy change, but it was chiefly brought about by the new hope in her heart which grew and brightened day by day.

One morning, however, Mr Bolt, coming back unexpectedly from the field where he had been ploughing, and happening to take a short-cut through the orchard, came upon Alice who was hanging out clothes to dry. Now it was Mrs Bolt's custom to let the world know that she had been washing, by setting the linen to dry in front of the house; the

[139]

larger articles being draped on clothes-lines that ran from the corner of the milk-house wall to the post by the wood-shed, while the smaller were neatly spread upon the hedge. But here was Alice setting up a private clothes-line of her own, and hanging garments on it—not her own, or her children's garments, as her father first supposed, but socks and shirts, even a pair of nankeen trousers.

"What mid ye be doin' here?" he enquired, at the top of his voice, and so suddenly that poor Alice dropped her basket.

"Dear, to be sure, father, how you frightened me!" she exclaimed, stammering.

"Who gave ye leave to make a dryin'-ground o' my archard?" resumed the farmer, striding up to her. "These here apple-trees wasn't made to hang clothes on. Whose clothes be these?"

All the pretty bloom fled from Alice's face; for a moment she stood gaping, unable to find an answer; then all at once she laughed—or tried to laugh.

"Why, what a to-do," she cried. "Whose clothes be they? Well, they be man's clothes, as ye can see—an' you be the only man about this here place, bain't ye?"

An ominous pause ensued, during which Farmer Bolt, turning to the clothes-line, closely examined the garments thereon.

"I'd be sorry to wear that shirt," he remarked; "and when did ye ever see me in trousers like them? They'm your 'usband's—that's what they be; an' what be tellin' lies about 'em for?"

Alice, who had always been known as a "spiritty maid," fired up at this.

[140]

"I think it 'ud be a queer thing if I was to name my husband to ye," she responded. "Ye can never find a good word to say for him. 'Tis natural enough for me to be unwillin' to let his name pass my lips."

"What be doin' washin' his clothes? I thought he'd emmygrated?" pursued the father suspiciously.

"They are his clothes, then," said Alice, with flashing eyes. "There, they are his clothes; I'll not deny it. I've a-washed 'em in the water what the Lard gave us all free, an' I be a-dryin' of 'em in the air what belongs so much to him as to you, father. An' this here bit o' rope's what was tied round my own box, so I d' 'low he bain't beholden to ye."

Mr Bolt, slightly abashed, moved a few steps away, and then paused again.

"Be ye a-goin' to send his washin' out to Ameriky to en every week?" he enquired.

His daughter made no answer, and Mr Bolt was obliged to go indoors to seek for further information.

"When did Ned Blanchard emmygrate," he enquired abruptly entering the kitchen.

Mrs Bolt was stooping over the fire, and it was perhaps on this account that her fkce became so red.

"Thursday was a fortnight, warn't it?" she enquired. "Yes, Thursday was a fartilight he shifted."

"Ah," said Farmer Bolt. "Them ships which goes back'ards and for'ards to Ameriky must travel martal fast. Our Alice be a-hangin' up his clothes to dry in the archard now."

[141]

"There, don't talk sich nonsence, Bolt!" cried his wife sharply. "She be but a-washin' a few o' the things what he left behind, o' course."

"That's it, be it?" said Mr Bolt with a keen glance.

"That's it," rejoined Mrs Bolt, making a great rattle with the poker between the bars of the grate. Mr Bolt eyed her for a moment or two in silence, and then went slowly

out again, jamming his hat firmly on his head. Several times that day his wife and daughter encountered his fixed gaze, but he asked no further questions.

On the following day, chancing to look backwards at his snug house in the hollow, from the up-lands where he was at work, he observed a white streamer dangling from his own gate.

"They've tied a towel to the gate," he murmured to himself. "What can they be wantin' carrier to call for?"

For by this simple expedient the carrier, journeying on the high road above, became aware of the fact that the dwellers in the lane needed his services. Farmer Bolt went on wondering all the way up that furrow and all the way down again, and presently caught sight of the carrier's van turning down the lane. He continued to speculate while the green-hooded vehicle turned into his own yard, emerged again, and finally came crawling up the stony incline to the high road. Then Farmer Bolt, unable any longer to restrain his curiosity, brought his horses to a standstill, and leaving them to their own devices, hastened across the field to the corner which the van must pass.

[142]

"That parcel what my wife gived ye just now, Jan," he panted, as he approached; "let's have a look at it I want to make sure it's addressed right. My wold 'ooman bain't no great hand with the pen."

" 'Twas your daughter wrote the address," returned the carrier. "I d' 'low it'll be right enough."

He produced the parcel, nevertheless, and the farmer hastily examined it. The address was certainly set forth in a clear, legible hand:—

MR EDWARD BLANCHARD,
c/o The Black Inn,
Sturminster.

To be left till called for.

He spelt it out slowly, thrusting out his underlip the while, with a puzzled look.

"To be left till called for," he repeated. "It do seem a queer thing that. How be the man a-goin' to call for it when he've emmygrated to Ameriky."

"Oh, and 'ave 'ee?" enquired the carrier, much interested.

"Ees, a fartnight ago."

"Well, 'tis funny too; but I d' 'low I must obey arders. Hand over that parcel, farmer. I did ought to be getting' on ; we'm a bit late as it is."

Mr Bolt handed him the parcel, and the carrier whipped up his horse; but the van had hardly rattled on a few yards before its driver was again hailed.

"Hi! bide a bit!"

"Well?" said the carrier, turning.

[143]

Mr Bolt came alongside, red and breathless.

"Ye mid just ask the folks at the Black who they expects to call for that there parcel," he said. "I be a bit puzzled in my mind about it."

"I will," agreed the other; "but let me go now, good man, else I'll never get to Sturminster to ask about no parcels at all."

Mr Bolt was in a stern and silent mood during the whole of that day, and after tea, instead of settling down to his pipe with little Abel in his chair beside him, strolled out Branston way to meet the carrier. He had not long to wait before he heard the familiar creaking and rattling of the rickety van, and presently the solitary light of its swinging lantern came bobbing along between the hedges. The farmer repeated the procedure of the morning:—

"Hi, bide a bit!"

"Hullo, be it you, Mr Bolt? Ah, I axed that there question."

"Did ye?" said the farmer, planting himself in front of the horse on the wet roadway

"Ees. I d' 'low there's some mistake about Ed'ard Blanchard emmygrating. He be to call for that parcel hisself."

"Be he?" enquired Mr Bolt with starting eyes.

"He be. There was never no talk of his emmygrating, the folks at the Black d' say. He be aworkin' under the same measter, an' a-drivin' o' the same cart. He have shifted from the house he had to a lodging i' the town, but that's all the emmygration he did do."

"I see," said the farmer, "Thank 'ee."

[144]

" 'Twas a funny thing as ye didn't know, warn't it?" remarked the carrier as he gathered up the reins. "Blanchard's your daughter's husband, bain't he?"

"Ees, that's right," agreed Bolt "I d' 'low it be a funny thing." He turned away, and the van jingled past him and soon disappeared into the darkness. Mr Bolt went slowly homewards, revolving this astonishing discovery in his mind. He'd been tricked—that was what had happened. They were all in it, Ned and Alice, and even his wife. They thought they could fool him just as if he were a child. He knew what they were at. They thought that once Alice and her children were established at the farm he could never find it in his heart to turn them out again; but he would soon show them whether he could or not. No doubt Master Ned intended to come marching in by and by, expecting to be received with open arms. They thought him, Farmer Bolt, a regular sammy, did they? He'd let them know what sort of a sammy he was I Perhaps he could make fools of them just as easily as they had made a fool of him. He stood stock-still in the road all at once—an idea had flashed across him, a scheme of vengeance quite as subtle as the offence, and moreover appropriate. They—those deceivers—should find themselves caught in their own trap!

He strode on now and presently burst impetuously into the family living-room. Alice and his wife were sitting on either side of the fire; little Abel had fallen fast asleep in his tiny chair, his curly head drooping at a most uncomfortable angle

[145]

over the arm. The farmer stopped abruptly at sight of him.

"What's that child doing here at this time o' the evening?" he enquired, roughly.

"He did beg so hard to sit up till granfer come back," explained Mrs Bolt, "we had to let en bide. There, nothin' 'ud satisfy him. I give him his sugar-stick, but that wouldn't do. He said he must stop up an' smoke his pipe wi' granfer. He's been a-savin' it till ye come—there's but just the leastest little comer bit off, look-see."

But granfer did not look. He sat heavily down in his chair and glared at Alice, who was knitting a woollen comforter.

"What be doin'?" he enquired, savagely.

She glanced up with a smile. "You mustn't look," she said. "It's a Christmas present."

"Ye be a-goin' to send it out to Ned in Ameriky, I suppose," he suggested sarcastically. "It's not for Ned," returned Alice quickly, and Mrs Bolt added in a reproachful tone:—

"The poor maid be a-makin' it for you, father."

There was a pause, during which the farmer recalled his injury and resolved not to be mollified.

"Christmas," he said slowly. "Christmas. I d' 'low Ned 'ull feel hisself a bit lonely spendin' Christmas in Ameriky. Ye'd best write an' tell en to come back an' spend it wi' us."

This was the scheme which the farmer had elaborated during his ireful descent of the lane. He would tell Alice to send for her husband, and she, carrying out her former plan of action, would

pretend to write to America and invite him to return, but as soon as Ned appeared he would find he had met his match. Farmer Bolt would desire him and his family to emmygrate out o' that house, and never set foot in it again.

"Tha'll surprise 'em all a bit, I d' 'low," said Mr Bolt vengefully to himself.

He did not look at Alice as he spoke, half fearful of prematurely betraying his anger; but after a moment, finding she did not reply, he wheeled in his chair with an enquiring glance.

Alice had dropped her work on her lap and was leaning forward, gazing at him with eyes that were full of tears.

"Well?" he asked impatiently. Before he realised what she was about she had risen from her chair and thrown her arms round his neck.

"Oh, father," she cried. "Oh, father, I can't bear it! You're so good—so good to me, an' I've been that wicked and deceitful!"

As she uttered the last word, the farmer, who at first had struggled to free himself, became suddenly passive in her embrace.

"I have, 1 have," she went on, sobbing. "There, mother, I be a-goin' to tell en everything. I couldn't go on actin' lies when he be so kind. Oh, father, I've deceived ye shameful. Ned isn't in Ameriky at all—he never emmygrated. 'Twas jist a made-up story."

Shaking with sobs she clung closer to her father, who still sat immovable and looking straight before him.

"I don't wonder ye can scarce believe it," she

[147]

wept. "I could never ha' believed it o' myself, but we was so wretched, Ned an' me, an' so terr'ble bad off, an' I thought if ye once had me back i' my wold place ye'd maybe get fond o' me again—ye used to be so fond o' me, father. I thought ye'd maybe take to the childern—an' that by-and-by ye'd maybe forgive Ned, an' gie en the carter's place."

"Oh," said Mr Bolt, "that was it, was it?"

"Ye know 'twould be only nat'ral, my dear," put in Mrs Bolt meekly. "Ye wouldn't be out o' pocket by it, an' ye'd be pervidin' for your own flesh an' blood."

Mr Bolt's countenance changed; his wife's suggestion was eminently practical, and he could not help being struck by it. Nevertheless the share she had taken in the recent plot was still too fresh in his memory to admit of his parleying with her.

"There, wold 'ooman," he cried, screwing himself round in his chair, "ye needn't be a-puttin' your oar in. Ye'd better keep quiet. I wonder ye dare look me in the face," he added sternly.

" 'Twasn't mother's fault—'twas me thought of it," cried Alice quickly. " 'Twas me planned it"

"An' 'twas very well planned too," commented her father. "I only wonder ye should ha' thought I'd ever change my mind. Ye do know I be a man o' my word, don't ye?"

"I do, I do," sobbed she, "but still—oh dear, father, haven't we been happy together these last few weeks, and haven't ye got fond o' little Abel, an' wouldn't it be nice for us all to be friends? Ye

[148]

did use to say Ned was a terr'ble good worker," she added wistfully.

Mr Bolt looked at first severe and then dubious; this was evidently an aspect of the case which had not before presented itself. The rigidity of his form relaxed in some degree, and for the first time since Alice's confession he cast on her a glance which, though reproachful, was not unfriendly.

"Tis true, that," he said in a meditative tone, " 'ees,'tis true. Ye be a truth-tellin' maid as a rule, my dear. I wonder how you came to make up such a lyin' tale about the emmygration."

As Alice hid her face he continued more kindly.

"There, well say no more about that since ye owned up at the last I mid own up about summat too, as maybe ye wouldn't like."

Alice raised her head quickly, and Mrs Bolt dropped the poker, and turned round. Little Abel, disturbed by the clatter, moved uneasily in his sleep. The farmer looked from the women's scared faces to that of the child, and all at once smoothed the waving hair from his daughter's forehead and kissed her.

"I don't know as I will, though," he said. "Nay, some things is best forgot. I d' 'low I'll forget this."

"An' ye'll forgive as well as forget?" said Alice.

Mr Bolt disengaged himself gently, rose, and took a hurried turn about the room.

"I bain't one what likes to go again' my word," he said after a moment's hard thinking. "I said I'd never let your husband cross my door—"

Both the anxious women exclaimed simultaneously;

[149]

the farmer threw out his hand to command silence.

"Bide a bit," he said, "it'll work out all right. When I said that about your husband, Alice, I didn't know he were going to be my carter. That's a different story, bain't it? I shouldn't wonder but what my carter mid have to come in and out of the house for arders."

As Alice went quickly towards him, her eyes shining and her bosom heaving, he burst into a roar of laughter; and then, becoming suddenly serious, caught her in his arms.

"There, write to your husband, love," he said. "Write to en so soon as ye like. Tell him"—he paused, and then began to laugh again, but unsteadily, "tell him he can emmygrate back again, an' while he be waitin' for Jim to give up the carter's place, we'll make shift to spend a merry Christmas together."

[150]

FARMER BARNES' DILEMMA

Farmer Barnes stirred his tea vigorously and continuously for some minutes, raised the cup to his lips, with the spoon still in it, paused, tasted again, glancing severely over the edge at his daughter Maimie, and then remarked, in somewhat stem tones:—

"You haven't put no brandy in!"

"Nay, feyther; I clean forgot to tell ye as there was scarce a drop left in bottle yesterday. I put the little drain that was left in tea-pot, but I'm afeared there weren't enough to make mich difference."

"The tay bain't drawed at all, lass—it makes all that difference. Ye should ha' towd me when I was goin' to town yesterday as bottle were nigh empty."

"Ah, that I should; but I forgot."

And Maimie wrinkled up her forehead until her eyebrows nearly touched her fair fluffy fringe. Her father set down his cup with a kind of groan, and looked at her with eyes that seemed puzzled, well nigh tearful, in spite of their severity.

"Yigh, you're a good hand at forgettin,' Maimie—ye met tak' a prize for't. There weren't a bit o' sauce wi' the cowd pork to-day, and the taters was as hard as hard."

Maimie coloured and looked down; the farmer gazed at her sternly for a full minute, and then made

a sudden lunge at the youngest child who sat next to him.

"What's wrong wi' thy bishop, Maggie? One side is all tucked up."

"It's tore," announced Maggie, with a certain triumph in a statement which must call down condemnation on her elder. "Our Maimie said as she'd mend it—she've been sayin' shell mend it all the week."

"Thou'rt a nasty little tell-tale, Maggie," cried Maimie with some heat. "Ye never think for to remind me wi'out it's jest at my busiest time—when I'm getting' dinner ready or summat."

"There, there, never mind," interposed Barnes gloomily. " 'Tis alius the same story. Young heads I suppose is what we mun look for on young shoulders." And he went on with his tea, swallowing it in great gulps, and as it were under protest, and remarking every now and then below his breath that it wasn't half drawed.

At the conclusion of the meal the younger children slid down from their seats, and began to play noisily in a comer, while Maimie "sided" the things. Her father pushed back his chair, with a squeaking sound, over the tiled floor, lit his pipe, and, extending his stocking-clad feet to the blaze, smoked meditatively and despondently.

Maimie glanced at him every now and then as she went backwards and forwards between kitchen and buttery, and at last, pausing opposite to him, encountered his steadfast and sombre gaze.

"Come thou here, my lass," he said; "put down yon dish, and Come and sit here aside o' me.

[152]

Maimie," he continued solemnly, "I've been thinkin' o' summat."

Maimie, impressed by his tone, gazed at him with scared blue eyes, not caring to speak.

"Ah, I've been thinkin' o' summat," he repeated, "summat rather partik'ler. First off I've been thinkin' a dale about your mother, Maimie. I miss her dreadful."

"I'm sure ye do, feyther," said the girl with a sob. " 'Tis what we all do. Nobry can't miss poor mother more nor me."

" 'Tis a twelvemonth or more since she was took," continued Barnes, in the same sepulchral tone. "Ah, a twelvemonth 'twas last Sunday week—and the house don't seem like itself at all. I don't say but what you do your best, my lass, but things seem to be warsening every day. I don't know whatever mother 'ud say if she were here to see it—I don't I'm sure. I'm fair moidered wi' nobbut thinkin' on it. It seems same as if I wasn't doin' my dooty by her, poor soul. She was alius that house-proud for one thing, and sich a manager. Summat 'ull ha' to be done, Maimie."

Maimie began to whimper, and to wipe her eyes with her apron, and to protest in muffled tones from behind its folds that she did try, and she couldn't tell how 'twas as things always seemed to slip her memory. The children was tiresome for one thing, and tore their clothes much more than when mother was alive, and they didn't mind her a bit, and she had meant to make some apple-sauce, and, and—

"There, that'll do," interrupted Barnes, leaning forward with one great hand on either knee

[153]

"Thou'rt but young, as I say, and I mustn't expect too much fro' thee. Do what ye will ye can't be like poor mother; nay, 'tisn't to be looked for; nay, it 'ud want sombry else as is older and wiser nor thee, lass, to take mother's place. Ah, I've been thinkin' o' that"—here he paused, slowly polishing the knees of his corduroys with his broad palms,—"I'm wishful for to do my dooty by your poor mother, my dear," he resumed

presently, looking very hard at Maimie. "Ah, I couldn't noways rest easy in my mind, if I didn't strive to do that, and so, as I tell ye, I'm thinkin' o' summat."

"What are ye thinkin' on, feyther?" cried the girl quickly.

Mr Barnes restored his pipe to his mouth, sucked at it, and then, blowing out a cloud of smoke, looked at his daughter with moist eyes from amid the blue mist.

" 'Twill go hard wi' me," he said slowly; "it will indeed, but the question isn't what I'd choose, but what she'd choose."

"Who?" cried Maimie, quite at sea.

"Why, the poor missus, your mother. It'll go agen me, as I say, but I've made up my mind for to do it."

"For pity's sake, feyther, speak plain. To do *what*"

"Why, to take a second, my dear," said the farmer, speaking somewhat indistinctly by reason of the pipe which was still firmly wedged in the comer of his mouth, but with the same solemn dignity. "To get wed—to pick soombry out as 'ud do for me the way your dear mother done for

[154]

me—one as 'ud keep things straight, same as they used to be, and have an eye to all of you young folks."

"Nay, but, feyther, mother 'ud never ha' liked that," protested Maimie. " 'Tis the very last thing she'd wish, to have a stranger put in her place, and a stepmother cocked up over her childer."

"Cocked up," repeated the farmer sternly, "the one as I have in my mind isn't like to be easy cocked up. A sensible, steady, hard-workin' woman—a widder too, so ye may think she'll have a feelin' heart for me. And one as have childer of her own, a plenty of 'em, and 'ull know how to dale wi' all on you."

"Who is it, feyther?" gasped the girl.

"Why, Mrs Wharton o' the Pit"

"Mrs Wharton I" ejaculated Maimie. She checked the tears which were ready to fall, and sat looking at her father in amazement, the colour sweeping over her pretty face. "Why, she've got six childer of her own, and pretty nigh all of 'em lads."

Her father nodded sideways with a contented air.

"They'll come in handy about the place I daresay," he remarked.

"And she only buried Mr Wharton six month ago!"

"Ah! I reckon she'll feel the want of him—very nigh as bad as I feel the want o' your mother."

"But she'd never think o' getting' wed again—she's fifty-five and more."

Barnes removed his pipe, pointing with the stem at Maimie to enforce the comparison:—

[155]

"Your mother," he said brokenly, "your mother, my dear, was fifty-four and a bit—'tis a nice age. The more I think on't, the more I do seem to tak' to the notion. Now, I'll tell you what you'll do, Maimie—jest pop round to-morrow and ax Mrs Wharton to come and eat her Sunday dinner wi' us—her and all her fam'ly. Sunday is a good day for doin' a bit o' coortin'—her and me 'ull mak' it up while you youngsters are making merry."

"Nay, but, feyther——"

"Nay, but. Til not ha' no buts," shouted her father, good-humouredly but firmly. "Do what I tell thee, my lass. My mind's made up, so thou met as well put the best face thou can on't."

When feyther hammered on the table after that imperative fashion, and threw so much determination into his one-sided nod, Maimie knew from experience that it was useless to argue, and, with a heavy heart, promised to obey.

Sunday came and proved to be all that Sunday ought to be: sunshiny and bright.

After church the Whartons and Barnes' came trooping down the flagged path together: Jim brave in the flowered waistcoat which had been laid aside since the death of his missus, and the Widow Wharton displaying a white flower in her bonnet, and discarding her crape "weeper." As they proceeded in single file, both being too portly in figure to walk side by side, the neighbours smiled and winked, and nudged each other, and remarked that it was a match for sure. The children of both families, stiff' and prim in their best clothes, eyed each other somewhat shyly, but presently fraternised;

[156]

though Luke, the eldest Wharton lad, a fine, well-grown young fellow already in the twenties, walked apart, silently, and with a gloomy face.

Maimie had stayed at home, busy over hospitable preparations, and now, with a flushed face and a heavy heart, stood awaiting her visitors. She revived a little presently, when Mrs Wharton praised her cooking, and remarked that she could not have made the pudden better herself; but her countenance soon clouded over again. During the meal feyther paid marked attention to the lady of his choice, filling up her glass until she was obliged to protect it by keeping one broad hand outspread on the top, piling her plate with beef, and leering in an amorous fashion whenever he caught her eye; and, at its conclusion, he requested Mrs Wharton to withdraw with him to the parlour, and jocularly told the young folk they might clear away and cut what capers they liked.

"I'll go out for a smoke, I think," said Luke; but he spoke somewhat hesitatingly, and looked questioningly at Maimie. "Without," he added gallantly, "I can be of any service to you, Miss Barnes."

"Do just what you please," she returned shortly. "I don't suppose you feel more like making merry nor I do mysel'. The childer can play if they've a mind to; but it 'ull take me all my time to clear away—and I've no great fancy for making merry as how 'tis."

"Come, I'll help ye with the tray," said Luke. "There, little 'uns, ye can take hands round and start 'The Mulberry Bush.' 'Twill keep 'em quiet.

[157]

I can't but feel sorry for ye, Maimie," he continued, as he took hold of the tray. " 'Tisn't what none of us 'ud like, I s'pose," and he jerked his head towards the closed door of the parlour.

"Ye think your mother 'ull have him then P " said Maimie, with a sinking heart.

"I can't make out one way nor t'other. She's got no call to be thinkin' o' wedlock, mother hasn't. Feyther have left her every stick on the place. 'Tis a nice place,

as ye know, Maimie, and she's reet well off. I couldn't help but ha' words wi' her last night, and she answered me back awful sharp. ''Tis time there was a change, Mester Luke,' says she. 'Thou'rt gettin' above thyself, lad,' she says."

"An' what do the younger ones say to it?" said Maimie, pausing in the act of setting a pile of plates on the tray which he held.

"Eh, they don't say much. Mother can do what she likes wi' they. They look a bit glum, but that's all."

"'Tisn't much use lookin' glum, I reckon," sighed the girl. "Feyther's that set on the notion he won't hear naught agen it."

"I dessay," said Luke; "'tis a very good match for him?"

"Not a bit better nor 'tis for your mother," cried Maimie, tossing her head.

"Why, our place is twice as big as this," returned the youth; "and mother have money put by—a dale of brass she have. I don't fancy your feyther could match it."

They were slowly proceeding towards the buttery

[158]

by this time, each holding on to an end of the tray; through the open doorway the children could be seen dancing round and round, while they vociferated shrilly the time-honoured refrain— "Ring-a-ring-a-roses!"

"I don't want him to match your mother's brass, nor yet your mother," said Maimie. "I wish she and the lot o' you had kep' away—that I do."

"Well, if that's all ye can find to say to me, I'd best take myself off," cried Luke angrily, and he suddenly let go of his end of the tray.

There was a slide, a clatter, a crash; the piled up crockery, too heavy for Maimie's arms alone, had slipped to the end of the tilted tray and fallen on the tiled buttery floor.

Maimie glanced at the heap of destruction for one moment, and then burst into tears.

"I didn't go for to do it," shouted Luke, overwhelmed with horror and remorse. "I thought ye'd firm howd on tray, Maimie."

"Eh dear, eh dear," sobbed Maimie, the tears pouring through her outspread

fingers, her bosom heaving convulsively. "Whatever mun I do? Feyther'll be mad. And I'll be that shamed before your mother and all."

Luke struck at his forehead vengefully.

"I'm a regular fool," he cried. "I'm a downright wastral and good-for-naught, that's what I am. I can't forgive myself for being so rough. Dunnot take agen me, Maimie, dunnot! I'm right down sorry— awful sorry, I am."

"I—don't—belive—you are," sobbed Maimie.

"I'll swear I am," asserted Luke, and, picking his

way through the fragments of crockery, he put his arm round Maimie's waist.

"Well, maybe you are," she said, relenting a little, but still weaping piteously. "'Tis a judgment on me I'm sure; I didn't ought to ha' spoke that way about your mother to your face."

"Nay, if it comes to that," groaned Luke, penitently, "I didn't ought to ha' cast up about the brass to ye."

By this time he was mopping delicately at Maimie's eyes with a beautiful silk handkerchief, duly perfumed with a bottle of sixpenny scent; and Maimie was so touched by this attention that she presently smiled wanly through her tears, and the two concluded a compact of friendship as they cleared away the broken china.

Meanwhile Jim Barnes and Mrs Wharton sat face to face on either side of the parlour fire, gazing at each other for some time in unbroken silence. Presently the farmer spoke, pointing at the widow with his thumb, and inaugurating proceedings by heaving a deep sigh.

"I reckon ye miss the gaffer, Mrs Wharton?"

"I do indeed, Mr Barnes," returned the widow, with an answering sigh, which made her stifl' black silk creak alarmingly.

"Ah—ye can't miss him more nor what I do my poor missus. She was a wonderful woman, Mrs Wharton."

"She was—ah, she was. Providence seems to ha dealt a bit 'ard wi' the two of us, Mr Barnes, but we munnot re-pine."

After this there came a pause, during which

[160]

the farmer scratched his head and rubbed his knees.

"My lass, Maimie, d'ye see—she's a very good lass, but a bit giddy—she dunnot seem never to remember naught."

"She's but young," said the widow tolerantly. "Our Luke—the eldest lad, he do seem to gi' me a lot o' trouble. Wants to know better nor me, and is ever and always trying to be gaffer. 'Women don't know naught about farmin',' says he to me as bold as ye please."

"Did he?" ejaculated Jim, with a deeply scandalised air.

"Not but what," continued the widow, half-laughingly, after a moment's reflection; "not but what the lad have got a wonderful notion o' farm work himself. Wonderful, he have—eh, he shapes wonderful well for a lad of his years. Mr Gradwell, now, o' Little Upton, he was passin' the remark to me only t'other day. Says he, 'I never did see sech a long head as your Luke have got for sech a young chap,' he says."

"Ah," exclaimed Farmer Barnes appreciatively, "he's a fine lad, I'll say that for him. He used to follow your poor master same as his shadow. I reckon 'twas your Joe what put him in the way of things so well. I reckon," he continued sympathetically, "he'd ha' been proud on him if he'd ha' lived, poor owd lad."

"I reckon he would," agreed Mrs Wharton, puckering up her face and producing her handkerchief; from the turn the conversation was now taking she would have soon to cry again.

[161]

"Ah," said Barnes, "your lad, I reckon he's a comfort to you, Mrs Wharton."

Mrs Wharton twitched down her handkerchief and spoke in a voice that was exceedingly clear and decided.

"Well, Mester Barnes, he is an' he isn't, if ye know what I mean. There can't be two masters in one house, and that's what I say—time and again I say it to our Luke.

I'm fair tired sayin' the same thing over and over again."

The farmer nodded with a kind of groan.

"Jest so, Mrs Wharton, jest so. I can feel for ye there. 'Tis the very same way wi' me an' our Maimie. I do tell her a thing twenty times mayhap, an' she'll forget jest same, not but what she's a good lass—I'd reckon you'd find her a good lass, Mrs Wharton, if you was to coom here."

"Eh, Mr Barnes," said the widow bashfully, "whatever put that in your head? Coom here, d'ye say?"

"This 'ere house," said Jim firmly, "wants a missus summat awful, an' I want a missus to see to things an' keep the young folks in order, and there's nobry in the parish I'd like better nor yourself, Mrs Wharton. You .an' me can feel for each other—ah, that we can—I don't see nothin' in the world to prevent us from lendin' each other a helpin' hand."

Mrs Wharton paused to reflect, pleating the edge of her black-edged handkerchief.

"If there was but you an' me," she said presently, "the matter 'ud be easy settled. I could do wi' you

[162]

very well, Mester Barnes. As ye say, we can feel for one another—but there's the childer to be thought on—all they little lads o' mine—there is but the one lass, ye know."

"The more the merrier," returned Jim placidly. "There's plenty o' little odd jobs they can be doin' on, at arter school be over. I often wish I'd ha' had more lads mysel'."

"Well, but," continued Mrs Wharton, to whom the various aspects of the situation were slowly unfolding themselves, "there's your big lass to be thought on—your Maimie. I doubt she'll not make it so very pleasant for me. I could manage the little ones right enough—I was allus fond o' childer. 'But your Maimie—I doubt we shouldn't get on so very well together."

"Oh, ye'd get on," said Barnes, "ye'd get on at arter a bit, I dare say."

He did not speak very confidently, however, and presently continued in a still

more dubious tone: "'Tis your Luke as is a bit of a stumblin' block. I hadn't reckoned he were that masterful. I doubt it'll not be easy to get him to content hissel' wi' workin' here under me, at arter he's been cock o' the walk at your place."

"Workin' here under you," repeated Mrs Wharton blankly. "He'd never do that—never. I don't know however it's to be managed, Mester Barnes, I'm sure. I didn't reckon to leave our place, ye see. I reckoned—well the thought jest happened to strike me, as if I was to take a second husband he'd be content to coom an' live at the Pit."

Farmer Barnes rolled his head from side to side

[163]

and gazed at the good woman with a sternly disapproving air.

"That wouldn't suit me," he said, "nay, that it wouldn't. Our family have been settled here for a hundred year an' more; *I* bain't a-goin' to shift."

Again Mrs Wharton considered. She was not disposed to relinquish her rights without a struggle, but, on the other hand, Jim Barnes was the most eligible suitor who was likely to come her way. The widowed state of both seemed to make the alliance peculiarly desirable; none of the neighbours could cast up at her for replacing poor Joe so soon when her second husband stood as much in need of consolation as herself. Then he was well-to-do, and a most excellent father. She had thought, moreover, that his support would have enabled her to get the better of the recalcitrant Luke. But there were limits which could not be outstepped. To expect a youth of twenty-two to accept a subordinate position on strange premises was too much.

"The Pit Farm is a very fine farm," she remarked tentatively, after a pause. "The Whartons have lived there a good few year too. 'Tis but nat'ral as our Luke should look to steppin' into his feyther's shoes some day when I'm laid under ground. 'Tis what he've a right to expect."

"Well, let the lad step into 'em now, then," exclaimed Jim Barnes jovially. "Let him step away. I don't want to be gafler at the Pit Farm; all as I want, my dear, is for you to come an' be missus here."

Mrs Wharton relaxed. When her wooer smiled so pleasantly and called her "my dear," it was difficult

[164]

to maintain an attitude of aloofness; nevertheless, though her heart was insensibly softening, her shrewd, stolid North-country head by no means followed suit.

"There's a deal to be thought on, isn't there? " she remarked. "Our Luke—if l was to let our Luke set up for hissel' at our place, there'd be no doin' anythin' wi' him. An' the lads ower young too to be livin' alone there—"

"Why need he live alone?" interrupted Jim. "Pick out a wife for him—that's what ye'd best do —pick out a wife for him an' let the yoong folks set up there, and you coom here along o' me."

Mrs Wharton smiled dubiously. "It met be a good thing in one way," she conceded, "but still— well, ye see, I didn't reckon to give up the Pit Farm to our Luke for a good few year yet. There's all the little uns to bring up and eddicate. I couldn't expect to be lookin' to you for everything."

"That's true," said Jim, becoming suddenly very solemn. He, too, had heard about the good bit of brass that was laid by, and, as every sensible person knew, when brass was laid by, it was laid by, until the time came for the fortunate possessor to leave it by will to somebody else. Still he had not reckoned on the possible contingency of having to feed and clothe at his expense the five younger Whartons.

After deep meditation, he struck the table with his fist.

"Why not make the chap pay ye rent for it?" he said. "That'ud be the thing. Set him up there an' pick him out a missus, an' let the two of 'em manage

[165]

for themselves, and pay ye a lump sum every rent- day—a good sum, mind ye, so as Mester Luke mayn't be kickin' up his heels an' thinkin' too much of hissel'. Coom," he cried, "what d'ye think o' that notion?"

"I think well on't," said Mrs Wharton, pursing up her lips, and nodding with a satisfied air. "I think 'tis a capital notion, Mester Barnes. I must just turn ower in my mind a bit, the lasses I'd like our Luke to choose from. There's Sally Lupton now; she's

a nice little body, an' folks say owd Lupton left a good bit to her mother."

"Ah," said the farmer, "she met do very well."

"An' there's Rose Blanchard," continued Mrs Wharton, ruminating, "she's a nice lass; wonderful house-proud Rose is."

"Ah!" agreed Barnes, nodding.

Mrs Wharton was struck by something peculiar in his tone, and looked at him sharply; a deeper shade of colour was slowly overspreading his face, and he was smiling in an oddly bashful way.

"Can ye call to mind no other lass?" he said, after a pause, and, edging his chair round the table, he nudged the widow meaningly.

A light suddenly dawned on Mrs Wharton; she began to laugh with a rather conscious look.

"Well, theer's one lass as 'ud suit very well. In more ways nor one she'd suit, I reckon; but I'm sure I don't know whatever you'd say to it, Mester Barnes."

"Give her a name," said Jim, grinning more broadly.

"Well—I hardly like—'t'ud coom best fro' you,

Mester Barnes; but she's a very nice lass, an' I've heard as her mother left a nice bit o' money behind her."

"Meanin' my missus," shouted Jim, the smiles forsaking his face immediately.

"Oh, I named no names, Mester Barnes, though I did hear that poor Martha had a nice bit put away in the bank."

"Maybe she had, an' maybe she hadn't," said Jim. "As how 'tis, whatever was left was left to me, an' it's me as'll have the settlin' on't."

"Of course, of course—I'm only sayin'—blood's thicker nor water, when all's said an' done, isn't it?"

"'Tis indeed, an' I'm sure that's a sayin' as you'll bear in mind, my dear, when you're setting your Luke up. He's his feyther's son, ye know, an' what did his feyther lay by so mich brass for, if not for the lad as is to stand in his shoes?"

There was a twinkle in honest Jim's eyes as he made this home-thrust, and when

Mrs Wharton replied, it was with a sort of giggle.

"Ah, to be sure, he's to stand in's feyther's shoes, poor lad, but I doubt he'll find 'em a tight fit if I take your advice, Mester Barnes, an' make him pay me a big lump o' rent."

The farmer laughed outright.

"Ye had me there, Lizzie," he said. "I hadn't give a thought to the chance o' my lass settin' up along o' your lad when I gave you that there advice, my dear. 'Tis as broad as 'tis long, that's one thing— 'twill be but takin' the brass out o' one pocket and puttin' it into another. Blood's thicker nor water,

[167]

as ye said just now. I doubt we'll agree very well."

"I doubt we shall," said Mrs Wharton.

"Well, the first thing agreed on is that you an' me is to be shouted soon," pursued Jim, smiling, "and next thing is to tackle the yoong folks."

"Reet," said Mrs Wharton. "If you'll have a quiet talk wi' your lass at arter we're gone, I'll say a word to our Luke while we're goin' home."

"Nay," cried the farmer, rising, " I'm never one for half-measures. Let's have the pair of 'em in now, and put it to 'em straigh."

Before Mrs Wharton had time to protest, he had thrown open the door, and was shouting lustily for Luke and Maimie.

After a moment or two the young couple appeared, Maimie, rather pale and inclined to be tearful, Luke, flushed and determined.

"Coom in, my lad," shouted Barnes, clapping him cheerily on the back. "Coom your ways in, Maimie, too: we'n summat to tell ye."

"An' we'n summat to say, too," said Luke, firmly. "Mother, I know very well what you're goin' to say, an' I'll ha' my say out first. You an' Mester Barnes here are goin' to make a match on't. Well, Maimie an' me has been talkin' a bit, an' though we're not wishful any way to hurt your feelin's, we've made up our minds, both on us, as we'll not stop here to have strangers set over us."

Farmer Barnes whistled, and Mrs Wharton, whose wits, as has been said, moved

slowly, looked a trifle alarmed.

"So what we've settled," continued Luke,

[168]

resolutely, yet looking from his mother to the farmer, with a kind of compassion, for he felt that the blow which he found himself obliged to deal them, was of a staggering nature, "what we've made up our minds to do is to get wed to each other and go away to earn our own livin's."

"An' a very good notion too," said Jim approvingly, sidling the while towards Mrs Wharton, and winking solemnly as he intercepted her somewhat startled gaze. "'Tis a very good job as ye've settled the matter that way, my lad—'twas the very thing me an' your mother was thinkin' o' proposin' to ye."

"Eh, feyther, ye'd never be so cruel as to want to turn me fro' the door," gasped Maimie, her ready tears bursting forth.

"Well," exclaimed Luke, "an' that's a pretty thing, I will say. Have ye the face to tell me, mother, as you an' Mester Barnes had made it up between ye to get shut of us—your own flesh 'an blood, for the sake o' takin' up wi' each other?"

Barnes, who had by this time reached Mrs Wharton's chair, gave her a warning nudge with his elbow, and winked again.

"Nay, lad, me an' your mother is not for turnin' ye out, but if you an' our Maimie have settled everything between yourselves we haven't nothin' to say, have we Lizzie? 'Tis a very good thing for young folks to earn their own livin'—a very good thing."

Luke and Maimie looked at each other blankly. The bomb which they had expected to discharge with such deadly effect had unaccountably fizzled

[169]

off; nobody seemed a penny the worse for it. On the contrary, this plan, which they had expected to be so strenuously opposed, appeared to suit the older couple to a nicety.

"Well," said Luke, drawing a long breath, "what I says I'll stick to. If you'll

keep your word to me, Maimie, I'll keep mine to you. 'Tis a bit hard to turn out of the old place after bein' brought up to look for somethin' so different, an' I doubt you'll find it a bit hard too, my lass, to settle down in a little small cottage—I doubt if your mother were alive—or my poor feyther, as thought such a dale o' me—"

He broke off, choking; there were tears in his blue eyes.

Mrs Wharton could stand it no longer; rising hurriedly from her chair, she pushed the farmer on one side, and, squeezing herself round the table, threw her arms round Luke's neck.

"Nay, my lad," she cried, "nay, dunnot believe it. Dunnot think as your mother could ever be that 'ard. Ye shannot be treated no worse nor if your feyther wer alive—maybe a bit better, for our gaffer were wonderful masterful, and I doubt he'd not be the one to turn out to make room for thee the same as I'm thinkin' o' doin'."

Luke, who had been warmly returning his mother's embrace, now jerked up a somewhat ruffled head, his flushed face disclosing distinct traces of tears.

"What's that ye say, mother?" he asked.

Meanwhile Jim had been shaking his head waggishly at Maimie, and uplifting an admonitory forefinger.

[170]

"Well, of all the little noddies! So I'm goin' to turn thee out, am I, to shift for thysel'. Water's thicker nor blood, I s'pose, ho, ho, ho !"

He laughed prodigiously at his own wit, and Maimie dashed away her tears and smiled a doubt-ful smile.

"Mester Barnes and me," said Mrs Wharton solemnly, "have made up we're minds for to get wed, him bein' in want of a missus an' me bein' that awful lonesome wi'out your poor feyther, Luke, as I feel I mun put soombry in's place."

"Very well said," interpolated the farmer, in a deep and admiring growl.

"At same time," continued Mrs Wharton, "we both knows our dooty to our childer, an' we think the best way o' settlin' the matter 'ud be for me to live here at arter we are wed, and for you, Luke, to stop on at the Pit wi' Maimie for your missus. Mester Barnes an' me," she added, looking towards her newly-chosen partner for confirmation

of her words, "'ull give an eye to things from time to time—me inside an' him out. An' ye'll have to pay me rent for the place, ye know, Luke"

"Allowin' yoursel' a fair profit, o' course," interposed Farmer Barnes, "a fair profit."

"An' Mester Barnes bein' a lovin' feyther, an' mindful o' what his poor missus 'ud wish," continued the widow, "'ull help ye to start, my lad—for stock an' that. Ah, ye may be sure we's both do the best we can for our own flesh an' blood."

Luke smiled broadly on his future stepfather, and gripped his sunburnt hand, murmuring heartily:

[171]

"'Tis very well done o' you, I'm sure. Very handsome—ah, that 'tis."

Maimie had crossed over to Mrs Wharton and was uttering on her side profuse expressions of gratitude and satisfaction.

Jim Barnes himself, however, looked slightly puzzled, and presently took occasion to murmur surreptitiously in Mrs Wharton's ear:

"Ye had the last word arter all, Lizzie, my dear!"

[172]

THE MISSUS'S CHAIR

WHEN the congregation of St Mary's Church, Thornleigh, came gaily forth on Christmas Day, pausing in the porch and on the steps, and almost blocking the gateway as they exchanged cheery greetings and good wishes with friends and neighbours, old Joe Makin loitered behind. He spoke to no one, scarcely venturing to show himself, it would appear, till the merry groups had dispersed and the last gleeful youngster had come clattering down from his place in the choir, and scampered off to join the family circle.

When all at last was still, Joe came slowly out, pulling his hat-brim down over his eyes, and looking neither to right nor to left. Instead of, however, descending the steps that led to the lich-gate he went hobbling round to the rear of the church, and then

paused before one of the graves.

The headstone bore the name of Annie, only child of Joseph and Mary Makin, and recorded her death as having taken place at a date full thirty-five years distant. Lower down was another inscription in memory of the aforesaid Mary Makin, who had departed this life, it seemed, but a few months before that very Christmas Day.

Joe looked round to assure himself that no one was in sight, and then, stooping stiffly, endeavoured to brush away with his hand the slight sprinkling of

[173]

snow which had fallen on the little mound. Drawing a. pair of scissors from his capacious pocket, he clipped the grass here and there where it had grown rank, muttering to himself the while.

"'Tisn't much harm, I don't think—nay, it canna be much harm, though it is Christmas Day, just to fettle it up a bit for our Mary. Hoo allus liked everything gradely—eh, that hoo did. Now hoo must have a bit o' green to mak her know 'tis Christmas—ah, and the little 'un too. Annie shall have a sprig wi' some pratty berries on't."

He took from beneath his coat two sprigs of holly, and after some difficulty succeeded in sticking them upright into the half-frozen ground, the larger one at the head of the grave, the smaller, all gay with red berries, at the foot.

"Theer, owd lass," he said, straightening himself at last, "thou shall have a bit o' green at head o' thy bed same as ever—eh, I could wish I were a-layin' theer aside o' thee—Can'st thou see the berries, little wench, wheer thou art, up yon ?—Well —I mun be off a-whoam now. Eh, but the grave looks gradely."

Somewhat comforted by this reflection he turned about, and set off homewards.

There were few loiterers in the village street; every one was indoors, either preparing for, or already partaking of, the Christmas dinner. When Lancashire folks make merry they like, as they say, to have plenty "to mak' merry wi'" For weeks, nay, months past, thrifty housewives had been looking forward to this day, and not a little self-denial had been practised in order to ensure the

[174]

keeping of it with becoming lavishness. From every house that Joe passed issued sounds of cheerful bustle, jests and laughter; he could see the firelight glancing on the window-panes, and catch glimpses of wonderful decorations in the way of cut paper and greenery. Here and there a little head would be pressed against the shining pane to watch for some belated guest; now and again he would hear a greeting exchanged between one and another; "Merry Christmas, owd lad!" "The same to you, man!" And then the chairs would draw up and there would be a clatter of plates, and a very babel of acclamations would declare the goose or the bit o' beef to be the finest that ever was seen. Joe was going to have a goose for his Christmas dinner; he had always subscribed to a goose club in his missus's time, and he had not yet learned to get into new ways; but the thought of that goose of which he was to partake in absolute solitude served only to increase his melancholy.

Poor Mary! how she would have enjoyed it—and she lay yonder in the cold ground.

When he arrived at his cottage he took the doorkey from its usual hiding-place behind the loose brick under the ivy, and let himself in.

Widow Prescott, who "did for him" now, had made everything ready before she had taken her departure for her own home. A savoury smell came from the oven where the goose and the pudding (sent as usual from the Hall) were keeping hot; the cloth was laid, the hearth swept up; the good woman had even garnished the place with a sprig of green, here and there; but the table was laid for one, and the

[175]

missus's chair stood against the wall. Joe stood still and looked at it, slowly shaking his head.

"Eh, theer it stands," he said, speaking aloud, according to his custom, "theer it stands. Eh dear, an' her and me have sat opposite to each for such a many years! And theer's the cheer empty, and here am I all by mysel', and it's Christmas Day!"

He wiped his eyes and shook his head again; then he slowly divested himself of

his hat and coat, which he hung up behind the door, set the goose and potatoes on the table, and sat down.

"For what we are about to receive" began Joe, dismally, and then he suddenly got on to his feet again. "I'll have that theer cheer at the table as how 'tis," said he, and hobbled across the floor towards it.

Then, as though struck by a sudden thought, he continued in an altered voice, "Pull up, missus, draw a bit nearer, lass. That's it. Now we's get to work."

He dragged the chair over to the table, and set a plate in front of it, and a knife and fork, and reached down a cup from the dresser.

"We's have a cup o' tea jest now," said he; "thou allus liked a cup o' tea to thy dinner."

Returning to his place he sat down once more.

"I'll mak' shift to think thou's theer," he said. "I'll happen be able to eat a bit if I can fancy thou's theer. I reckon thou'rt very like to be near me somewheer, owd lass; thou an' me as was never parted for a day for nigh upon forty year, 'tisn't very like as thou'd let me keep Christmas all by mysel'."

[176]

He was so busy talking to himself that he did not notice that the latch of the house door, which opened directly into the place, was lifted, as though by a hesitating hand, and that the door itself was softly pushed a very little way open.

Taking up the carving-knife he cut a slice from the breast of the goose.

"Wilt have a little bit?" he asked, looking towards the empty chair.

"Yes, please," said a little voice behind him; the door was opened and closed again, and little feet came pattering hastily across the floor.

Joe dropped the knife and fork and looked round; a small figure stood at his elbow, a dimpled face surmounted by a very mop of yellow curls, was eagerly lifted to meet his gaze.

"Hullo!" cried Joe.

"Hullo!" echoed the little creature, and catching hold of his sleeve, the child added in a tone of delighted anticipation, "Please, I *could* like a bit."

"Why, whose little lass are you?" inquired the old man. "And what brings ye out on Christmas Day? Why, thou'rt starved wi' cowd, an' never a hat a-top of all they curls, an' not so much as a bit o' shawl to hap thee round. What's thy name, my wench?"

"Jinny, please, Mr Makin," announced she; "Jinny Frith. I am John Frith's little lass—John o' Joe's, ye know."

"I know," said he; "and what brings ye out in the cowd?"

[177]

Here the little face became overcast, and the little lip drooped.

"Mother put me in the wash-house," said she. "Hoo wouldn't let me sit at table; hoo put me in the wash-house, and I saw your fire shinin' through the window, and I thought I'd come and ax ye to let me come in and warm mysel'."

"Well, an' so I will," returned Joe, heartily. "Put ye in the wash-house, did hoo? Well, and that's a tale. Hoo's thy stepmother, isn't hoo? Ah, I mind it now, I mind hearin' thy feyther 'ad getten a new wife."

Jinny nodded, "An' a lot o' new childer!" she announced. "There's Tommy, an' Teddy, an' Maggie, an' Pollie, mother brought 'em all wi' her."

"Ah, she was a widow, was she?" queried Joe, interested.

"An' there's *quite* a new baby," continued Jinny, opening her eyes wide, "a new, little, wee baby. That's my own sister. Hoo's so bonny, nobbut when hoo cries. Hoo cried jest now along o' me makin' a noise, and mother was some mad."

"Well, but your mother didn't ought to have put ye in the wash-house for that," returned Joe. "You didn't go for to wakken the babby a-purpose. Theer, coom nigh the fire and warm thysel' a bit. Eh, what little cowd hands. What's that theer on thy arm?"

Jinny turned her chubby arm and examined the mark reflectively.

"I know!" she cried, "'twas where mother hit

[178]

me with a spoon yesterday. 1 wer' reachin' for the sugar."

"Hoo hit ye, did hoo?" cried Joe, with a sort of roar." My word I the woman mun ha' a hard heart to hit a little lass same as thee. What was feyther doing, eh?"

"Feyther was eatin' his breakfast," responded Jinny. "He said hoo didn't ought to hit me—and then hoo got agate o' bargein' at him."

"Well, well," commented Joe, who had been chafing the little cold hands throughout the recital, "the poor man's pretty well moidered, I reckon. But coom! the goose 'ull soon be as cowd as thee if we don't give over talkin' an' start eatin'. Thou'd like a bit o' goose, wouldn't thou?"

"Eh, I would!" cried Jinny, with such whole-souled earnestness that he laughed again.

Breaking from him she clambered into the chair opposite to his own—poor Mary's chair. And there she sat, her feet a long way from the floor, but the better able on that account to give certain little kicks to the table in token of ecstasy.

Joe looked across at her: how strange to see that chubby face, and golden head, in the place of the kindly wrinkled countenance which had so often smiled affectionately back at him from between the closely pleated frills of Mary's antiquated cap! But the chair was no longer empty, and, though Joe sighed as he took up his knife and fork, he thought that the tangible vision of the expectant little face was, on the whole, more conducive to dispel loneliness

[179]

than the most determined attempts at make-believe.

"Hoo's not theer," he muttered; "hoo'll never be theer no more, but it's a good job as you little lass chanced to look in—'tis better nor the wash-house for the little thing, as how'tis."

Who shall say how Jinny revelled in the goose, and the stuffing, and the apple-sauce—particularly in the apple-sauce? It was pleasant to see the solemnity with which she presently selected the biggest potato in the dish, and, sliding down from her chair, marched round the table to bestow it on her host.

"You deserve it," said she, with a quaintly condescending air—"you are so good. Besides you are the owdest," she added as an after thought.

"Well, to be sure!" ejaculated Joe, leaning back in his chair the better to clap his hands.

Then, of course, Jinny was obliged to peel the potato for Joe, and to cut it up for him; she would in fact have liked to feed him, had not a timely suggestion as to the advisability of continuing her own dinner recalled her attention to that very important matter.

When the pudding came, she insisted on measuring plates to make quite sure that Joe was not defrauding himself of any portion of his just share; and was altogether so judicious and patronising, not to say motherly, that the old man partook of the repast to an accompaniment of perpetual chuckles. His delight was greatest, perhaps, when Jinny

[180]

insisted on "siding" the dinner things at the conclusion of the meal, a task which she accomplished with most business-like dexterity. One by one she carried away dishes and plates—having first taken the precaution of setting the buttery door ajar—then she swept up the floor, and folded the cloth, in a somewhat lop-sided manner it must be owned, but with an air which left no doubt of her own consciousness of efficiency.

"I'll wash up by and by," she remarked, as she returned to Joe's side.

"Eh, we'll not ax thee to do that," replied he. "Thou art a wonderful little lass. Thou art, for sure! And nobbut six! Thou's a gradely headpiece under they curls o' thine."

"My curls is all comin' off'," remarked Jinny, with a little toss of the head that carried them.

"What!" cried Joe, almost jumping from his chair.

"Mother's goin' to cut them all off," explained the child. "They take such a time brushin' out —and sometimes hoo pulls 'em an' hoo's vexed when I cry. So hoo says, Off they must come. Daddy axed hoo to leave 'em till Christmas, but I 'spect hoo'll have 'em off tomorrow."

"Well, that beats all!" cried Joe, as profoundly moved with indignation as though the decree had gone forth that Jinny must lose her head instead of her hair. "I

should think that any woman as is a woman, or for the matter o' that, anybody wi' a heart in their breast, ought to be glad and proud to

[181]

comb out they curls. For the matter o' that I'd be willin' to comb 'em out mysel','if that's all the trouble. Coom over here of a mornin', my wench, with thy brush an' comb, and I'll see to you."

"Will ye, Mr Makin?" said Jinny, clapping her hands. "Eh, ye are good! Didn't I say ye was good? The goodest mon—I—ever—did—see," she added with emphasis. "I wish I was your little lass," she remarked, after a pause.

"Do ye?" returned Joe, setting aside the pipe which he had been about to fill, and drawing her towards him. "Ye'd never like to live wi' an owd mon same as me," he pursued in a. hesitating tone. "Nay, of course, ye wouldn't; ye'd be awful dull."

Jinny shook her head till her curls made a yellow nimbus. "I wouldn't!" she cried with emphasis. "I'd love to live here wi' you, Mr Makin. You'd be my daddy then, wouldn't ye? Were you ever a daddy, Mr Mackin?"

"A long time ago," said Joe, "I had a little lass o' my own, and she'd curly hair mich the same as thine and bonny blue e'en. Her little bed is up yon in the top chamber."

"If I was your little lass I could sleep in her little bed, couldn't I?" returned Jinny, who was a practical young person. "Daddy's got a lot of new childer—and I could like to have a new daddy. I'd like *you* for my daddy, Mr Makin," she insisted.

"Well," returned Joe, uplifting her dimpled chin with his rugged forefinger, "'tis a notion that; I reckon I could do wi' thee very well."

[182]

"I'd sleep—in—that—little—bed—up—yon," resumed Jinny, in a sort of chant, "and I'd sit in this here chair."

With some difficulty she dragged over the missus's chair to the opposite side of the hearth, and climbed into it. There she sat with her curly head leaning against the

back, a little hand on each of its wooden arms, and her chubby legs dangling. It was the missus's chair, but Joe did not chide the presumptuous little occupant. On the contrary, he gave a sort of one-sided nod at her, and winked with both eyes together.

"Now you are as grand as the Queen," said he.

While they were chuckling together over this sally, there came a sound of hasty steps without, followed by a knock on the door; and John Frith thrust in his head.

"Eh, thou'rt theer!" he cried. "My word, Jinny, what a fright thou's gi'en me. I thought thou was lost."

Joe removed his pipe from his mouth, and gazed at the newcomer sternly.

"Hoo's here, reet enough," he returned. "Sit still, Jinny," as the child, abashed, began to get down from the chair; "thou's no need to stir—coom in if ye are coming, John," he added, over his shoulder, "an' shut yon door. The wind blows in strong enough to send us up the chimbley—Jinny and me."

John obediently closed the door, and came forward. He was a big, loose-limbed, good-natured looking fellow, without much headpiece the neighbours

[183]

said, but with his heart in the right place. As he now advanced, his face wore an expression, half of amusement, half of concern.

"Eh, whoever'd ha' thought of her runnin' off here!" he ejaculated. "Theer's sich a to-do at our place as never was. Some on 'em thought hoo'd fallen down the well. Eh, Jinny, thou'lt catch it from mother. Why didn't thou stop i' th' wash-house?"

Jinny began to whimper, but before she could reply, Joe Makin took up the cudgels in her defence.

"Stop in the wash-house indeed!" cried he. "Yo' did ought to be ashamed o' yo'rsel', John Prescott. Stop in th' wash-house on Christmas Day, to be starved wi' cowd, an' clemmed wi' hunger. 'I dunno how yo' can call yo'rsel' a mon an' say sich a thing—yo', as is her feyther an' all."

"Eh, dear o' me," cried John, "'tis enough to drive a mon distracted, what wi' one thing an' what wi' another. I ax naught but a quiet life. Jinny, hoo woke the babby, and the missus, hoo got in one of her tantrums, an' the childer was all fightin' an'

skrikin', an' the whole place upside down—eh, theer's too many on 'em yonder an' that's the truth, but if I say a word hoo's down on me."

"Yo're a gradely fool to ston' it, then!" retorted Joe. "The man should be gaffer in his own house."

"Oh, I don't say but what he ought to be," responded John, with a sheepish smile, "but 'tis easier said than done, mon: I weren't a-goin' to

[184]

leave the little lass in the wash-house," he added in an explanatory tone, "I were goin' to let her out reet enough on the quiet I'd saved a bit o' dinner for her, too——"

"Oh, yo' had, had yo'?" interrupted Joe, ironically. "Coom now, that's summat. You weren't goin' to let her clem on Christmas Day—well done! 'Twas actin' like a mon, that was—yo' may be proud o' that, John. I tell yo' what," cried Joe, thumping the table, "since yo' take no more thought for your own flesh an' blood nor that, yo' may mak' a present o' the little lass to me."

"Mak' a present!" stammered the other, staring at him.

"Ah," returned Joe, sternly, "you don't vally her no more nor if hoo wer' an owd dishclout—lettin' her be thrown out in the wash-house an' all—but I'm made different. Your house is too full, yo' say—well mine's empty—awful empty," he added with something like a groan. "Theer's too many on yo' yon, at your place—well, then, I'll take Jinny off ye."

John still stared at him without speaking, and Joe continued vehemently.

"I say I'll take her off yo'. There'll 'appen be more peace at yo'r place when the little wench is out of the road; an' they curls o' hers may stop on her head instead o' being cut off an' thrown in the midden—an' if hoo axes for a bit o' sugar hoo shan't get hit wi' a spoon. Theer now," he summed up sternly.

John scratched his head and reflected. Jinny was his own flesh and blood, and he loved her after

[185]

his fashion; but there was no doubt things were very uncomfortable at home, and if she were not there, there was likely to be more peace. If Joe really meant what he said he might be worth hearkening to.

"Yo' seem to have taken a wonderful fancy to the little lass," he said hesitatingly; "hoo's a good little lass enough, but—I reckon yo're laughin' at me."

"I wer' never more in earnest i' my life," said Joe. "Coom, it mun be one way or t'other. Mun I have her?"

"Oh, you can have her reet enough!" returned the father, with a shamefaced laugh. "Would ye like to live here, Jinny?"

"Eh, I would!" she cried. "Eh, that I would! He shall be my new daddy."

A pang shot through her own father's heart.

"An' yo'll think no more o' the owd one now, I reckon," he said.

Jinny looked from one to the other quickly.

"Two daddies!" she said emphatically, adding after a pause. "Two daddies and no mother that's what I'd like."

"Poor little lass!" said John, with something like a groan. "I reckon thou would; I doubt I can't blame thee."

"'Tis settled, then; I can keep her?" cried Joe eagerly.

"Ah," returned John, backing towards the door, "'tis reet—yo' can keep her"

As the door closed behind him, Jinny returned to her big elbow chair, and once more taking possession

[186]

of it, folded her hands on her lap and announced triumphantly that she was the little missus.

"Bless thy bonny face," cried Joe, "and so thou art."

[187]

THE RULES O' THE HOUSE

JINNY WHITESIDE had kept herself without being beholden to anybody since she found herself an orphan at the age of twenty-eight. She took in washing, she went out charing; during her spare hours she worked in her garden; but her main source of income came from letting her two small spare bedrooms. Her cottage was situated at such a convenient distance from the little wayside station, that the constantly changing porters who earned their living there, invariably became her lodgers.

One sunshiny May day the outgoing porter took leave of his landlady—having been removed to a more important station—and after giving him a hearty Godspeed, she stood watching his departing figure, until she was presently hailed by the voice of the porter who had come to take his place. Looking round, she observed that his eyes were fixed on her with a gaze that was half-amused and half-enquiring. Jinny Whiteside was a pleasant enough sight that bright morning. She wore the bedgown and petticoat which many of her neighbours condemned as old-fashioned, but which she would have scorned to discard; her print sleeves were rolled up high on her sturdy arms, her fair hair shone like satin, and her sunburnt face was

[188]

smooth and comely still in spite of her five-and-thirty years.

"Good day to yo', missus," said the new porter.

"Good day," returned Jinny, removing her arms from the gate on which she had been leaning. "Yo'n coom about the lodging, I reckon?"

"How dun yo' know that?" said he. "Theer's other cotes i' this place besides yo'rs."

"Cotes enough," agreed Jinny. "Yo' can go an' see 'em if yo'n a mind."

"I reckon I'll have a look round here first," retorted he. "'Tis a pratty place, an' I doubt by the looks on yo' yo're wan as 'ud mak' a mon comfortable."

Jinny, with an unmoved face, led the way into the cottage and piloted him upstairs, throwing open the door of the room just vacated by her last lodger. The newcomer stepped past her with a laugh; the highest part of the sloping ceiling touched

his head.

"Not mich room to turn," he observed.

"Yo'n no need to turn, wi'out it's to turn in," replied Jinny, surveying him calmly, with her hand resting on her hip; "or mayhap," she continued reflectively, "yo'd fancy turnin' out. I'm not one to beg and pray yo' to lodge wi' me again your will."

"How mich are you axin'?" said the visitor, grinning appreciatively at this sally.

She named her terms, adding, "Tak' it or leave it."

"I'll tak' it," said he. "Theer, that job's sattled. Now then, missus—Mrs Whiteside; that's yo'r name, isn't it?"

[189]

"*Miss* Whiteside," corrected Jinny, preceding him down the stairs, "I were never wed."

"Oh," said he, with a quizzical look, "what were the lads about? Well, Miss Whiteside, I hope you are satisfied?"'

"I'll let yo' know that at the week-end," said Jinny. "What met yo'r name be?"

"Luke Kershaw," responded he.

"Well, 'tis as good a name as any other. Theer's one thing, Luke, yo' mun keep to the rules o' the house. Yo'll find out about 'em soon enough," she added, in reply to his questioning look. "Fetch yo'r things now, I mun get agate wi' my wark."

When Luke returned dinner was set forth, and his fellow-lodger, who was likewise his fellow- servant at the railway station, was already seated. Miss Whiteside set before them a deep dish, containing thick slices of bacon done after the incomparable rustic fashion, and emitting a most appetising odour; and jerking open the oven-door, produced therefrom a tin full of smoking potatoes, nicely browned in dripping, which she rapidly proceeded to transfer to the hot dish lying ready to hand before the fire.

"My word," exclaimed Luke, rubbing his hands, "this is what yo' may call a gradely do, John. Does yon lass treat yo' so well every day?"

"Noan so ill," interpolated Jinny, "though 'tisn't always bacon day. Now then, pull up, an' we's ax a blessin'"

Luke duly drew his chair to the table, but instead of folding his hands and bending his head after the

[190]

manner of his comrade, stared at Miss Whiteside with a sarcastic smile. Jinny eyed him sharply, dumped a portion of bacon and potatoes on a plate, and remarking with some asperity—

"Christians get sarved first in this cote," handed it to John. Then, turning abruptly to Luke, and keeping her big spoon poised in the air, she added: "Mayhap yo' didn't know sayin' grace at meal-times is one o' my rules."

"Naw, I didn't," admitted Kershaw, still grinning.

"Well, yo' know now, then," resumed Jinny, "an' don't yo' be for forgettin' it."

She helped him to his allotted portion, but, as Luke jealously imagined, curtailed his allowance of bacon fat, though she had generously spooned a large quantity of it into John's plate.

He made no remark, however, and fell to with appetite, remarking after a pause, that the folks at the public hadn't sent up his little beer-barrel yet.

"Thot's another thing," said his landlady, raising her eyes from her plate. "I ought haply to ha' named it this morn, for ye'll ha' the trouble o' takin' back that order now. I don't allow nobry to sup beer i' this place."

"Eh! my word!" cried Luke, supplementing the ejaculation with an oath. Yo' want it all yo'r own way i' this cote, I reckon."

"I don't allow no ill language neither," observed Jinny. "If yo' can't get along wi'out usin' bad words yo' needn't be at the trouble of unpackin' that box o' yo'rn."

"Theer, don't get vexed," put in John, in a stage whisper to his fellow workman. "Humour her a

[191]

bit, mon. Yo'll not rue it at arter, an' so I tell yo'. A mon met search far an' wide afore he found hisself so weel done-to as we find ourselves here."

"What mun I drink then?" cried Luke sullenly. "Dry water!"

"Yo' can have coffee same as the rest on us," returned Jinny. "It's b'ilin' on the fire now, an' 'ull be ready as soon as yo' are, I doubt. Ate yo'r bacon an' don't let's hear so mich talk."

"Is talk forbidden too?" enquired Luke, with a dawning smile.

"Not when it's gradely talk," responded his hostess. "If yo'n anything to say, say it, but I'll not be moidered wi' grumblin's an' growlin's."

John plunged at once into an account of a chance meeting with an old crony of his, who was also, it seemed a friend of Miss Whiteside's, describing with a good deal of dry humour his encounter with this gentleman, who was, it appeared, more nor a little set up since he had shifted to Liverpool. Jinny seemed much tickled, and interrupted the speaker every now and then by a burst of laughter —very fresh and pleasant laughter, her blue eyes twinkling the while in a way that was equally pleasant. She was in such a good humour that at the conclusion of the repast Luke was emboldened to produce his pipe, and, after tentatively polishing it on his coat sleeve, held it out to her. '

"Can I smoke," he asked ingratiatingly, "or is that again the rules too?"

"Well," said Miss Whiteside, surveying him reflectively, "if yo' was any kin o' mine I'd ha' summat to say to yo', but if yo' choose to weer

[192]

yo'r brass on baccy it's nobry's business but yo'r own. It keeps yo' quiet, an' so long as yo' stick to coffee for yo'r drink, theer's no harm in't as far as I can see. Say grace afore yo' leave the table though"

This time Luke, if he did not openly join in the devotions, had the good taste to sit quiet, and to keep his features composed and his eyes downcast till the "Amen," after which he lit his pipe and fell to smoking in silence. John, who was no smoker, adjourned to the bench in the porch, and, drawing a newspaper from his pocket, began to read. Meanwhile Jinny "sided" the things, singing to herself in a high, clear voice. Presently, catching up a bucket, she went out; the creaking of a windlass was heard, and in another minute she returned, the pail brimming over with water.

"Yo'n a well here, I see," observed Luke, removing his pipe. "I couldn't make

out what the screeching was. Yo' are rale owd-fashioned folks hereabouts."

"Noan the war for thot," said Jinny. "Yo' Manchester folks is so stuck-up yo' reckon to find pumps an' taps an' sich like i' th' country. But yo'll ha' to put up wi' us same as yo' find us. When yo'r for cl'anin' yo', yo'll ha' to fill bucket for yo'rsel', same as John yonder."

"Eh, I'll fill it," responded Luke; "'tisn't so very mich trouble. I'd ha' filled yon for yo' too if I'd ha' knowed what yo' was arter." '

"Nay, I'd as soon do for mysel', thank yo'," retorted Jinny. "I never was one as fancied bein' behowden to folks. Theer, 'tis striking one," as

[193]

the cuckoo-clock on the chimney-piece gave out a quavering note, "yo'd best be steppin'."

Luke rose, pocketed his pipe, and followed John, who had already folded up his newspaper and left his place in the porch. They walked away together in silence until they were out of earshot, and then Luke, with a slow grin and a backward jerk of his head towards the cottage, remarked:—

"Th' owd lass seems awful religious."

"She's that," agreed John, "but she's one o' the better mak' for all that. She dunnot preach nowt as she dunnot put i' practice, mon."

"Well, I dunnot howd wi' bein' put upon as how 'tis," retorted Luke defiantly. "I'm one as dunnot like to sup coffee when I've a mind to sup beer, an' to be set down to say grace, same as if I was a babby."

"We're all babbies here," said John, with a grin. "I could laugh by times of a Sunday morn, when we all sets out for church same as the infants in the school."

"Church!" exclaimed Luke, his voice becoming almost falsetto in its indignation. "Tell yo' what— she'll find she's got hold o' the wrong mak' o' chap for they games. 'Twas a rule as I made long ago."

John laughed to himself in a way which increased the new porter's ire.

"What do yo' mean by that?" he enquired sharply; "theer's nought to laugh at as I can see."

"I'm nobbut thinkin' yo'll change yo'r tune afore long, same as the rest on us," returned the other.

[194]

"We all has to give in to Miss Whiteside. Jem Phillips, as has just gone, he thought he'd have his own way about comin' home late fro' the public, but she soon let him know."

"I'll let *her* know then," growled Luke, in the depths of his brown beard.

That very evening his resolution was put to the test. He had preserved an ominous and gloomy silence throughout supper, which, though plentiful and comfortably served, was rendered in a manner distasteful to him by the compulsory devotions which had preceded it; and observed in a loud voice at its conclusion, that he intended to step out to the "Blue Lion." Jinny received the information disapprovingly but calmly.

"I'm not responsible for what yo' do *outside* o' this house; yo' can be as great a fool as yo' like," she said. "As long as yo' coom back sober, an' not too late," she added with emphasis. "Ten's my hour for going to bed; I don't say but what I met stretch a point now an' then, an' stop up till half-past ten, but folks as comes home later nor that 'ull find theirsel's locked out."

"Eleven's closin' time," said Luke, sulkily. "I suppose yo' think yo'rsel' better able to make laws nor the government."

"I makes laws for my own house," responded Miss Whiteside with dignity. "I always kept my 'ouse respectable, an' I'll go on doin' of it. No house can be respectable as takes a lodger out o' they crowd o' shoutin', singin' wastrels as nobbut cooms whoam when they're *turned* out o' the public. If one o' my lodgers is sich a noddy as to go to the public at all

[195]

he mun walk out o' his own free will, an' not wait to be turned out."

"Of his own free will, indeed!" commented Luke, with an angry laugh; "theer's

not mich free will left to any chap as bides i' this cote."

"Please yo'rself an' yo' please me," said Jinny. "I don't want to keep nobry here against their will, but if yo' reckon to lodge here yo' must do same as I tell yo'."

"I've more nor half a mind to tak' yon wench at her word," muttered Kershaw, as he strode away, accompanied by John, whom he had persuaded to join him for a single glass, though, as the latter explained, in a general way he was temperance.

"Yo'll do same as the rest on us—yo'll give in. Eh, mon, yo'll not rue it I tell yo'; I've been a dale 'appier an 'a dale better sin' Miss Whiteside took me in hand. An' Mary Frith, as I'm keepin' coompany with, says often an' often she blesses the day I went to lodge wi' her."

They went into the "Blue Lion," and John duly had his glass, and departed amid the mirth of the assembled company. One facetious person enquired, with apparent innocence, but nudging his neighbour the while, if Luke did not intend to accompany him.

"We know the rules o' the 'ouse," he cried. "Miss Whiteside 'ull be on the lookout for ye, lad."

Luke's only response was to order himself another three-penn'orth; but being further pressed, he announced with great valour his intention of showing yon wumman as she'd not get the better of him. Nevertheless, when ten o'clock drew near, he

[196]

began to fidget. Would Jinny really carry out her threat of locking him out if he did not appear at the appointed time? It was raining heavily. Someone had recently reported, he was tired, and the memory of the snug little room under the roof appealed to him forcibly; moreover he would infallibly become the laughing-stock of the place if Jinny was as good as her word. When another quarter of an hour had passed, therefore, he arose, stretched himself, and remarked with feigned unconcern, that he was dog tired and would be glad to turn in. The wag aforesaid pulled out a huge Waterbury watch.

"Mak' the best use o' yo'r legs, mon," he exclaimed. "Yo' have but ten minutes to do the job. She'll be gettin' the bolt ready 'iled."

Luke deemed it best to feign unconsciousness of the other's meaning, and went

slouching out of the house with as much dignity as was compatible with a devil-may-care aspect. He whistled loudly as he sauntered down the lane, but once he had fairly left the inn and its occupants behind, he took to his heels and ran. As he approached Jinny's cottage, he observed with alarm that there was no light in the kitchen windows, though, as he sent the little gate swinging on its hinges, a faint ray shot through the keyhole of the door. He lifted the latch but the door did not yield. Then he struck the upper panel heavily with his clenched fist.

"Yo'd best open this door, missus," he shouted out, in a voice thick with anger, "else I'd think nothin' at all o' breakin' it down."

There was a grinding of bolts within, and the door

[197]

was flung open, revealing Miss Whiteside, flat candlestick in hand.

"Now look yo' here, missus," cried Luke, propping the door open with his broad shoulder, "a bargain's a bargain! Half-past ten was the time yo' named an' it wants three minutes to that now."

"It does nought o' the kind," responded Jinny indignantly. "Cuckoo's gone five minutes sin'."

"Cuckoo's wrong then," retorted Luke roughly, and he dangled his watch in the flickering light in order to confute her. Just as Jinny was shrilly asserting her belief in the infallibility of her cuckoo, the church clock struck the half-hour.

"Theer! What do yo' mak' o' thot?" cried Luke, restoring his watch to his fob, and stepping past her; "church clock can't be wrong, can it?"

Jinny, unexpectedly confounded, fell to re-bolting the door again without speaking, and her lodger, triumphant in the consciousness of having had the last word, marched up to bed.

Luke was awake early on the following morning, yet, when he came downstairs to draw up a bucketful of water from the well, he found that his hostess must have been astir long before him. The kitchen had been scrubbed and sanded, a bright fire burnt on the hearth, and a most savoury smell of coffee and bacon greeted his nostrils. Moreover, Miss Whiteside, kneeling before the fire, was toasting a large round of bread.

"Yon smells gradely," said Luke, pausing in the doorway.

[198]

Jinny glanced over her shoulder.

"It's yo'," she remarked. "I got yo'r breakfast in good time, knowing yo' have to be on duty o' mornin's."

"Coom," said Kershaw with a gleeful swing of the bucket, "that's reet. I call that proper thoughtful. I reckoned I'd happen have to tak' a bite along wi' me, seein' it's so early."

"Nay," responded Jinny graciously, as she scraped the burnt corner off the toast; "I'm for sendin' a man off to his wark wi' some heart in him—wi'out it's too early for him to have a appetite. Poor John 'ull have to come back for his breakfast. I couldn't expect the lad to be hungry at five o'clock i' the mornin', though I made him a nice cup o' tea before he went, an' I'll do the same by yo' next week when 'tis yo'r turn to be the early bird."

"Well, yo're something like a stirrin' body—I'll say that!" cried Luke approvingly; and he hurried out to the well, filled his bucket, and performed his ablutions, all with the least possible loss of time, for really the sights and smells in that comfortable kitchen made him feel most uncommonly hungry.

Jinny had finished toasting the second round by the time he appeared, and was covering the table with a coarse, clean, white cloth.

"Now then," cried Luke in high good humour, "if the meal's ready the mon is."

He set a chair in Jinny's place, and fetched another for himself, and was about to sit down, when Jinny, who had methodically arranged plates

[199]

and cups upon the table, glanced at him reprovingly.

"Prayers first," she remarked.

"Well, I'm ready—fire away," grunted Luke, bending his head and folding his hands in the approved fashion.

"Grace is one thing," observed Jinny, "an' prayers another. Yo'll go down on your knees, Luke Kershaw, along o' me an' say a word to yo'r Maker afore yo' breaks bread i' this house."

"I'm d—d if I do!" shouted Luke, thumping the table. "I'm about tired o' bein' missus'd an' so I tell yo'. Pray away as much as yo' like, Miss Whiteside—I'll step outside an' yo' can call me when yo're ready."

Jinny shot a glance at him, and then, with the precision which characterised all her actions, removed one plate, one cup and saucer, and one knife and one fork from the table.

"Them as hasn't the decency to thank the Giver, dunnot want the gifts," she observed, and flopped down on her knees by the settle in the corner.

"What mak' o' talk's that?" enquired Luke somewhat shamefacedly.

"Yo' know well enough," responded she. "This here's a Christian house, I say, an' I'll not set at table wi' nobry as dunnot begin the day as a Christian should."

Luke made a step towards the door, and then glanced back at the hearth. The two rounds of toast standing at right angles to each other were

[200]

as brown as brown could be; the bacon was done to perfection.

"A mon must eat," he said, speaking more to himself than to her. "A chap can't do his work wi'out he's fed, but I'll look out for another lodgin' afore the day goes by."

Jinny, with her head buried in her hands, was too much absorbed to heed him. Luke, after another moment's hesitation, came shambling across the kitchen, and popped himself down beside her.

"Dunno be too long, that's all," he observed in a wrathful whisper.

Miss Whiteside glanced at him between her fingers, and then obligingly began to pray aloud. The devotions in which Luke was invited, or rather commanded, to share, were not of very long duration, and something about the simple, familiar words evoked in him an unwonted sense of shame, which was increased by Jinny's comment on concluding:

"'Twere scarce worth while to make such a fuss, were it?"

He relinquished the idea of seeking lodgings elsewhere, and moreover unpacked and stowed away his few possessions with a certain sense of satisfaction. Jinny herself came upstairs before he had finished, and immediately took possession of such garments as required mending. The day passed peacefully away. Luke, in fact, was lamb-like throughout the ensuing week, not only as regarded saying his grace and refraining from protest when the need for beer at the midday

[201]

meal made itself felt, but even returning home from the "Blue Lion" before the church clock struck ten. All in fact went smoothly until Saturday evening when Jinny announced, in her sharp, imperative manner, that she expected "both lads" to be ready for church at a quarter to eleven sharp.

"It'll take us all that time to get theer," she observed, with the corner of her eye on Luke.

"Yo'd best look sharp an' see that yo're ready," observed the latter, addressing himself to John.

"He knows right enough," said Miss Whiteside quickly. "It's yo' as 'ull have to look sharp."

"I'm not goin'," rejoined Kershaw firmly.

"Nay, but you are," responded Jinny, uplifting her voice. "'Tis the rule o' the house. I've never had a lodger yet as didn't go to church."

"Yo'll have one now, then," retorted Luke, tapping the ashes out of his pipe and rising.

"There's sausages for breakfast to-morrow," remarked Jinny, with apparent irrelevance.

Luke burst out laughing:—

"Yo' think I'm a child,I doubt," he said. "No breakfast for a bad lad. Well, it won't hurt me to go wi'out my breakfast for once. I'm not goin' to church—I tell yo' plain. Yo' have yo'r rules an' I have mine. I fell out wi' a parson once as took on hissel' to interfere wi' me, an' I says to him what I says to yo'—'I'll never set foot 'ithin a church again'—an' I wunnot."

He got up and went out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Jinny was nonplussed for once; but nevertheless, following her elementary

[202]

mode of procedure, prepared such an appetising breakfast on the following morning, as she hoped would touch the heart of even the most hardened sinner. Luke, however, did not put himself in the way of being softened; he rose even earlier than his landlady; dressed himself sullenly in his working clothes, and went off for a solitary ramble along the shore.

The Rector met Miss Whiteside on her way to church.

"What, only one companion!" he cried, laughing.

"Only one, sir," said Jinny, dropping a staid curtsey."

"How is that? I thought there were no black sheep in your fold."

"Step a bit up the road, John, do," remarked Jinny in a loud aside; as soon as this injunction had been obeyed, she turned to the Rector. "I doubt my new lodger's a black 'un—leastways not altogether black. He keeps all my rules nobbut this 'un. He've dropped beer an' bad words, an' he says his prayers an' grace an' all, an' he comes a-whoam by ten—but he says 'tis *his* rule not to go to church—I don't know how to mak' 'un do it, that's the worst on't. I've mended all his clothes this week so I can't get even wi' un wi' leavin' 'em in holes. He didn't have no breakfast this mornin'— but I can't go on cuttin' off his victuals for long. The mon works 'ard, an' wants 'em."

The Rector laughed.

"Have you ever tried persuasion?" he said. "Sometimes when threats fail coaxing prevails. He can't be a bad fellow if he does all you say.

"Well, I wouldn't say he was bad," she agreed

[203]

meditatively. "I never thought o' tryin' persuasion," she added. " My way is to serve 'em out if they don't do what I tell 'em."

The Rector laughed again:

"'A spoonful of honey catches more flies than a pint of vinegar'," he remarked; "have you ever heard that saying?"

Jinny had not, but conceded that it met be true enough; she followed John with a pensive look.

Kershaw did not return for dinner, nor yet for tea; he did not, in fact, put in an appearance until late in the evening, when, if truth be told, he was considerably the worse for drink. He went straight upstairs to bed without pausing a moment in the kitchen.

Next morning, when he came in for his breakfast, this being his week for early duty at the station, he expected a severe lecture, but Jinny set his food before him with a pleasant smile.

"Oh," growled Luke sarcastically, "yo'll gie me summat to eat to-day, will yo'? Well, I can do wi' a bit at arter yesterday. Bread and cheese were my dinner yesterday. I had to walk nigh upon six mile afore I could get it."

"Yo'r dinner was waitin' for yo' here," responded Jinny, with mild dignity. "'Twas keepin' hot for yo' all the arternoon."

"I thought haply yo' was goin' to punish me by makin' me clem all day. Yo' was some mad wi' me, wasn't yo?"

"Nay, nay," replied Jinny, still mildly, "not mad. I were nobbut sorry."

All that week she redoubled her attentions to

Luke, and when Saturday night came he was astonished and abashed when she put a little parcel into his hands. It contained a tie of the brightest hues and the richest texture obtainable for a shilling.

"If yo'll weer that to-morrow, Luke," she said graciously, "I'll feel proper proud steppin' along aside of yo'."

Luke gazed hesitatingly, first at the tie, then at Jinny's beaming face; then folding up the little packet he tendered it back to her.

"I couldn't tak' it on false pertences," he faltered. "I'm no church-goer."

Jinny swallowed down what appeared to be a lump in her throat. "Keep it all the

same, an' weer it to-morrow," she said. "Theer's one thing yo' can do. Yo'll not ha' no objections to waitin' outside the gate for me, an' walkin' home along of me?"

Luke eyed her suspiciously, but consented after a moment's hesitation, reflecting that she could not possibly force him to go in.

He duly sat on the wall outside the church on the following day, and escorted Miss Whiteside home, feeling somewhat ashamed of himself, as he noted her chastened air and heard the heavy sigh which now and then escaped from her.

That afternoon, however, her continued affability emboldened him to make a request on his own account. It was such a lovely day, and he was free —would not Miss Whiteside go for a walk with him? Jinny, startled, began to refuse with her usual abruptness, but checked herself midway, and consented instead.

[205]

They strolled out together along a narrow path, which led past meadows and cornfields to a little wood. While they sat there, resting on a mossy bank, the church bells began to ring, now on one side of them, now on the other. Luke glanced sarcastically at his companion.

"I reckon yo're wishin' yo'rself theer an' not here?"

Jinny looked up with a start.

"Wheer?" she asked, and turned very red. Luke stared, laughed, and then suddenly grew serious, blushing too. Silence reigned for a moment and then he said:

"I doubt I'd best tell yo' why I'm so set again church-goin'. 'Tisn't altogether along o' not wishin' to be put upon. When I were a young chap a parson comed between me an' the lass I were acoortin'."

" Oh, indeed," said Jinny distantly.

"Ah, he did. She was a. sarvent lass an' couldn't get out above once a fortnight. I didn't see so mich on her I could afford to lose the time she spent in church, and parson he barged at her for not goin'. Well, I geet my back set up along of it, an' I towd her one day she mun mind me an' not parson. Well she wouldn't, so I gave up a-walkin' wi' her, an' she took up wi' another chap, an' I promised mysel' I'd never go to church again as long as I lived—an' I've kept my word."

"Well, if yo'll excuse me, I think yo're nothing but a noddy!" cried Jinny, with decidedly more vinegar than honey in her tone. She sprang to her feet, shaking out her dress.

[206]

"I doubt I will go to church arter all," she added.

"Nay, a promise is a promise," returned Luke, catching her by the arm. "Sit yo' down again, an' tell me why yo' reckon I'm a noddy."

"Well, a body can't think it anything but foolish to go on a-keepin' up spite along of a wench same's that," cried she, twitching away her arm, but making no further effort to leave him. "She couldn't be worth mich if she could go takin' up wi' another chap so quick."

"That's true," agreed Luke. "She was in a hurry to forget me."

"She mun ha' been a leet-minded snicket not worth frettin' arter," pursued Jinny warmly. "An' she can't ha' had a bit o' sperrit neither. She ought to ha' stood up to yo' an' showed yo' yo' was doin' her no harm an' yo'rself no good. If I'd ha' bin in her shoes——" She stopped short, colouring again to the roots of her hair.

"Set yo' down again, do," said Luke persuasively. "What 'ud yo' ha' done if yo'd been in her shoes, Jinny?" '

Jinny sat down, but for once in her life was dumbfounded; she did not dare raise her eyes to Luke's face.

"Theer's no knowin' what yo' met ha' done wi' me if yo'd ha' bin in Mary's shoes," he went on. "Yo've a wonderful manageable way wi' yo', Miss Whiteside."

"I don't seem able to manage yo' though," said Jinny inconsequently. "I've had lodgers, a-mony of 'em, an' I've took a interest in 'em all, an' they allus did what I wanted—all of 'em, nobbut yo'. Yo're

[207]

the first as ever refused to do what I axed yo'."

"Coom," cried Luke indignantly. "I'm sure I've gived in to yo' more'n I've ever

gived in to a wumman before. I've done all as yo' axed me— nay, yo' didn't ax me, yo' ordered me, an' I'm not one as likes to be ordered by a wumman—but I gived in all but the one thing—I've gived yo' my rayson for that."

"'Twasn't no rayson at all," said Jinny. "Coom now, Luke, yo' owned up to me about that a minute ago. Coom, I'll not order yo' no more—I'll ax yo' gradely—happen yo'll do it if I ax yo' proper?"

Her blue eyes were shining with eagerness, her lips were parted with an arch smile.

"Happen I would," admitted Luke. "Let's hear yo' do it." '

"Well then Luke, ha' done wi' foolishness," she said in her most persuasive tones. "Promise yo'll coom to church same as any other Christian."

"That's not axin' me proper," said Luke. "I care nowt at all about any other Christian. Say it this way, Jinny—'Will yo' coom to church wi' me?"

"Will yo' coom to church," she began falteringly, and then broke off for Luke had seized her hand—"Whativer are yo' drivin' at?"

"Theer, I'll ax the question mysel'," cried Luke. "Will *yo'* go to church wi' *me*, Jinny? If yo'll gie me your promise, I'll walk i' your footsteps all my days, my dear."

Jinny presumably gave her promise, for when they presently emerged from the wood they were

[208]

walking arm-in-arm. Whether he subsequently fulfilled his resolve of following meekly in her footsteps, is a moot point, for Luke was a person of strong individuality; but Jinny liked him none the less for that, and one thing is certain: she saw to it that he kept the rules of the house.

[209]

LADY LUCY

JOHN COTLEY closed his account-book—blotting the last entry carefully, for he was an orderly man——and laid it in its accustomed place in the drawer of his high

desk. Then, rising from the tall stool on which he had been seated for an hour and more, he passed his hands across his brow, and looked through the mullioned window at the fast darkening landscape.

"It grows late," quoth he. "Molly will be in a taking at my keeping supper waiting so long, but I must stretch my legs first, after all this sitting."

As he stood in the wainscotted hall without, in the act of taking down his hat, he was startled by loud rapping at the great wooden gates of the yard, which had been closed and bolted for the night, together with the sound of several voices raised in unison. He threw open the hall-door and stood for a moment on the threshold, listening; and the rapping was repeated, and the voices called—some gruffly and some shrilly:—

"Let us in—you there! Let us in! What, is everyone in the place dead or deaf?"

John went slowly down the flagged path between the lavender hedges, and began with a grating, grinding sound to draw back the heavy bolts, the voices on the other side of the stout oak portals keeping up, meanwhile, a running commentary of

[210]

impatient ejaculations, intermingled with little bursts of laughter.

"Now, good fellow, who ever you may be, put a little goodwill into your efforts."

"Fie! what a disagreeable noise! Sir, 'tis to be wished that your master would expend a pennyworth of oil on this screeching ironwork."

"La! what a time the rascal takes! Pray, Hodge, or Giles, or whatever thy name may be, tell us who lives here. We had thought you deaf; and now, faith, it would seem as if you were dumb."

"Nay, Tufty, do not distract the poor yokel. These rustics have not wit enough to attend to more than one thing at a time. Tug away at thy bolt, good man, and let us in; it grows chilly here."

At length, with a final shriek, the last bolt was withdrawn from its rusty hasp, and the doors parted in the middle under John's hand; then, removing his round hat, he was preparing, with his usual gravity, to enquire the reason of this unexpected visit, when, with many expressions of relief and satisfaction, a party of what seemed to be

very grand folk brushed past him into the enclosure. There was a rustling of silken skirts, a waving of long feathers—a diffusion of sweet strange odours—such odours as had never yet greeted the honest country nostrils of John Cotley, though they would have been familiar enough to any frequenter of high company in town; odours of powder and pomatum, and the scented bags that women of fashion lay among their tuckers. Thus the ladies filed past, one, two, and three; and then the gentlemen came

[211]

—very fine gentlemen, indeed. John could see, even in the dim light, the glitter of gold lace and sparkling buckles, the pale gleam of silk-stockinged legs and powdered heads.

"La, how sweet it smells," cried one of the ladies. "What is it? Roses, think you—gilly-flowers? Nay, 'tis lavender! See these ghostly hedges are all of lavender."

"Madam," cried one of the gallants, "'twould please me better could I smell some savoury stew. Ghostly, did you say? I vow the whole place looks ghostly. Not a light in all those ancient windows."

"Pray, you there, you, fellow; leave the gate and try and find thy tongue. Does anybody live here, and is it possible to obtain refreshment and a night's lodging?"

"I live here," said John, somewhat ruffled by the tone. "As to your second question, before answering it I will first ask one or two of my own. What may this company be, and why do they seek admittance into my house at such an hour?"

"Why, what a churl is this!"

"By gad, 'tis his house, Harry. We've been discussing the place in the presence of its owner; but we must needs be civil, it seems, if we would dine and sleep under cover. Sir, you behold a noble company of travellers, or, if you prefer it, a travelling company of noblemen and ladies, journeying from Bristol Hotwells, where they have been sojourning for the good of their health. Their coach, having taken a wrong turn, has inconveniently broken down on that abominable mixture of marsh

[212]

and stones which you are pleased in these parts to term a road. As it is late and the

ladies are hungry and tired, the gentlemen athirst, the best horse lame, the front wheel damaged, and the postboy drunk, we deem it better to push no further to-night. Therefore, finding no inn within a radius of ten miles, and descrying your house—which seemed to us a building of some importance—we have come to throw ourselves upon your hospitality for the night."

"Sir," returned John simply, "I am sorry for your misfortune, and will do my best to entertain you, though, being a plain man and a bachelor, I fear the accommodation I can offer you is not such as these ladies are accustomed to."

"Well said, man! you can but do your best," cried the gentleman called Harry, clapping John on his brawny shoulder. "Come, lead the way, and we'll all promise not to be over fastidious Something to drink."

John led the way into the house, baring his head as he passed the ladies, and the party trooped after him into a panelled parlour, where the dim outlines of cumbrous articles of furniture might be discerned in the dusk. Drawing a tinder-box from his pocket, he struck a light, and having ignited the candles on the mantelshelf, turned to face his visitors.

The flickering light revealed to them the sunburnt face and well-knit figure of a man of about five-and-twenty, with brown hair and brown eyes, and an expression of shy kindliness.

As he looked in bewilderment from one to the

[213]

other of his guests, dazzled by the medley of fine clothes and trinkets, here marking the gleam of white teeth, there a pair of dancing eyes, yonder the flutter of powdered locks, out of the confusion there seemed to detach itself—one face. A small face, round which the hair fell in natural curls untouched by powder; laughing eyes, a mouth at once sweet and roguish; a bloom that even John's unsophisticated eyes instantly recognised as being wholly natural, yet such as he had never beheld on the solid cheeks of the rustic damsels of the neighbourhood.

Forgetful of his good manners, Cotley stared mutely at this lovely face, until recalled to himself by a murmur of amusement from the rest of the party.

"When you have recovered your tongue, mine host, we shall be glad if you will introduce yourself," remarked one of the gentlemen. "I myself must own to no little curiosity about you. Pray, man, are you a hermit, that you live thus in what seems to be absolute solitude? Split me, if I've seen a living soul about the place except yourself!"

"Sir," returned the other, with a start and a blush, "my name is John Cotley, at your service. I am, as I think is easily seen, a gentleman of somewhat limited means. Had you come before sundown you might have observed a few of my labourers busy on the premises—when they leave, I own, with the exception of my old housekeeper, I am alone in the house." Looking round on the curious and surprised faces he added, stiffly, with a certain boyish pride: "My family met with reverses before

[214]

I succeeded to this small estate, and, if I am to live here at all, I must perforce practise great economy and see but little company."

"Poor fellow!" said a soft voice, which was not meant to reach his ears; but John heard nevertheless, and marked that the bright eyes of the youthful beauty were fixed on him 'with an expression at once of interest and compassion.

But the others were not so considerate—

"Economy!" quoth Tufty, with a grimace.

"Sir," cried Harry earnestly, "you have my sympathy, but I trust for all our sakes that there is at least some drinkable beer to be had on your premises."

"Or at any rate a dish of tea," put in one of the elder ladies. "Pray, sir, let the matter have your attention, for I assure you we are positively faint."

"A roast fowl would not come amiss," added the other matron, whose appearance was indeed suggestive of good-living, for her large person seemed to be bursting out of her silk sacque, and her face was as plump as it was good-humoured. "Such a thing should easy be come by in the country—a platter of ham and eggs with it."

She paused, looking almost beseechingly at her bewildered entertainer.

"Speed, sir," chimed in Tufty, "speed—despatch for heaven's sake!"

"Sirs,—ladies, I go at once," cried John, starting towards the door. "Meanwhile

be seated, I beg. I regret with all my heart I have no good entertainment to offer you, but I will do my best."

He hastened from the room, shouting lustily for

[215]

'"Molly,"and, after what seemed to the impatient guests an interminable delay, the heavy door was thrown open, and an old woman entered, carrying a tablecloth. The master of the house followed, bearing a tray, on which, in the midst of a shining array of plates and glasses, knives and forks, a toby jug of goodly proportions occupied the place of honour. They proceeded, awkwardly enough, to lay the table, and the housekeeper, having retired, presently returned, staggering under the weight of another huge tray, on which were set forth such homely viands as the house could provide: a round of cold salt beef, a crusty loaf, a dish of ham and eggs. When all was set upon the table John stood hesitating a moment, and then going straight up to the owner of the unpowdered curls begged leave to hand her to a chair.

" 'Fore George, the manners of these country bumpkins want mending as well as their gates!" cried Tufty. "Sir, do you not see that Her Grace is yet standing?" and he waved his hand in the direction of the stout lady already alluded to.

"Her Grace!" stammered John, somewhat taken aback, and then he added bluntly—

"Madam, I will come back for you so soon as I have conducted this lady to the table."

"Why, sir," returned she, with a jolly laugh, "I protest I like your unceremoniousness. 'Tis a refreshing change. And after all you could not be expected to divine my quality. 'Tis not often, I wager, that you entertain a Duchess in this solitary place."

"Madam," responded John gravely," I must own that I have never before been privileged to offer hospitality

[216]

to persons of such consequence; but I can truthfully say that my desire to serve you is not more ardent than before my knowledge of your station. I would fain do all in my power to succour and entertain any lady in distress."

"Very prettily said," returned she. "There, my good sir, we will dispense with ceremony for to-night. Pray sit by Lady Lucy since your unbiassed choice has fallen on her. My friend, Lord Tuftington, will escort me; and you, Lady Olivia, will no doubt allow Sir Harry to be your companion."

"Faith, madam, so that we may at once attack that round of beef, I have no objection to make," responded Lady Olivia, hurrying towards the board.

Meanwhile Molly stood gaping, and John himself was a little taken aback on hearing of the exalted rank of all his self-invited guests. Yet, with a certain natural dignity, he took his place as master of the house, and proceeded to dispense hospitality.

He soon found, indeed, that these noble folks were as affable in manner as gay in humour. Sir Harry proceeded to pour out foaming beakers of ale for as many of the company as desired to partake of it; and, somewhat to John's surprise, everyone with the exception of Lady Lucy accepted this homely beverage; even Her Grace the Duchess quaffed her tumbler with unfeigned approval. Lord Tuftington served the ham and eggs, and Lady Olivia, with great good-humour and a firm hand, cut slices from the crusty loaf which she laughingly tossed across the table to each member of the party.

Meanwhile Lady Lucy sat toying with an egg, speaking little, though every now and then her face

[217]

lit up with smiles over some ridiculous sally from Tufty or Sir Harry. Once or twice John caught a curious glance shot at him from beneath her long curling dark lashes, and with each of them he felt as though that manly heart of his, hitherto untouched by love for woman, were being drawn from out his bosom. Fain would he have sat by her side in mute ecstacy, but his guests plied him incessantly with questions, and appeared to be excessively diverted by the simplicity of his answers.

All at once the Duchess threw down her knife and fork with a little scream—

"Lord!" she cried, "we have left that booby of a postboy to his own devices.

What if he should have made off with all our property! Quick, somebody, see to him!"

"Nay, Duchess," returned Tufty, with his mouth full, "the fellow was dead drunk, and the best horse dead lame—they will stick in the mud safe enough till morning."

"But surely our valises should be brought in?" cried Lady Olivia. "If by any accident the fellow should abscond, we shall arrive in town without so much as a change of linen."

"Madam, we are all in the like plight," observed Sir Harry; "and in any case, if the lad had given us the slip he would be miles away by now, and it would be useless to pursue him."

"You cannot, I am sure, be serious," said Lady Lucy, looking from one to the other with large, startled eyes. "You would not be so inhuman as to leave the poor man exposed to the weather

[218]

all night And the horses—think of the horses. Surely they too need food and shelter."

Neither of the gentlemen seemed in the least touched by her appeal, and, though the Duchess and Lady Olivia continued loud protestations and entreaties, both Sir Harry and Lord Tuftington continued their repast without offering to move.

John looked from one to the other of these worthies with astonished disapproval. Indeed, from the first, both gentlemen had impressed him unfavourably. Their voices were loud, their laughter excessive: Lord Tuftington interlarded his conversations with strange expletives, while Sir Harry helped himself perpetually from the beer-jug. He was surprised to observe on nearer view that the latter's dress was at once tawdry and slovenly; his gold lace was tarnished, his ruffles soiled; as he held the jug aloft on one occasion, John actually detected a rent in his fine peach-coloured coat.

After a pause, broken only by the lamentations of the elder ladies, Lucy turned hesitatingly to her host—

"Do you not think, sir," she said pathetically, "that it is cruel to leave the poor horses standing in the road all night?"

"Ma'am," cried John, starting up, "with your leave I will at once go and see after

them."

"And bring my valise, good sir," besought Lady Olivia—"the smallest valise in the boot."

"Pray, Mr Cotley, try to bring all our property—all at least that is portable."

"Certainly, ladies," returned John, "I shall be happy to carry some of the baggage myself, and

[219]

to direct your servant to bring the remainder hither."

"I am obliged to you, sir," replied the Duchess, with a somewhat embarrassed air, "but you must know that with the exception of the postboy we are unattended at present."

"'Tis a pity, indeed, my dear," put in Lady Olivia, "that we should have left all our servants behind."

"But, ladies, remember," put in Sir Harry, with half-tipsy gravity, "that we are travelling *incog*."

"Perhaps the postboy may help me," said John.

When he reached the scene of the catastrophe, however, he found the fellow so hopelessly intoxicated, that it was clear no help was to be expected from him, and he was forced to seek assistance from some of his own work-people who lived in a little hamlet about a mile from his house. It was more than an hour, therefore, before he returned home, himself leading the horses, while a couple of stout lads staggered in his wake laden with the ladies' luggage, the post-boy having by his directions been lifted inside the empty vehicle, which had been drawn up under the hedge for the night.

He found the parlour empty, save for Sir Harry, who lay stretched half across the table, while upstairs all was merry bustle. Old Molly was distractedly hastening from one room to another with her warming-pan, while Lord Tuftington stalked behind her, laden with warm blankets and piles of lavender scented sheets. The ladies had volunteered to make the beds, and with much chatter and

[220]

laughter the work proceeded. They often changed their minds with regard to the apartment which each intended to occupy, and the trunks were in consequence dragged from room to room; some half unpacked disgorging their finery in the passage—in fact such a scene of confusion had never before been witnessed within the quiet walls of Cotley Grange.

But at last some measure of order was restored: the babel of voices and laughter ceased; the last door banged for the last time: the last light was extinguished, and by-and-by all the house was still.

John, too, retired to bed, but only to toss feverishly from side to side, with throbbing head and leaping pulses. Now he would thrill with delight as he recalled the kind look which Lady Lucy had cast upon him when he bade her good night: now a pang of despair would pierce his very soul as he thought of how she would leave on the morrow, and of how, in all probability, he would never set eyes on her again.

He rose with dawn and went out of doors; his men would soon arrive, but, before allotting them their daily tasks, he sought to regain some measure of his usual composure. Pacing up and down the garden at the rear of the house—if in truth the sweet wilderness of tangled greenery and lush grass, and borders where flowers and weed embraced each other might be dignified with such a name—he inhaled the pure chill air of the September morning, throwing open coat and waistcoat as though the fresh blast could allay the fever in his breast. The

[221]

swallows were already on the wing, now circling aloft against the pearly sky, now dipping until they appeared to brush the dewy grass; a robin was piping on a lichened apple-bough, and to poor John Cotley the sweet shrill notes seemed to carry a message at once poignant and delightful.

"Why did she come here!" he groaned; and in another moment he was asking himself distractedly how he had contrived to exist before seeing her.

The sun had not yet risen high in the heavens, and the dew still lay in silver sheets upon the meads, when Lady Lucy, having left her chamber, was minded to take

to take a walk abroad. She had protected her head with a scarf which was lifted by the strong autumn breeze, so that its fringes and her clustering curls were alike set dancing; and she had thrust her little feet into thin slippers with very high heels, most unfit for the wanderings on which she was bent; but nevertheless, having first tripped down the flagged path between the lavender hedges, and found the gates still closed, she had stolen up the weed-grown track that led round the house, and made her way through the shrubberies, laughing as the wet leaves flapped in her face, and peering round her with curious delighted eyes. And suddenly, pushing through an overgrown arch of yew and holly that had once been clipped into fantastic shapes, she came face to face with John Cotley, standing stock-still in the middle of the alley, with one hand pressed to his brow and the other clutching at his bosom. Then what must Lady Lucy do on her perceiving the young man's violent start and

[222]

blush, but burst into the sweetest. gayest little trill of laughter, while poor John first reddened to the roots of his disordered hair, and then grew pale as death, and drew his coat and waistcoat together hastily, and stammered at last as she laughed on—

"Madam, I crave your pardon—I—I humbly crave your pardon."

"For what, my good sir?" cried she. "For taking a morning stroll in your own grounds, or for being discovered in such a profound reverie? Nay, sir, it is rather I who should ask pardon for breaking in so suddenly on what seemed to be very serious reflections, and for laughing so rudely. But I vow it was droll and unexpected to find you could assume so tragic an air—and then your start—your look of surprise! Pray, sir, did you think I had fallen from the clouds?"

John blushed again, and, finding that she continued to look upon him smilingly and very kindly, took courage, and said gently—

"'Twas folly in me to appear surprised, madam, for I believe that angels do sometimes descend from the clouds."

"Vastly well, sir," said she. "Pray where did you learn to pay compliments? I had thought they were not easily come by in the country."

"Nay, madam," sighed poor John, ruefully. "I fear I should prove a poor scholar

were I to attempt to learn the art of flattery. In saying that you appear to me to be an angel I did but speak the truth."

Lady Lucy stopped laughing, and hung down

[223]

her head in a manner quite inexplicable to John Cotley.

"An angel!" she said. "Ah, sir, what do you know of me."

"Only what my eyes have shown me, madam," said John, and then emboldened by a certain timid protest in her downcast face, he added warmly, "only what my heart has told me."

And in some unaccountable fashion John Cotley's tongue was loosed, and he found himself telling Lady Lucy all manner of strange things. About his loneliness, and of how during his somewhat melancholy life he had never hitherto met with a woman whom he could love; of how at first sight of her he had fallen a victim to one of those sudden passions of which he had sometimes heard, but in which he had never hitherto believed; of how absolutely hopeless he knew it to be, what misery, and yet what joy. His face glowed as he spoke, and his eyes were bright with a kind of fierce triumph: she should hear, she should know—at least she should know.

Her colour came and went as she listened; now her eyes were drawn to John's, as though fascinated, now they sought the ground; once or twice she caught her breath with a little gasp.

"But a few moments ago," said John, "I was telling myself that I wished I had never seen you; and now, though I may never see you again, I thank Heaven that this hour at least is mine. One hour, madam, out of a lifetime; it is not much, but at least it is something to look back on."

"To look back on." she repeated, with an odd expression,

[224]

and an attempt at lightness. "Surely, sir, it is better to look forward. I, for one, care not for giving way to gloomy thoughts. The whole world lies before us. I, you must know,

am about to be introduced to it for the first time: why should not you, too, seek to make a figure in it? Why bury yourself for ever in this solitude?"

"Why, madam," cried John excitedly, "would you have me seek my fortune in London? Oh, if I thought there were the slightest hope—"

"Nay, good friend, I spoke not of hope," returned she; "our ways, as you very truly say, lie apart, and perhaps it is better so; were you to meet me in town, you might think more lowly of me than you do at present."

"How could that be?" he exclaimed eagerly, adding, however, despondently, "but it is folly for me even to talk of such a thing. How could I, plain John Cotley, the unpretending country gentleman, with threadbare clothes and light purse, hope to make my way into the circles which you will adorn. You, who will be courted by the highest in the land, admired by all the fashionable world. Dukes, I suppose," cried the poor fellow, gloomily, "Dukes and Marquises will be fighting for the privilege of kissing your hand."

"Oh yes," she rejoined, with a careless shrug, "there will be plenty of that, I dare say." Then, seeing his melancholy face, she added with an arch smile. "But London is a large place, so large that even besides the fashionable folk of whom you speak there might be room for honest John Cotley. And what though there be a whole horde of noble

[225]

admirers coming to Court and applaud me! Is a worthy country gentleman for that obliged to hold aloof? Sir, I tell you in the great world of London there are many places where a man may see the object of his admiration. There are, to begin with, places of entertainment, such as Vauxhall, Ranelagh, and the like, and then there are the playhouses. Now, as a matter of fact, did you chance to be at Sadler's Wells Theatre on this day se'en-night you would see me there."

"At a playhouse!" cried simple John, all in a turmoil of emotion. "Madam, I have never been at such a place in my life. My parents held that play-going was folly, if not worse, and indeed even were I so minded I have had no opportunities of frequenting such resorts. But to see *you*—if I thought there were a hope of seeing you— But no, you

are mocking me. Even if I were to go there, how should I venture to intrude my company upon you?"

"You are faint-hearted, in fact," said she, while a wicked little dimple came and went about her lips, "and you remember the adage, '*Faint heart*'—"

John looked at her bewildered, enraptured, and mystified. Her words appeared to encourage what had seemed to him a perfectly wild and preposterous hope, but her manner was at once gay and repellant. As he stood earnestly considering her in the endeavour to fathom her meaning, she ceased laughing, and fixed her eyes upon him with a gaze that was serious and almost sad.

"Nay," she said, "I speak foolishly. Do not come to town, Mr Cotley; better remain here in your tranquil and solitary home, and think upon me sometimes

[226]

kindly. Think of this hour, an hour that is all peace and innocence and brightness. Come, shall we walk? I have a mind to explore these alleys."

She drew her scarf more closely round her, and looked about her, her face bright with a child's curiosity and pleasure, her momentary gravity forgotten. "Oh, the roses," she cried, and clapped her hands. "And those sober old gilly-flowers, how sweet they are. And what a forest of Michaelmas daisies! Pray, Mr Cotley, will you gather me a posy?"

It is needless to say how eagerly John fulfilled her behest, and with what a distracting mixture of pleasure and longing he saw her fasten the flowers at her waist.

Slowly they paced about the moss-grown paths. Once she stumbled, and he enquired breathlessly if she would take his arm. What wondering bliss when she agreed; how that strong arm of his thrilled under the light pressure! What a sweet, sweet, brief dream it was! All too brief, indeed, for while they yet wandered side by side among the sunlit green a shrill voice was heard calling from the house, and Lucy, withdrawing her hand from his arm, gave a little impatient sigh.

"They are calling me; I must go in."

"Wait a moment," cried John peremptorily; his voice was hoarse, his eyes seemed to burn in his pale face, "let us part here, since we must part."

She, too, had grown pale; but, after a moment's pause, seemed to struggle against the contagion of his emotion.

"Pooh," she said, with a little jarring note in her

[227]

voice, "who knows? After all we may meet yet. Some folks say the world is a small place."

"No, no," he cried fiercely, "'tis you, yourself, who have said it, madam. You go out of my life this day; my one hour is wellnigh over, but a moment of it remains. Let it at least be full; give me something to remember it by."

Trembling in spite of herself, she looked at him, as much in earnest now as he:

"What would you have?" she said almost in a whisper. "This?"

She detached one of the roses from her nosegay and held it out to him with shaking fingers.

"I would have more, madam," he cried, and, bending took both her hands in his and kissed them many times with a vehemence which startled her.

"Good-bye," she said, and her slight form wavered like a reed, "good-bye, poor John, dear John, try to think well of me always. And now, let me go."

But John had fallen on his knees in the green bower, and his face, as he uplifted it, seemed bright with a kind of white radiance.

"Oh, love," he cried in a broken whisper, "love, stoop to me!"

He drew her gently towards him, and she did not resist, and they kissed each other shyly, tenderly, wonderingly, as the first man and woman may have kissed beneath the blossoming trees of Eden.

Then the shrill cry came nearer, and there was a sound of pattering feet, and in a moment she was gone, and John Cotley was left alone to awake from his dream.

[228]

One week after the events which had so disturbed the placid current of John Cotley's life, that unwise young gentleman might have been discerned making his way

into Sadler's Wells Play-house amid a crowd of more seasoned play-goers.

He had struggled fruitlessly against the overpowering desire to see Lady Lucy again; everything indeed had seemed to point out the folly of his enterprise; the prejudices of a lifetime, the oft-repeated axioms of those whom he had loved and lost, his own diffidence, the absolute hopelessness of his passion, but none of these considerations had been strong enough to outweigh the memory of the girl's tantalising words: "Did you chance to be at Sadler's Wells Playhouse on this day se'en-night you would see me there!" And then again, "You remember the adage, 'Faint heart '—."

Surely no one could say that John Cotley's heart was faint this evening; on the contrary, it beat so loud and strong that he wondered his neighbours did not turn to look at him. When he entered the building and took his seat the whole place seemed to swim round him, and the play-bill fluttered in his hand. But by-and-by he began to regain his self-possession; the lights which had danced before his gaze settled steadily in their places, and he took courage to rise and cast a searching glance round the house; but strain his eyes as he might he could not discover Lady Lucy. The house, indeed, seemed packed from pit to topmost gallery, but amidst all the rows and rows of faces hers was missing. After concluding his futile search for the twentieth time

[229]

he sat down disconsolately, and, to hide his confusion on perceiving the amused and curious stare of his neighbours, he fell to examining his play-bill. At first the words floated meaninglessly before his eyes, but by-and-by one of them took shape and assumed, indeed, an odd familiarity.

"*Lord Tuftington*"—*Lord Tuftington!* Why, surely that was the name of one of the invaders of Cotley Grange on that never-to-be-forgotten evening. *Lord Tuftington!* How did his name come to be there? But stop! Here was another that he knew, "Sir *Harry Highflyer*." And here again, *"The Duchess of Flummery*," and again, *"Lady Olivia Pouncebox,"* and here—here actually was the name of all others sacred to him, *"Lady Lucy Mayflower!" Lady Lucy!*

He sat staring at the paper for a moment, and then, scarce knowing what he did, turned to one of his neighbours—

"Pray, sir, is it not a strange thing for such a noble company to give a performance in a public place?"

The man stared, and laughed.

"Sir, I fail to understand you. Where, in heaven's name, would you have them perform if not in a public place? How else should we see them play?"

"'Tis for charity, no doubt," cried John, scarcely heeding him, and speaking in a white heat of passionate indignation. "But to me it seems degrading that they should thus expose themselves, so that all who pay a certain price are free to gape at them."

[230]

The man gazed at him blankly for a moment, and then burst out laughing.

"I presume, sir, this is your first visit to a playhouse, and truly, I think, with these sentiments, you would. have done better to keep away. But as for the performance being given for charity— Faith, if you were to make such a suggestion to the manager he would tell you that charity began at home, I fancy. By the time he has paid his company, and defrayed the cost of the scenery—"

"Paid the company," interrupted John, "why, sir, do you mean to tell me that persons of such quality would condescend to play for hire? High-born ladies like—like the Duchess—"

His neighbour positively gaped, and then bending forward gazed at him narrowly—

"Sir," he said, "I believe you are purposely acting the buffoon; you seek to impose on me by affecting an impossible ignorance"

"Upon my soul, sir," cried simple John, who was now quite pale and could hardly speak for agitation, "'tis my first visit to such a place, and I—I happen to know some of these ladies and— —"

"So?" said the other with a grin. "Well, good country cousin, I will take pity on your innocence. These titles here are wholly fictitious, as indeed I think is easily seen; these names to the right are those which either belong properly to the actors and actresses, or are assumed by them for their greater convenience. Mrs Scully, for instance, who plays Lady Olivia, chooses rather to call herself Mrs Swynnerton,

because the name has a better sound, while as for Miss Fitzroy, who is set down for the

[231]

part of Lady Lucy, that I am sure must be an assumed name, but as it is the lady's first appearance upon the boards, my information concerning her is scanty. I am informed that she is a pretty little creature, and likely to prove attractive. Now, sir, let me request that you will sit still. I assure you it is quite unnerving to see you bouncing about in your seat. Sit down; the curtain will rise in a moment; and let me inform you, since the business is novel to you, that the first duty of the playgoer is to refrain from disturbing the rest of the audience."

John sat still; indeed, once the curtain had risen, he remained so absolutely motionless that he might have been turned to stone.

The play, which at the time of its production enjoyed an ephemeral popularity, but has since passed into oblivion like its author, abounded in strained situations. The sentiment was superabundant, the humour forced and occasionally verging upon coarseness, but Lady Lucy, who sustained one of the principal parts, won tumultuous applause from first to last. John saw her smiling upon her fictitious lover as she had smiled upon him, he heard her voice, her light laugh, he marked certain little tricks of manner, which, though he had known her for so brief a space, seemed engraven upon his memory and his jealous heart seemed like to burst within him. He felt ashamed, nay, personally degraded by the publicity into which she had thrust herself. Good God! That her beauty, her charm, her pretty ways should be thus pilloried! That any coarse brute who sate aloft in the gallery was free to make his comment because he had paid

[232]

his sixpence! That nothing should be sacred; that she should prattle of love, and weep mock tears, there in the glare of the footlights before all these curious, insolent eyes, as though he and she had never clasped hands and stammered secrets in the sanctity of the solitary dawn. Oh! Heavens, it was too much!

The intensity of his gaze drew hers towards him before she had been very long

upon the scene, and she appeared to falter for a moment, but speedily recovered her self-possession.

At the end of the first act, while he was still staring blankly at the lowered curtain, someone touched him on the shoulder, and, as he turned round, thrust a note into his hand. He tore it open quickly, and found it contained but a line:—"Come to the stage door when the play is over." Turning to speak to the messenger, he found that he had already gone.

When Lady Lucy next came on the stage she played with even greater spirit and vivacity than before, but by-and-by stole a questioning glance at John; and John gravely nodded. A thousand times, indeed, he had a mind to leave the place and to set eyes on her no more; and still he lingered. With each succeeding act Miss Fitzroy further captivated the house, and the curtain descended at last amid tumultuous applause.

Slowly and gloomily John rose, and after many enquiries found his way to the stage door, standing there motionless while streams of gay folk passed and repassed before his eyes.

All at once he felt a hand upon his arm. A slender, cloaked figure was beside him, and two

[233]

bright eyes were gazing at him eagerly from the depths of a quilted silk hood.

"John," whispered Lady Lucy's voice, "here I am, John. I have given them all the slip that I might talk to you for a moment. You must know that I have had quite an ovation—they say that my fortune is made and that all London will be ringing with my name to-morrow; and now tell me, what did you think of it—how did you like me?"

"What did I think of it? " groaned John. "My dear, it nearly broke my heart!"

He saw the eager eyes flash, and felt the hand upon his arm tremble with anger.

"What!" she was beginning wrathfully, but broke off and continued in a softer tone: "You are vexed, I suppose, because I deceived you?"

"Nay, madam, 'tis not that. I had liefer you had told me the truth, yet that is a small matter. But that you should thus exhibit yourself—"

She snatched away her hand.

"You would have kept me all to yourself, I suppose?"

"God knows I would!" said he.

"And you have the face to tell me so. You would have me stifle my ambition—make nothing of my talent—throw away the fame and fortune which are now actually within my grasp? And pray, John Cotley, what would you leave me?"

"Peace of mind," said Cotley. "Honour—"

"Sir, do you mean to insult me? Surely these things must be mine in any walk of life."

"Madam, they are endangered by the course you

[234]

would pursue. Give it up, I beg of you—I entreat it of you. You cannot already have forgotten what has passed between us—does it give me no right over you?"

"You are in truth a strange man," said she petulantly, "though I believe you love me well in your own odd fashion," and here the little hand stole back again to his arm. "But it is a selfish fashion, John. You would take everything from me—what would you give me in return?"

"All that I am," said John. "All that I have. My love, my home, myself. I came round to this place to offer them to you once and for all."

The very intensity of his passion made his voice sound stern, and Lady Lucy once more jerked away her hand, and tossed her head.

"Upon my word, sir, you are mighty cool. Pray do you expect me to jump at this proposal? I believe you do. I believe you would have me on my knees with gratitude for your condescension. Really it is laughable. Here am I with the world at my feet, and you—you would have me give up my whole career at your command and follow you like some meek patient Grizzel to that dreary home of yours. And you make this noble offer once for all, do you? You are not disposed to renew it, should I venture to hesitate?"

"No," said John Cotley: "I am not to be trifled with. It must be now or never."

"Then it shall he never.'" said Lady Lucy.

Seven years passed by, and John Cotley tilled his

[235]

fields, and sowed, and reaped, and rode abroad in summer heat and wintry frosts. He was a hard man, his labourers said, and the neighbours gibed at him for being morose; and John Cotley went on his way without heeding them, though day by day the lines about mouth and eyes deepened, and silver threads, which had no business there, increased among his brown locks.

One March afternoon he was driven indoors by a heavy fall of snow—one of those late storms which are all the more severe because so untimely. He was standing, drumming impatiently on the windowpane, and thinking with vexation of the fruit-blossom which would be blighted, and the young growth of root and blade which must be checked, when of a sudden, through the muffled stillness there came a sound of imperative knocking at the double gate. The men were at work in the woodshed at the rear of the house, old Molly, who had grown deaf of late, was busy in the kitchen: only the master was aware of the summons, and he paused a moment as though in doubt before responding to it.

The knocking came again, hurried and urgent John Cotley threw open the window and called aloud—

"The gate is not locked: you can come in."

He saw the latch partly lifted and then fall back again, and the knocking was resumed, a woman's voice crying out at the same time—

"Sir, it is too heavy for my strength. I pray you, let me in."

John started and caught his breath; then hastened from the room, with long swinging strides, and down

[236]

the snow-covered path. The gate creaked upon its hinges, and the figure of a lady, cloaked and hooded, stood revealed; her hooped skirt almost filled the half-opened door, and as she stepped past John and hurried up the sloping path that lay between the lavender hedges—ghostly now beneath their weight of snow—she left behind her a

little track of narrow-soled high-heeled shoes—each print of that light foot marking on the snow what seemed to be the impression of a flower and a leaf. Not a word said she, but pressed on till she reached the house, and indeed the snow was piled upon her shoulders and filled the creases in her hood.

Once safe in the hall she turned and curtsied to John, who had followed close upon her heels, and then, throwing back her hood, revealed to him an unforgettable face in, which he nevertheless saw much that was strange and new. There was new beauty to begin with, but beauty of a different order to that young delicate bloom which he remembered; there was a roll in the bright eyes which had not used to be there; a somewhat languishing smile wreathed the lovely lips. As she loosed her mantle and let it drop from her shoulders, she revealed a form in which full womanly symmetry had replaced the almost fragile grace of early girlhood.

"John Cotley," she said, "I have come once more to throw myself upon your hospitality. 'Tis true my coach has not broken down, but the storm is unpleasant, and progress is slow, and I am not ill-pleased at the prospect of warming and refreshing myself before proceeding further. Therefore, recognising

[237]

the aspect of the country, and calling to mind that you lived in these parts, I desired my servants to halt for an hour, and bethought me that I would come and take you by surprise."

"Madam," said John, "you do indeed take me by surprise."

She stole at him a curious, somewhat anxious glance—but soon laughed, and raised her eyebrows and shoulders with an affected gesture—

"Fie, sir! is that all you can find to say to me? I vow your manners have grown rusty during these seven years. I protest when I visited you last you had more politeness. Do you wish, sir, to forbid me entrance?"

"By no means, madam. Pray come in. Such entertainment as this poor house can afford shall be yours."

He led the way into the parlour, and soon was on his knees by the hearth kindling a fire. Outside, the snow drifted past the window, and within all was silence,

save for the rustling of Lady Lucy's silken garments as she breathed quickly, and the click of flint and steel. The tinder caught at last, and by-and-by the flame leaped in the chimney. Then John Cotley rose from his knees, and found Lady Lucy earnestly considering him.

"You have not changed much, John, these seven years."

"Have I not, madam?" said he.

"The place," she went on, "the place is so oddly familiar I could almost fancy that I had been here yesterday."

"Could you indeed, madam?" said John.

[238]

Leaning forward in the flickering light, and with that earnest expression she looked wonderfully, perilously like the other Lady Lucy whom he had once known. He averted his eyes, and began to move slowly towards the door. She followed him with a curious intent gaze.

"'Tis a pity that it should be snowing, John," she said, and the soft voice sounded almost caressing. "I have a mind to see the garden. If by chance it clears up by-and-by, I shall ask you to conduct me there."

"Nay, madam," said John, pausing in the doorway, and turning upon her a very resolute face, "the garden would scarcely be worth your notice."

"Do you suppose I have forgotten it?" whispered she. "Shall I ever forget that sunny morning, and the roses, and— —"

"Nay, forget it, madam," said John, sternly. "I assure you the roses are dead."

And then he went away and left her, and presently old Molly came, all in a flutter of wonder and delight.

"'Tis herself, sure," she cried, peering into the beautiful pensive face of the visitor; "'tis Lady Lucy. Master come to me and says, says he, 'Get tea ready, and everything of the best,' he says, 'A lady has come who must be well attended to'; but he didn't never say it was your ladyship. Dear, my lady, what a merry company you was, to be sure. Do you mind how you all made your own beds. I'll wager your ladyship has never made your bed since."

[239]

"Yes, yes," said Lady Lucy, "I have made my own bed, Molly, and I must lie on it."

She sate very silent and thoughtful after this; but when refreshments were served, and John Cotley came to do the honours of his table, she became once more all smiles and gaiety, prattling very prettily about the great world and the folk who dwelt there, and running on from one topic to another without appearing to notice her host's gravity and silence. All at once, turning to him with a challenging air, she said: "In this solitary retreat of yours, Mr Cotley, I presume the news of my doings and successes have not reached you?"

"Madam," he returned, with an added shade of coldness in his tone, "I must own that I have failed to keep count of your triumphs."

"Why, that is the less surprising since, according to my flatterers, my triumphs are past reckoning. Do you remember, sir;" and here, leaning her elbows on the table and resting her chin upon her hands, she darted a penetrating glance towards him—"do you remember, sir, a conversation which we once had at early dawn? I, at least, recollect it very well. Though you were unaware at the time of the career I had chosen, you made several curiously apt forecasts."

"Madam," returned John, "I regret to say that my memory is not as good as yours."

She bit her lip, but soon recovered herself. Tilting back her head slightly, and looking at him through her narrowed lids, she continued—

"You prophesied, as I recollect, that I should be courted by the highest in the land; admired by all

[240]

the rank and fashion of London. 'Dukes,' said you —and I vow you would have laughed had you but known the gloomy despair of your face—'dukes and marquises will be fighting for the privilege of kissing your hand.' Well, your words have come

true; many grandees have come a-courting me; this hand of mine has been kissed by royalty. And yet, John Cotley, 'tis a weary life. Empty flattery, tiresome praise—a feather-headed crew that flutter round me with unmeaning smiles and foolish compliments. Not one true man among them."

As she paused, he bowed stiffly.

"Amid all my success I am sick at heart," she went on, excitedly. "I long for a home; I long to find a loyal heart, a hand that I could rely on."

"I regret to hear, madam," said Cotley, as she paused again, "that events have not justified your expectations."

She looked at him fixedly for a moment, and then smiling archly, went on—

"And you tell me you have forgotten this conversation of ours? Now, I can recall it word for word. When I first emerged from under the leafy archway yonder"—with a wave of the hand—"you were standing thus"—

She rose to her feet and struck an attitude, head bent, one hand pressed to her brow, the other clutching at the ruffles at her breast. "And I was so rude as to laugh; do you remember?"

"You have the advantage of me, madam," said John Cotley, sternly.

She continued as though she had not heard him,

[241]

and with a little tremor in her voice. "You said some pretty things about my being an angel, and I asked you what you knew of me; and you said that you knew only what your eyes had shown you, and what your heart had told you. Oh, John, does your heart tell you nothing now?"

"I do not understand you," said John, steadily.

"To be sure you have forgotten all that passed. I suppose, too, that you have forgotten about those wanderings of ours in the alleys yonder, when the leaves were green, and the roses were blowing. I stumbled once, and you made me take your arm, and I felt it trembling beneath my hand. Think of that, Mr Cotley! Were you not a foolish youth in those days? And so we walked together, and told each other wonderful things, and I asked you to think kindly of me always. Ah, John, I fear you have not kept

your word."

He, too, had risen and stood before her, rigid, with hands dropping by his side, and a grey face.

"Then they called me," she went on, with a thrill in her musical voice, her face earnest now and glowing, "they called me—there was but one moment left: I gave you a flower, but you said it was not enough—you took my hands and—"

Bending forward suddenly she seized his; they were limp and cold as ice; "You took my hands," she repeated, her voice still vibrating, her eyes fixed passionately on his, "you fell on your knees at my feet as I kneel to you now, you said, you said—oh, let me say it!—"Love, love, stoop to me!"

[242]

John Cotley gave one glance at the pleading, upturned face, at the beautiful eyes swimming in tears, and then he withdrew his hands.

"You have surpassed yourself, madam," he said. "You are certainly a marvellous actress. Your rendering of the scene was absolutely perfect"

She was on her feet in a moment, dashing the tears from her eyes and laughing unsteadily.

"I was determined to convince you of my powers," cried she, in a voice which feigned lightness though it was husky and ill-assured. "There, you should feel proud, Mr Cotley, that so famed a personage should give you a performance all to yourself…The storm shows no signs of abating, I fear, so I will not trespass further on your hospitality. I am much obliged to you, Mr Cotley, for your entertainment, and now I think I will take my leave. My cloak and hood lie yonder —I thank you"—as he assisted her to put them on. "Now, sir, if you will have the kindness to open the gate I will pursue my way."

They were out of the house by this time, and she passed in front of him towards the gate. When she reached it she paused, and curtsied with averted eyes.

"Farewell, sir, I have to thank you for your generosity and kindness. I need trouble you to come no further."

He watched the figure move away with stately undulating grace, and when it was

lost in the white mist he closed the gate with a heavy sigh. There lay the tracks in front of him, flower and leaf, flower and leaf, those just made showing sharp and clear,

[243]

the others already half-obliterated; by nightfall all alike would have vanished. The light feet would intrude no more upon his path.

Going indoors he stood for a moment by the hearth, and then drawing a note-book from his bosom, took from the little leather pocket beneath the cover a small paper packet which he proceeded to unfold. Within lay the crumbling and discoloured remnants of what once had been a rose.

"Let it go with the rest!" said John Cotley, and stooping he dropped it among the embers.

A little flame caught it, leaped up, flickered, and died away.

[244]

A PRISONER OF WAR

IT is nearly a hundred years ago now since that golden October evening which made such a change in Molly Rainford's life; the blue-eyed children to whom she used to tell the story have long since been laid to rest, and her grandchildren— old men and women now—have almost forgotten it. Even the neighbours have ceased to wonder at the odd name which they bear, and do not realise that were it not corrupted and mispronounced, it would have a still stranger sound in their ears.

On this fine October evening then, many, many years ago, Molly Rainford was setting the house-place to rights, before the return of her father and his men from the wheatfield, where they had been at work since dawn. It was worth while growing wheat in those days, as Farmer Joe could tell you, but it took long to cut, and the arms grew weary that wielded the sickle, and the sweat poured down the brown faces. Old Winny the servant, and even Susan, the lass who occasionally came in to help, had been all day in the field too, helping with other women-folk to bind the sheaves. Molly would have been there herself, but that somebody was wanted to go backwards and forwards

between house and field with food and drink for the labourers. Indeed, what with carrying the ten o'clock "bagging," the big noonday dinner, and the four

[245]

o'clock "drinkings," Molly's arms and feet ached pretty well, but she could not sit down to rest yet; she must bestir herself, "straighten up" the house, and set out the supper—bread and cheese, cold bacon, and plenty of small beer.

As she moved about the flagged room, intent on her own thoughts, she did not at first hear a low hurried tap at the outer door, which stood open; and it was not until a figure passed hurriedly through it, and stepped from the passage into the kitchen itself, that she turned round with a great start.

She saw a young fellow of about middle height, with a well-knit and curiously graceful figure, fair hair, closely cropped, and blue eyes set in a face which, though pale and startled now, had nevertheless a certain winsomeness about it. His clothes were soiled and ragged, and his feet were bare, yet at the very first sight of him Molly realised that he was no tramp.

"Don't scream," he said in a low voice, and throwing out his hand pleadingly.

"I weren't goin' to scream," returned Molly, briefly and calmly, and thereat the stranger smiled—a very pleasant smile, with a flash of white teeth, and a merry twinkle in the eyes.

Molly blushed all over her apple-blossom face, and dropped her head, upon which the brown hair would never lie as smoothly as she wished; but presently, overcoming her shyness, she fixed her honest grey eyes upon him and said seriously: "What might you please to want, sir?"

"I will tell you the truth," said the man. "I have escaped from prison. I want you to give me shelter

[246]

here for a few days, until the hue and cry is over, and then—"

"'Scaped from prison!" ejaculated Molly. "I don't say as I won't scream now,"

and she made as though she would rush past him to the door. But the other stopped her.

"I am not a criminal," he said. "I have done no wrong except to fight for my own land."

"Dear o' me," said Molly. "And where may that be? I doubt we are fighting most of the world just now."

"I am a Frenchman," returned he. "My name is Jean Marie Kerenec."

"Well, that's a name," cried Molly, and dropped upon a chair. "Jammery, d'ye say? But you speak English quite sensibly."

"I was a fisherman by trade," said Jean, "and used besides to do a bit of trade with your country, and your folks came over to us, and so I learned to speak your language when I was quite a little boy. And then I've been so long in an English prison, you see. When the war broke out I became a marine, and was taken prisoner with my mates by an English man-o'-war, and I've been in prison two —three years now. Life in an English prison-ship is not gay, I tell you."

"You shouldn't fight against us, you see," said the girl. "Well, I'm sure I don't know what I'm to do. You're welly clemmed, I reckon?—hungry, I mean," seeing that he stared at her. "Sit down and eat a bit."

She pointed to the great wooden settle, but he remained standing until she returned with a plate of

[247]

bread and meat and a jug of beer. Going towards her as she was crossing the kitchen, and moving swiftly and gracefully on his bare feet, as some lithe creature of the woods, he took her burden from her, and, placing it on the table, sat down, and fell to with right good will. '

Molly went on with her work, eyeing her visitor from time to time. Once, happening to intercept her glance, he smiled at her brightly.

"I'm sure I don't know whatever my father will say," muttered Molly. "He'll haply be angry with me for letting you stop."

"Is he a hard man?" enquired Jean, his face falling.

"Nay, when father's not crossed there's no kinder man in the whole o'

Lancashire. But if you go the wrong way to work wi' him! Poor Teddy, my brother, did that, and my father turned him out. He's sorry enough about it now, poor father is, for Ted went and 'listed and hasn't never been home since."

The stranger laid down his knife and fork and looked at her earnestly. "If your brother were taken prisoner," he said, "would not he, your father, be glad if he were treated kindly? If he had a chance of coming home, and only wanted just what I want now, shelter for a few days to help him, what would your father say if one refused him?"

"There's something in that," said Molly, and the glance which she threw at the young stranger was much softer and more encouraging than her words.

An hour or two wore away, and Molly finished tidying, and spread the long tables, and fed the

[248]

chickens, and set her dairy to rights. In all these operations Jean Marie Kerenec assisted her, and he told her the most wonderful things the while, so that now her eyes brightened with astonishment, and now her bonny cheek grew pale with alarm, and sometimes her red lips would droop and tears of compassion would hang upon her lashes. But she thought her new friend an heroic and most delightful personage.

When the shadows had crept over the face of the land and the first bat circled round the house, the tramp of clogged feet, and the sound of many voices, announced the return of the harvesters.

"You'd best hide," said Molly, struck with a sudden thought. "Yes, hide in the buttery till the folks are abed and my father is having his glass comfortable by the fire; then I'll tackle him."

So into the buttery Jean Marie disappeared, and prudent Molly locked the door and put the key in her pocket. Presently he heard the farmer come stamping in in his top-boots, and a series of thuds in the passage, which meant that the men, having duly "washed them" at the pump, were now respectfully divesting themselves of their clogs. He heard old Winny groaning over the fatigues of the day, and Susan giggling with some rustic admirer, and the quick tread of Molly's feet on the flags as she hastened up

and down the table. Then a roar from Farmer Rainford—

"Hurry up, wilt thou, lass? Wheer's the moog? I'm that dry I could very near drink water. 'Is the field nigh cut?' says thou. No, nor half-cut" (and here the farmer rapped out an oath or two); "the

[249]

lads don't work near so well as they used to do: nor the wenches neither. There's storm-weather about. Thou might ha' made shift to come out a bit before supper—another pair of hands is worth summat, I tell thee."

Another pair of hands! Jean Marie rubbed his own in the darkness, and drew a long breath. Here was a lever by which he might help his cause.

Presently the scraping back of benches denoted that the meal was at an end, and soon the sound of retreating voices announced that the tired folk had withdrawn to their beds in attic or outhouse. Then Jean Marie heard Molly speaking in a low muffled tone, which somehow conveyed to him the impression that she was bending over her father; and then a bellow from the old man made the prisoner spring backwards from the door.

"A Frenchy in my house! What the—the—"

"Eh, father, just think if it were our Teddy as had got loose from prison over yon, and wanted a helpin' hand."

"Our lad's noan sich a fool as to get put in prison."

"Nay. but he might; and the Lord might do the same to us as we do to yon poor chap."

"Don't tell me, ye silly wench, as the Lord 'ud go for to treat a good honest Englishman same as a fool of a Frenchy."

"He looks just like an Englishman, father, and he speaks English much the same as we do. He seems as nice as could be, and that handy going about the kitchen."

[250]

"Sir," called out Jean Marie from the place of his concealment, his voice sounding thin and strange through the keyhole; "Sir, I could help with the reaping; you

said you wanted another pair of hands."

"What's that?" cried Farmer Joe, and then he fell a-laughing. "Why, there's sense in what the chap says—I'm terribly short-handed just now. Come out, sin' thou'rt theer, and let's have a look at thee."

The door being unlocked, Jean emerged from the buttery, and stepped lightly across the floor on his bare feet. Taking up his position opposite old Rainford, he first extended for inspection a pair of powerful hands, and then, pulling up his ragged shirt-sleeves, displayed the magnificent muscles of his arms.

"Will that do?" he enquired quaintly.

The farmer slapped him on the back, with a roar of laughter.

"That'll do, my lad; that'll do," he cried. "Od's bobs, they arms 'ud do credit to an Englishman! Coom, we's see how mich work thou can get through to-morrow. How long dost thou want to bide here?"

"Till the end of the week, if I may."

"Ah, that'll do well enough; we's have finished field by then. How wilt thou get away, think'st thou?"

"A friend of mine will meet me a little further down the coast in a fishing-boat. You see, I am trusting you, sir. I am sure you will keep my secret."

[251]

"You may be sure, lad. I'm not the mon to betray yo'."

"I've been thinkin'," put in Molly, "we must lend Mester John some o' our Ted's cloo'es, and a pair o' clogs, and we must tell folks—I think we'd best tell folks as he's a friend o' yours as has coom to help wi' the harvest."

This plan was put into execution. To the work-people it seemed natural enough that "Mester" had called in additional help in the emergency, and the intimate terms on which the new comer seemed to be with the daughter of the house lent credit to the supposition.

Jean Marie worked manfully in the wheat-field, but in the evenings, and every spare moment during the day, he was at Molly's side. He pumped water for her, carried her pail, swept up her kitchen, and even lit the fire before she came down in the

morning. He had such pleasant ways withal, and such a kindly smile, that it was no wonder Molly smiled on him in return, and that the work-people soon began to whisper that she and the "Liverpool mon" were "coortin'."

On the evening of the third day, work being finished, and Jean outstripping his mates, and finding Molly alone in the kitchen, was greeted by her so cordially that somehow—he never quite knew how—he found his arm ronnd her waist, and words of love leaping to his lips. She was an angel, a darling; he would never love anyone but her, and she must love him too; he must go away now, but when the war was over he would come back, and they must be married.

[252]

"But my father will never allow it," stammered Molly, making no attempt, however, to disengage herself.

And at this most inopportune moment in walked Farmer Joe. The state of things that ensued can be imagined. The old farmer's fury; Jean Marie's protestations; Molly's tearful and inconsequent assurances, first, that she knew nothing about it, and that it wasn't her fault, secondly, that "as how 'twas" she would never have any other sweetheart.

After a time, however, peace was in some measure restored; the young folks silently resolved to achieve their end, while Farmer Joe loudly announced that, as the chap was bound to leave in two-three days, he'd keep his word to him for this time, but he'd be domned if he didn't give him up if ever he showed his face there again.

After that he interfered no more, and though he was well aware that Jean and Molly continued their courting on the sly, he left them alone, and, except for an occasional sarcasm anent "Frenchies" and "frog-eaters," made no attempt to molest Jean.

On the morning of the day fixed for the young man's departure, however, he received news which changed his contemptuous indifference into active hatred and fury. He came staggering into the kitchen with an ashy-white face and starting eyeballs. Parson Bradley had been with him, and had announced to him the death of his son, Teddy, in foreign parts.

"They'n killed him," he cried. "Those domned

[253]

Frenchies ha' killed my lad. See, here's his name in th' paper parson brought me. Eh, my lad— and I druv him fro' the door! And now they'n killed him, the domned raskils!"

Molly gave a cry, and flung her apron over her head, and Jean came forward, full of genuine distress and sympathy. But at sight of him the old man's face became suddenly suffused with a rush of returning colour; he babbled with inarticulate rage, and shook his fist threateningly.

"Soombry 'll pay for this," he cried, as soon as he could speak. "I'll not have no murderers in my house. I'll have blood for blood. Does not the Book say 'an eye for an eye'? I'll have life for life, I tell yo'. I'll revenge my son!"

"Oh, father, father," wept Molly, throwing herself at his feet, "dunnot say that! Dunnot look at John so wicked! He's innocent, poor lad. The Book says more not they things; it says, 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,' and, 'Do as yo' would be done by.' We'n killed hundreds and thousands of Frenchmen, I reckon, but if poor Teddy were alive in the hands of his enemies yo'd think it a cruel thing if he were made to answer for it."

With a volley of oaths the farmer was stooping forward to thrust her away, when there sounded of a sudden a tramping of feet without, and a heavy knock at the door.

"They've come for me!" said Jean, turning very pale. "Molly, my loved one, they will take me away; we shall—never meet again. Let us thank God for these happy days."

[254]

She had risen and flown to him, and his arms were about her, when the knocking came again, loud and continuous.

"Open there, in the King's name!" cried an imperious voice.

"Curse yo', Molly, go to the door! "growled her father.

"Go, sweetheart," said Jean, releasing her.

"Oh, father," gasped Molly, as she crept with lagging steps across the room, "father, remember —yo' gave your word!"

The door swung back, and in, an instant the room, as it seemed to Molly, was full of soldiers. Their leader, after a brief glance round, which took in, apparently without any deep interest, the old man leaning forward in his chair, the trembling girl, and the fair-haired young labourer standing in the background, addressed himself to the master of the house.

"You are Farmer Rainford, I presume? I am in search of an escaped French prisoner of war, who, it is supposed, is in hiding in this neighbourhood. A suspicious-looking French craft has been hovering about Formby Cove since yesterday. May I ask if you've seen any stranger about your premises during the last few days?"

Old Joe lifted his heavy eyes, and gazed at the speaker stolidly, but without saying a word.

"Please to excuse my father, sir," faltered Molly, coming quickly forward, "We'n just had bad news—terrible bad news, and he's upset. We'n just heard as my only brother was killed by the

[255]

French. See, there's his name in the paper—Corporal Edward Rainford of the King's Own."

She snatched the paper from her father's hand as she spoke, and pointed out the marked place with a trembling finger. Joe made an inarticulate sound, and then clapped his hand before his mouth.

"That's a pity," said the officer, with momentary compassion. "Well, Mr Rainford, we won't trouble you. You can tell us what we want to know, my girl. You haven't noticed any stranger about the place lately? Your labourers are all known to you? No ragged-looking fellow has come to the door to beg for alms?"

Molly had been shaking her head vigorously.

"No, sir! oh no, sir!" she now cried eagerly. "There's nobody about but our own folks as has worked for us ever sin' I can remember ; and there's nobody in this house

but my father and mysel', and old Winny the servant, and my sweetheart there."

"Oh!" said the officer, laughing, "that's your sweetheart, is it? He seems a likely lad. Why isn't he out fighting for his country?"

"Oh, please sir, I couldn't spare him!" cried Molly, laughing with white lips. "It 'ud fair break my heart if anything was to happen to him."

Her feigned laughter was strangled by her sobs. Her father uttered a groan, and let his head drop forward into his hands.

"Dom they raskil Frenchies!" he cried: "they'n been and killed my only son!"

"Come, men," said the officer, "we'll take ourselves off. This is not a likely place for a French

[256]

prisoner to take refuge in. You'd soon give him up, wouldn't you, Mr Rainford?"

Joe Rainford raised his head and looked at him steadily.

"Yo'n heerd what my lass telled yo'," he said, doggedly; "there isn't nobry here, nobbut me, and her,—and her sweetheart!"

[257]

THROUGH THE COTAGGE WINDOW

THE gable end of the cottage faced the shore, and I first became conscious of the window by the sudden appearance of a faint light behind its narrow panes. It was a stormy evening, the wind sweeping down between the dunes in sudden gusts that caught up the sand from their steep sides— which were indeed but sparsely covered with star-grass—and sent it driving seawards in blinding eddies. I had wandered overlong about the damp stretch of shore that bordered the remains of the submarine forest, interested first by the curious contrasts of colour to be noticed there—the silvery sweep of sand sloping downwards to the dusky purplish brown of the remnants aforesaid, in the irregular surface of which little pools and rivulets of water reflected the sky; the blue-green of the star-grass interspersed with patches of dwarf willows and bilberry plants, the foliage of which at this season had taken on a variety of tints. Later on, when the

tide had come roaring and leaping in, I had been attracted by the magnificence of its fury, and had watched wave after wave roll towards me, gathering and swelling as though with suppressed rage, and finally breaking with a boom that went echoing through the hills, while the spray dashed ever higher and higher. Fascinated as I had been by the sight, I did not notice that the early autumnal sunset was

[258]

over, until a sudden roller, more adventurous than its fellows, came rushing to my very feet, and, turning hurriedly to escape from it, I observed that the world behind me was wrapped in gloom, save for the lingering glare at the horizon. Almost at the moment that I became aware of the approach of night, I became also conscious that the gusts of wind before alluded to no longer carried stinging clouds of sand with them, but were laden with a cold mist of rain almost as painful to meet, a mist which, indeed, as I hastily threaded my way through the yielding sand, soon turned to a downpour.

Clearly, unless I wished to be drenched as well as benighted on this lonely waste, I must at once seek shelter; and, while I was disconsolately wondering whither I should bend my steps, a sudden ray of light drew my attention to the little habitation I had Lefore noticed. Drawing my cloak closely round me I made my way thither with all the speed I could muster, and knocked loudly at the closed door; but my summons passed unheeded, being most probably unheard in the increasing fury of the gale; and, after repeated raps on the panels and rattlings of the latch, I went round to the window, in the hope that my efforts to attract attention might meet with some success from this point. No curtain hung behind the panes, and pressing my face close to them I peered into the room within. It was a small kitchen, kept with a neatness and cleanliness which one learns to expect among north-country folk. A small fire burnt upon the hearth, and a candle flickered in a tin sconce over the homely mantle-shelf. By the light of these I descried the

[259]

figure of a woman sitting by the hearth; her hands were folded on her lap, and her eyes

were fixed upon the fire. She might have been any age between fifty and sixty; the slight and erect form, and handsome face, rendered remarkable by strongly-marked black brows, would incline one to name the lesser figure, had not the deep lines about eyes and mouth, and the snow-white, if still abundant hair, inclined one to think her an older woman.

But I was in no mood to examine or criticise just then; with my face still close to the casement I tapped sharply on the topmost pane. The woman started, and turned her face towards me, grasping the elbows of her chair with both hands, but not otherwise attempting to move. I tapped again, more impatiently. Still remaining seated she stretched out both arms towards the window, a smile breaking over her face. Such a strange smile! Tender, even yearning, and yet one might almost say, fearful.

Losing patience, I tapped again, and nodded. With arms still stretched out she slowly left her chair and dropped upon her knees.

Then taking advantage of a momentary lull in the storm I shook the crazy casement and shouted:

"Let me in; I shall be wet to the skin!"

At length she rose hurriedly to her feet; then, shading her eyes with her hand, made her way towards me.

"Eh, dear!" she cried, as she drew near; " it's not him—'tis a wumman!"

"Oh, do let me in," I pleaded. "See how it

[260]

rains! I only ask for shelter until the storm is over."

She signed to me to go round to the door, and in another moment my feet were on the sanded floor within.

"Dear o' me," she cried, "yo're wet, ma'am; yo're terrible wet. I wish I'd ha' heerd yo' before, but wind and rain were makkin' sich a din I didn't notice nothin'."

"And when you did notice, you took me for a ghost, I think," I said, laughing, but feeling still a little aggrieved.

No trace of the strange expression which I had noticed on her face when I had first summoned her lingered there as she admitted me, but at these careless words of

mine I saw it come again.

"Coom nigh the fire," she said, after a pause, during which she had gazed at me as one half awake.

"Did you take me for a ghost?" I persisted, as I drew near the hearth.

"I took yo' fur—summat," she answered doggedly. Then, after a moment's silence, she began to press me hospitably to dry my "shoon," and informed me that she would "mak' tay in a two-three minutes."

"Yo're out late," she added presently, gazing at me as I basked in the comfortable warmth. "Dun yo' coom fro' far?"

"I have walked along the shore from Saltleigh," I said. "I am staying at the inn there. It is not very far. When the storm is over I shall make my way back by road."

"Ah," she commented, bending down to fill the little brown teapot from the now bubbling kettle.

[261]

As she did so I caught sight of the glitter of a wedding-ring upon the gnarled brown hand.

"Do you live here all alone?"

"Ah," affirmatively.

"You've been married, I see."

She nodded.

"Your husband is dead, I suppose?" Again the curious look, but no answer. I repeated my question.

"I reckon he is dead, ma'am," she replied in a low voice. "Yigh, I met say I know he's dead. It's thirty-five year sin' he went—he mun be dead."

"Did he not die here, then?"

"Nay, ma'am, he wur a sailor. He deed at say on jest sich a night as this. He deed, and he thought on me."

The smile which I had seen once before, which held so much of love, and yet had in it a suggestion of fear, hovered about her lips again for a moment, and was gone.

"Tay's drawed nice now," she said in a different tone. "Will yo' please to pull

up, ma'am?" motioning me to draw my chair nearer the table. "I've soom leet cake here as I'll toast in a minute, but I have na' a bit o' butter, I'm sorry to tell yo'; yo' mun mak' shift wi'out."

As I murmured my thanks for the generosity with which she had set before me the best her house contained, and emphatically assured her that I infinitely preferred light cake without butter, my hostess reseated herself in her elbow-chair, and gazed at me, while I ate and drank, with evident satisfaction. But she did not speak, and each

[262]

furtive glance that I sent in her direction increased my curiosity.

It was such a handsome face, with its great dark eyes, its still beautiful colouring, its expression of reserved strength, of patience, of—what was it? Expectation or longing? A little of both, perhaps, but all placid and contained.

"You must be very lonely," I said, pushing away my cup at length, and leaning back in my chair. She looked up quickly, sighed, and suffered her hands to drop together in her lap.

"I am that," she said, half to herself.

"How long were you married before you lost your husband?"

"Nobbut a year," she returned; "scarce a year."

"So short a time! How very sad. It must have seemed hard to you that he should go to sea and leave you—but of course he had to do it."

"Yigh, ma'am, he had to do it—but I took it very ill."

Her voice had sunk, so that the words were scarcely audible; it seemed to me that there were tears in the dark eyes. Impulsively leaving my chair I knelt down by her side, taking the worn hands in mine.

"It is all forgiven now," I said. "The few hasty words are forgotten, but the memory of the love remains."

"Ah," she said, still speaking half to herself, "all's forgiven now—all wur forgiven long sin'—before he deed. He thought of me before he deed, and loved me jest same as ever. He looked at me so lovin'— God rest him! He was never one to bear a grudge."

"But I thought you said he died at sea."

[263]

"Yigh, he deed at say, fur sure," she added, looking at me as though in surprise; "but I knowed he loved me and forgave me."

"Some of his comrades told you all about it, I suppose?"

"Nay, nay, nobry towd me—nobbut hissel'. His mates was all drownded, too; naught was niver heerd on 'em at arter ship sailed that last time. Noan of 'em ever coom back—nobbut him, and he coomed to nobry but me."

"Do you mean that his spirit came back?" I asked, half-incredulously, half awe-stricken.

"Ma'am, I can't reetly tell you how he coom back, but it was him. He coomed to tell me he wur dead, and to let me know as he'd forgive me."

"Was nothing ever heard of his ship?" I enquired.

"Naught was niver heerd of ship, nor captain, nor crew," she said. "Noan of 'em coom back, nobbut my Will."

The wind raging round the house drove the rain fiercely against the little window, and I glanced towards it fearfully; then, laughing inwardly at my own folly, I turned to the woman again.

"Don't you think it may have been fancy?" I said. "You are so lonely here, you see, and you had been fretting perhaps because of your little quarrel, and because you had, I suppose, no news of him. And then you imagined you saw his face—at the window—was it? he used perhaps to come to the window—"

"Ah," she interrupted, "he all'ays coom theer—all'ays fro' the time when he wur a little lad. He'd coom theer, and press his face to the window, and tap

[264]

three times same as yo' did to-neet—he all'ays tapped three times. And I used to look up from my little stool i' the corner and nod at him, and at arter a bit get up and stale out when feyther and moother wurna lookin'—fur they'd all'ays barge if they cotched me

playin' wi' Will Davis. The Davises were cocklin' folk—very rough—a bad lot 'twas said, and my feyther didn't reckon to let me go wi' 'em. But my Will, he was never same as t'others—a gradely little lad he wur, good at's books and never up to no mischeef. 'I'll noan be a cocklemon same as my feyther,' he'd say; 'when I goo to say I'll goo a. bit fur'er off. I'll sail fur, where theer's no lond an' no houses, an' no naught, nobbut wayter, wayter, wayter—same as it says in my book.' Folks thought it a wonderful thing to see a little chap same as him goin' so reg'lar to school. But t'other lads 'ud laugh at him for goin' barefoot; poor Will, he hadn't niver a shoe to his foot."

She broke off to laugh softly to herself; her eyes were again fixed, on the fire, and her mind had evidently conjured up a vivid picture of the lad as he had been in bygone days.

"Eh, I mind when he'd coom patterin' ower th' weet sand to this place he'd leave tracks o's little bare feet all round the house; and my feyther 'ud barge and sauce me terrible if he coom out and saw them.

"'Yon little raskil Will's been here again,' he'd say; 'my word, I'll thrash him if I catch him here.'

And moother, hoo'd tak' me by the ear, and drag me across the kitchen and sit the down on my stool

[265]

i' th' comer wi' my patchwork. 'If thou dar's so mich as say a word to yon agin', hoo'd say, 'I'll fetch birch—rod to thee.'

"But 'tweren't o' no use. Soon as ever I'd hear the three taps, and see the roguish e'en o' Will laughin' in at me through the window, I'd mak' my way to him soom gate. Yigh, I wur terrible headstrong. Poor mother—hoo'd a done better to ha' taken rod to me—but hoo never did more nor talk—hoo thought the warld o' me, and so did my feyther."

"Were your parents alive when you married?" I inquired, breaking in upon the somewhat lengthy silence which ensued.

"Nay, ma'am, they deed both on 'em, when I wur eighteen year of age. My aunt coomed to live wi' me then for a bit, but we didn't get on so well. Will had been

sailorin' for nigh upon five year then, and I only seed him now and agin. Eh, I mind well the time he coom at arter feyther and moother deed. I had my blacks on, fur it were market day, and me and my aunt had been down to th' village. We had afallin' out as we coom we're ways awhoam again, and my aunt hoo'd gone straight to her chamber, and hoo said hoo didn't want no say, and hoo'd pack up and go next mom and leave me alone, for I wur but an ill-mannered, ill-tempered wench. Well, I coom in and sot me down here in cheer, and I got a-gate o' cryin', for I wur feelin' quite undone to think o' my aunt goin' that gate, and I wur thinkin' how lonely I was, and what a miserable thing it war for a lass to be left same as me wi'out feyther nor moother, when all of a sudden I heerd Will knockin' at the pane. Didn't I jump up, and

[266]

didn't I run out, and didn't he cotch me in's arms and kiss me same as nobry'd ever kissed me afore! 'Why, my lass,' says he, 'wast thou cryin'? I never see those bonny e'en o' thine wi' tears in 'em afore. Why, what wast thou cryin' for, Molly?'

"I looked up in his face—eh, it was a bonny face, and so kind and anxious like, that I fair burst out again. 'Coom, lass,' says he, 'we's ha' no more tears, but thou mun tell me all about it.' 'Eh, well,' says I, 'I'm cryin' because I am a cross, bad-tempered lass and nobry can't a-bear to live i' th' house wi' me.' 'Coom, is that all?' says he, and he laughed till he fair shook; 'I know soombry as could manage very well to live i' th' same house as thee. Coom, give over—I thought 't were summat war when I see thee i' thy blacks and all.'

"'Nay, but it is war,' says I, 'feyther and moother are dead o' the fever, and I am left wi' nobry but my aunt Jane, and her and me cannot agree, and we had words coomin' awhoam fro' market, and hoo says hoo wunnot live wi' me no more.'

"'Eh, dear, eh, dear, there's a tale,' says he; 'coom, will Aunt Jane eat me, dost thou think, if I ax to coom in?'

"'Hoo cannot eat thee if hoo wants to,' says I, howdin' up my head. 'This house belongs to me now, and I am missus.' We were steppin' inside then, and Will put his two hands o' my shoulders and turned my face to the leet.

"'Thou'rt missus, art thou?' says Will, 'but thou'll't tak a master soom day, my

wench.'

"'Master,' says I, half laughin' and half cryin'; 'I dunno. I don't fancy callin' nobry my master.'

[267]

"He looked down at me so earnest for a bit, and then he smiled. 'Dunnot tell me that tale,' says he. 'Who was it I see cryin' when I looked in; cryin', because hoo was so lonely?'

" 'I don't'want a master, as how 'tis,' said I.

" 'Well then,' says he, 'give it another name. Say husband, Molly.'

" 'And what husband?' says I, knowin' very well what he was at, but lettin' on I didn't understand. 'Not a farmer,' says I, 'for I'm not good enough to be a farmer's missus; and not a cottager's,' says I, 'for I'm too good to be a poor man's slave; and not a soldier fur sure, for soldiers goes to the wars and gets killed; and not a sailor—'

" 'And why not a sailor, Molly,' says he. 'Sailors has half a dozen wives they sayn,' I answered him back as impudent as you please, 'and what good would it do me t' wed wi' a mon who was always at say?'

" 'Sailors gets paid off ship now and again; then they likes to think there's a little whoam and a little wife waitin' for 'em. 'Tis a miserable thing,' says he, 'to know as theer's nobry lookin' out for yo', nobry as cares whether you are dead or wick, no place wheer yo're made welcome.'

" 'Poor Will,' says I, wi' my face turned away, and my e'en cast down.

" 'Nay,' says he, 'it's not poor Will, for Will knowed theer wur soombry thinkin' on him, and soombry lookin' out for him.'

" 'Will tak's too much conceit in hissel',' says I, makkin' shift to spake 'ard like. But he geet his arm round me again and pulled round my face to

[268]

leet, an' then it wur all ower wi' me—he see plain enough as he'd spokken truth."

She relapsed into silence again, her face wearing a. soft and tender smile that

made it look almost young.

"So when he came to court you he looked at you first through the window?" said I.

Her face changed.

"Yigh, ma'am; and it wur theer he took his last look at me afore he went away and left me. We'd been married then a good few month and I niver thought he'd be for leaving me again till I noticed as he wur gettin' a bit onsattled-like. And wan neet he sot up in bed and shriked out, 'Say's callin' me, Molly! say's callin' me.' I towd him 'twere nonsense and he mun ha' been dreamin', and he said no moor, but next day he went wanderin' up and down, up and down, yon by the shore. An' he didn't seem like hissel'. And a two'three days at arter a letter coom for him, and when he read it he went first red and then white as a sheet. 'What does it say?' I axed. 'It's fro' my owd captain,' says he. 'He wants me to jine th' ship agin. Molly, Molly,' says he; 'I towd thee say was callin' me.' 'Nay, Will, dunnot be a fool,' says I. 'Thou mun write and tell captain as thou's wed and has gettin' wark upo' dry lond, and as he mun look out for soombry else.' But Will he coom aroun' table to me and looked into my e'en, an' his own face were half-sorrowful, and half-j'yful. 'Nay, my lass,' says he, 'but I mun go. Sailors same as me connot live long wi'out they feel the wayter under them. I's not be long away fro' thee, my bonny wench—captain

[269]

says it 'ull be nobbut a short v'yage, an' I'll be fain to get awhoam again—but I feel as I mun go.' I pulled his two hands down and I pushed him fro' me. 'Thou'lt be fain to get back,' says I—'nay, but thou'rt fain to go. I tell thee if thou goes I'll ne'er ha' no more to say to thee. If thou can do wi'out me I can do wi'out thee.' And then I geet agate o' cryin'. 'Eh,' I said, 'I didna think thou'd sarve me that gate. Thou'rt a false 'ard-'arted deceivin' felly—that's what thou art, Will Davis! What brought thee here wi' thy soft words, an' thy lovin' ways—lees all on 'em—to tak' all as I had, and mysel' along wi' it—to tee me, hand and foot, and then to go away and leave me?' I throwed apron over my head and sobbed like a child, but my cheeks were as hot as two coals wi' anger. First Will tried to pull away th' apron, but I held fast and stopped my ears as soon as

ever he began o' speakin', and arter a bit he gave o'er, and went away whistlin'. I wouldna speak a word all that day, nor yet the next, though I see him gettin' together his things and makkin' ready.

"Late i' th' arternoon he coom and stood by my cheer.

" 'My wench,' says he, 'sin' thou wunnot speak to me nor look at me, I may as well be off" at wonst. Captain towd me jine him soon as ever I could.' My heart wur like lead, but I kept my face turned away from him. 'Well,' says I, 'sin' thou wants to go, thou can go for aught I care.' He stood a bit longer, and then he stooped his face down to mine. 'Coom, Molly,' he says, 'gie us a kiss, and let's part good freends. Thou'rt a bit vexed still, but

[270]

when thou cooms to think it ower thou'lt see I wur nobbut reet. A man mun stick to the lot he's chose.'

" 'And what about the wife he's chose?' cries I. And I pushed away his face and pushed back cheer. 'Nay, I'll noan gi'e thee a kiss. Go thy ways and leave me.' He waited a bit longer, but I didn't turn my head; and then he took up his bundle and went out. I heard his step on th' sand, very slow and lingerin', and then I heard his tap on th' window. 'Coom, my wench,' he called out; 'gi'e us a look then. Gi'e us a look sin' thou'lt gie me naught else.'

"But I hitched my cheer round and turned my back on him. Eh, my lad! Eh, my poor lad, I might ha' seen thy bonny face then and I wouldna look. Eh, I wonder the Lord didna strike me down dead that day for my wicked pride and anger."

She brought down one clenched hand upon the open palm of the other with such sudden fiery energy that for a moment the veil of years was lifted, and I saw before me the passionate, resentful girl wife who has sent her husband from her with such a sore and angry heart.

By-and-by I saw tears upon her withered cheeks, and gently patting the nearest hand I said consolingly, "Do not fret; it is all over long ago, and you know you told me you felt he had forgiven you."

"Ah, that's true," she sighed, lifting the comer of her apron to her eyes with her

disengaged hand. “I knowed that long ago. I’ll tell yo’ about it. It seems to coomfort me like to talk about him. ‘Twas jest sich a neet as this—I wur sittin’ nigh to fire

[271]

thinkin’ on him—he’d been gone a good few months then, and I began o’ wonderin’ how soon I met reckon to see him back, and to plan what a welcome I’d gi’e him. Eh, I wur ashamed o’ mysel’ and my ill-tempers by that time, and I thought soon as ever I see him comin’ I’d run and throw my arms round’s neck and ax his parden. And then I’d bring him in, I thought, and set him i’ th’ cheer here, and tell him that the wife and the whoam would always be ready and waitin’ for him. But all on a sudden I bethought mysel’ that it wur a very stormy neet, and I geet all of a shake thinkin’ of him out yon on the dark wayter, and every time the big waves ‘ud lep up an’ roar upo’ the shore, I’d beat my breast and pray to the Lord to ha’ mercy on the folks at say, and not to let my dear lad dee wi’out I see him agin and knowed he forgive me. It got to be a dark neet, but I couldna go to bed, but sot here cryin’ and prayin’ by the fire till the cowd grey morn coom. And then there coom a quiet minute, as if storm was howdin’ back for summat, and I heard plain the three taps o’ th’ window as Will always made, and I looked up and there he wur, lookin’ at me and smilin’ so lovin’. I jumped up fro’ my cheer—this here cheer as was stood in this here corner jest as it is now, and I ran towards window, and I see him plain as plain as I see you jest now. His face were a bit pale, and the wayter wur drippin’ fro’s hair, and fro’s cloo’es—he was as weet as weet. But he stood there smilin’, and lookin’ at me lovin’.

“ ‘Bide a bit,’ says I, ‘I’ll oppen door in a minute.’ And I ran to door, and oppened it, and

[272]

wind and rain coom rushin’ in. Down yon on the shore I could hear waves rushin’ and roarin’—I could scarce mak’ my voice heerd wi’ th’ din. ‘Coom in, Will,’ says I, ‘coom in. Dunnot stond theer i’ th’ wind and the rain. Coom in to thy wife.’ But nobry answered, and then I run round the corner, wrastlin’ wi’ the wind as was near liftin’ me

off my feet, and when I come to the window there weren't nobry theer. Eh, you may think how I skriked out. I run round the house agin and looked in at door, but theer warn't nobry inside, and then I coom out agin, and sarched and sarched, an' called an' called, but I heerd naught but wind and rain, and the waves thunderin' o' th' beach.

"An' then I knew he wur dead."

Her voice, which had been lifted excitedly as she told her tale, dropped at its close, and the hand, which had twitched convulsively in mine, lay passive once more. It was an eerie tale, but convincing withal, and my eyes again stole towards the window nervously.

"Did you think he had come again when I knocked to-night, then?" I inquired, after a pause.

She nodded.

"Have you ever seen him or his spirit since the night you told me of?"

"Nay, ma'am, but I'm all'ays waitin' for him."

"You think he will come?"

"I know he'll come," she said. "Eh, I wish to the Lord he would coom. I am longing for't."

"Yet when I looked in I thought you seemed— almost frightened."

"I am afeared," she returned in a low voice, "but

[273]

I'm not afeard o' him—I'm afeared o' what he'll bring when he cooms. And yet, God knows, I'll be fain to——"

"What do you mean?"

"Nay, never mind. Maybe 'tis foolish talk… The rain has gived ower now, ma'am, and yo'd happen do well to mak' a start."

There was no disputing the advisability of this course, and I took my leave, promising to come and see the old woman again on my next visit to the neighbourhood.

Two years passed, however, before I again found myself in that part of the world, and even then I had been staying at Saltleigh for a week or two before I could make time to betake myself to the cottage on the lonely dunes. I walked along the shore

as I had done on that former occasion, and, as I drew near, my eyes instinctively sought the little window which had played so important a part in the old woman's story, and I stared in surprise at its altered aspect. The ledge behind the casement hitherto left blank—no doubt because Molly would tolerate no intervening objects between her and the panes on which her eyes loved to linger—was now closely packed with flower pots; gay scarlet geraniums pressing forward to the light. I quickened my steps, but before I could reach the house a yet more astonishing sight appeared amid the clusters of bloom; neither more or less than the laughing face of a little child, which peered curiously out at me, and was by-and-by supplemented by two fat, dimpled hands, which hammered gleefully upon the glass.

[274]

Full of forebodings I knocked at the cottage door, which was presently opened by a tall young woman with a baby in her arms.

"I came to see Molly Davis," I said hesitatingly. "Is she—is she—"

"Eh, ma'am, hoo's dead," returned the young woman, answering my wistful look rather than the unfinished sentence. "Hoo deed nigh upon a year ago—last autumn it wur. Poor soul, hoo was glad to go, I doubt, for hoo was but 'onely here"

"Do you know—what she died of? Was she long ill?"

"Hoo seemed to be failin' like, but hoo wasn't not to say sick. Eh, it gived every one a turn when they coom and found her."

"Do you mean to say they found her dead?"

"Yigh, ma'am, little Teddy down yon fro' Frith's farm coom up wi' the milk—hoo couldn't fotch it for hersel' for two-three weeks afore hoo died—he hommered at door and couldna get no answer, and then he run round to window, and theer he found her, poor body, leein' close under it on her face. He ran down to farm and they coom and brok' open door and fotched doctor, but doctor said hoo'd been dead for mony hours… Dunnot tak' on ma'am" —for I was weeping—"coom in and set yo' down. I doubt it giv' yo' a turn to hear o' poor Molly goin' that way. But we'll all ha' to go when we're turn cooms," she added philosophically.

Wiping my eyes I went into the little kitchen which I remembered so well; its

aspect was changed and modernised. A gay square of oil-cloth covered the tiled floor, the walls were decked with gaudily

[275]

coloured pictures; Molly's great elbow-chair was gone, and in its place stood a horsehair covered sofa.

"Ah, we's all ha' to go when we're turn cooms," repeated my new hostess with the gloomy relish, with which your rustic enunciates such statements; "and Molly, hoo were fain to goo. Onybody could see that as coom to see her laid out—so peaceful hoo looked, wi' a smile upon her face."

"She was found under the window you say?"

"Ah! Her knittin' wur throwed on the floor nigh to her cheer, and hoo'd knocked down a stool on the way to the window—doctor said hoo'd wanted to oppen it and let in fresh air, very likely—for her arms were stretched out towards it. But hoo didn't ha' time, poor soul, hoo was took afore hoo could get theer. Eh, dear, yes. That was the very way they found her, lyin' on her face wi' her arms stretched out, and smilin'—smilin' quite joyful like."

So there had been no fear at the last—no fear either of Will himself or of the grim comrade who had accompanied him. Molly's presentiment had been realised; the much loved spirit of her husband had come to seek and sustain her in the last solemn moment. Stormy youth and lonely middle-age had alike been forgotten; for Molly the end had been peace.

And as I took my way homewards to the sound of the gentle lapping waves, I thought of her, not as she had described herself to me, handsome, wilful, impetuous; not as I had seen her, expectant, regretful—not even starting forward at the sound of

[276]

the well-known signal, or lying prone with outstretched arms upon the floor. No, I pictured to myself the placid face smiling on the pillow, the folded hands at rest, every line of the quiet figure bearing the imprint of a peace that would never more be broken.

[277]

APRIL FOOLS

THE late spring dusk had at length fallen; the horses had been led home from the plough, which remained in characteristic Dorset fashion at the angle of the last furrow, the merciful twilight hiding the rich coating of rust with which a lengthy course of such treatment had endued it; the elder labourers had donned their coats, and lit their pipes, and gone sauntering homewards along the dewy grass border of the lane. Farmer Bellamy had laid aside his pinner—the last cow having long been milked and sent pasturewards in the rear of her fellows—and likewise smoked ruminatively in the chimney corner; his wife faced him, a large basket at her feet containing sundry arrears of mending, a sock upon her outspread left hand, a needle threaded with coarse yarn in the other. It was getting too dark to darn now, and she wondered impatiently why Alice and Lizzie did not come in to light the lamp and do their share of needlework.

But Mrs Bellamy's daughters formed part of a little group of men and girls who had gathered round the low stone wall at the extremity of the yard; the central point of interest being a certain flat topped gatepost which marked off the entrance to a disused pig-sty. Lizzie Bellamy was bending over this, her face in close proximity to the paper on which she was writing, her eyes strained in the

[278]

endeavour to make the most of such light as yet remained. A boy, standing near her, held, at a convenient angle, a penny ink-bottle which he obligingly tilted each time that she required to dip her pen; occasionally in Lizzie's increasing excitement, the pen missed its mark, whereupon he seized it in his stumpy fingers and guided it to its rightful destination.

Little spasmodic bursts of laughter escaped the writer every now and then, and a kind of smothered chorus of giggles was kept up by the bystanders; while from time to time one of the more adventurous squinted over her shoulder, being admonished in return by a vigorous dig from the girl's elbow.

At last she threw back her head and dropped her pen with a laughing exclamation—

"I d' 'low that'll do."

"Read it, read it!" cried the others.

"Somebody'll have to light a match, then," retorted she.

Jem Frisby produced one, struck it on the wall, and stepped forward.

The light fell on the girl's face—a good-looking one enough, of the dark-eyed, red-cheeked Dorse type—and illuminated now one, now another, of her companions. All these faces were young, all bore the same expression of expectant, mischievous glee.

" 'MY DEAR GILES,' " read Lizzie, " 'I take up my pen to write these few lines to let you know a wish what's long been in my mind—' "

"I d' 'low it 'ud be better if ye did put 'What's been in my mind since the death o' Missus Neale,' " suggested a tall lad, with a smothered roar of laughter.

"No, 'twouldn't do at all," said Lizzie. "It 'ud put him in mind o' the poor body, and he'd be that down-hearted he wouldn't have no fancy for cwortin' Hannah. Keep quiet, else I can't read. There, the match be out now; 'tis your fault."

"Let the maid alone till she've a-read us what she've a-wrote," growled somebody from the darkness, which seemed intense now that the little flickering light had vanished. Jem struck another match, and Lizzie continued, reading quickly—

" 'You must find it terr'ble hard to manage without no missus; an' I'm beginning to feel lonesome now I be gettin' into years—' "

"I d' 'low that'll sp'ile her chances!" exclaimed someone in the background. Lizzie twisted her head round angrily:

"Nothin' o' the kind; Giles 'ud never look at nobody without it were a staid 'ooman. Second match is near out now. I won't be bothered readin' the letter to ye at all if ye keep on a-interruptin' of I. Well— '

" 'I've been a-thinkin' we might do worse nor make a match. I could do for you, and you'd be company for I. Besides'—here Lizzie's voice quavered with laughter—

'I've took a mortal fancy to you, Giles, an' think you the handsomest man ever I see. My heart have been yours two year an'

[280]

more. If you think well on the notion you might meet me to-morrow in the Little Wood at breakfast time—Yours truly, HANNAH PETHIN.

" '*P.S.*—As I'm feelin' a bit timid along o' writin' this here letter, I'd be obliged if ye'd kindly not mention it when we meets face to face."

The match had burnt itself out a moment or two previously, but Lizzie remembered her composition sufficiently well to recite it without such aid, and was rewarded for the effort by shouts of approving laughter.

"The very thing!" exclaimed one.

"The last touch is the best!" cried another; while all united in declaring the letter to be "jist about clever."

"I'll pop it under his door late to-night!" cried Jem. "So soon as I'm sure he be asleep. Now, let's write his to her."

"You'd better do that," said Lizzie. "The two writin's mustn't be the same, an' she'd know my hand along o' my makin' out the milk bills."

"Hold the match, then, somebody," cried Jem. "Here, 'Ector, catch hold; an' mind ye keep it studdy. Give me the pen, Liz."

He took up his position at the flat stone, and was so long in squaring his elbows, arranging the pen in his clumsy fingers, and thrusting his tongue into his cheek—a necessary preliminary to rustic letter-writing—that Hector announced that the match was burning him, before he had begun work in earnest.

[281]

"Hold hard a minute!" cried another man. "Best be thinkin' out what you want to say afore we lights another. It comes terr'ble expensive on matches, an' it's enough to put anybody off to have to start to light one in the middle of a line."

"True, true!" agreed the others.

Lizzie, flushed with her recent triumph, again took the lead—

" 'DEAR HANNAH——' "

"Best put 'Miss Pethin' " suggested Rose Gillingham, one of the dairymaids.

"He do never call her anything but Hannah," retorted Lizzie; "an' they've been workin' together now for nigh upon ten year."

"That's the very reason she'll think he's more in earnest-like; she'll be terr'ble pleased if he treats her so respectful."

There was something in that, the others agreed, and even Lizzie gave way, and it was decided that the amorous document should begin after the somewhat distant fashion suggested by Rose.

"Well now," resumed Lizzie— " 'I write these few lines to say as I've been a-turnin' over somethin' in my mind, as I hope you'll be glad to hear. Bein' a widow-man, I feels mysel' by times at a terr'ble loss, an' I be wishful to take a second—'"

"Bain't that comin' to the p'int a bit too quick?" interrupted Rose.

"Lord, no!" interpolated Jem very quickly. "Mercy me, it'll take I all my time to get that

much in. We have but the one sheet of paper, look see; an' there'll be a deal o' writin' in what ye've thought on a'ready."

" 'There's nobody,' " went on Lizzie, disregarding both disputants, " 'my dear Miss Pethin, what I could like better to fill the empty post nor yourself—' "

"I never knowed a post could be empty," said some facetious bystander, who was, however, nudged and hushed into silence.

" 'I do think you the vittiest maid in the whole o' Dorset,'" pursued the intrepid author, being unable, however, to proceed with her composition for some moments, owing to the storm of ironical applause ; for, indeed, the destined recipient of this tender document was not only "a staid 'ooman," but had never, at any period of her life, possessed any claim to good looks.

" 'If ye think well on my offer, will ye meet I at the Little Wood at breakfast-

time to-morrow? But, as I'm a shy man by natur', I'd thank ye not to say nothin' about me havin' wrote to ye.

" 'Your true and faithful,

" 'GILES NEALE.' "

When the hubbub of applause had subsided, a match was duly lighted, and Jem set to work. His task concluded, after much labour and consequent burning of matches, the document was read aloud, directed, and handed over to Lizzie, who undertook to slip it under Hannah's door before retiring to rest herself.

[283]

"If she do say anythin' to I about it, I'll tell her I did hear a man's foot goin' through the cheese- room very late," she added, giggling.

"Well, then, us'll all post ourselves behind the hedge at back o' the Little Wood," cried Rose, jubilantly; "an then us'll all run out an' call' April Fools!' so soon as they' ve a-made it up."

"'Ees," agreed Lizzie, "but don't you sp'ile sport by runnin' out too soon; Best wait till brewery whooter goes, an' then all run out together—that's the ticket."

The resolution was carried unanimously, and the party separated for the night. The female section made its way towards the farmhouse, for the two milkmaids employed by Farmer Bellamy in addition to his own stalwart daughters, lodged on the premises; while the men and boys betook themselves to the little cluster of houses, a kind of off-shoot from the village proper, in which they had their homes.

Hannah Pethin was usually the first of that busy household to awake, and it was her duty to call her less alert companions. When, on the morning of this momentous first of April, she jumped out of bed, she stood for a moment or two rubbing her eyes and staring. There, in the centre of the very small patch of boarded floor which intervened between her bed and the door, lay a large white envelope, which bore her name in bold characters—

"MISS HANNAH PETHIN."

" 'Tis for me," she said to herself, after gazing at this object for a minute or two. It generally took

[284]

Hannah some little time to grasp an idea, but this one presented itself in a concrete form. "Dear, to be sure, I wonder what anyone can be writin' to me for?"

She had pulled on her stout knitted stockings, and assumed the greater part of her underwear, before it occurred to her to open the letter and ascertain its contents. Even then she grasped the paper with a diffident finger and thumb, and turned it over and over before she could make up her mind to embark on its perusal.

"Dear!" she exclaimed, looking at the end in true feminine fashion, " 'Tis from Giles!"

Her eyes opened wider and wider as she read the line which preceded the signature. "Your true and faithful." She turned over the page, the colour deepening in a countenance already ruddy as the brick floor of the milk-house which she so frequently scrubbed."

"Well!" she ejaculated at last, drawing a long breath, " 'Tis a offer—that's what it be! Who'd ha' thought o' me gettin' a offer!"

She mused for a little time, her face wreathed in smiles, and spelt over the letter again with increasing satisfaction.

"Meet I at the Little Wood at breakfast-time to-morrow'—that's to-day." Hannah's wits were brightening under the influence of this unexpected stroke of good fortune. " 'I'd thank ye not to say nothin' about me havin' wrote.'…Well, an' that's well thought on. I d' 'low I be jist so shy as he, an' it 'ud ha' been terr'ble arkward to ha' talked about sich a letter as this here… 'I be wishful to

[298]

take a second'—well, the man couldn't speak plainer… 'The vittiest maid!' *Fancy* him sayin' that!"

At this period of her meditations Hannah was constrained to cross the room on tip-toe to the window, near which a small square looking-glass was suspended from a nail. She surveyed her own image with some curiosity but no little satisfaction, as with

Giles's eyes; regretted that her hair was growing grey about the temples, but consoled herself with the fact that it was still abundant and curly, and finally smiled broadly to herself.

"I d' 'low if I do for him it's all right!"

Suddenly she recollected with a start that if she was to be at the tryst at the hour named, she would have to get through her intervening labours with more than usual celerity.

A few minutes later a whirlwind-like form burst into the room where Lizzie and Alice Bellamy still lay, wrapped in slumber.

"Get up, 'tis past the time, an' there's a deal to be done."

Lizzie sat up, at first very cross, but recovering good humour as recollection came with increasing consciousness.

"Here, Hannah, wait a bit, what be in sich a stew for?" She poked Alice, who still lay under the blankets, with her elbow. "Have anythin' strange happened? You do look so queer—an' I do declare you've a-made yourself quite smart."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" responded Hannah quickly, "What could ha' happened at this time

[286]

o' marnin'? I be in a hurry to get forward wi' my work, that's all!"

"Oh, is that all? We slept a bit late, Alice an' me, along o' bein' disturbed by hearin' a man's steps i' the cheese-room late last night; did you, chance to hear 'em?"

She poked the sleepy Alice again, and even through her half-closed lids that damsel perceived the conscious expression which overspread poor Hannah's face. Before they had time, however, to ply her with further queries the latter had fled from the room, and after a vigorous thump or two on the door of the room shared by her fellow milkmaids, and a more respectful summons to the farmer and his wife, went hammering downstairs in her hobnailed boots to begin her work.

"She bain't a-goin' to be late at the meetin' place ye mid be sure!" cried Lizzie, and Alice roused herself sufficiently to chuckle.

The feverish zeal with which Hannah subsequently applied herself to her various

duties astonished her mistress, who was wont to consider her unduly slow of a morning. This zeal, however, seemed to be shared by the other occupants of the farmhouse—no one who was in the secret wanted to be late; everyone was determined to arrive at the Little Wood in time to witness the meeting of the unconscious couple. At breakfast-time, therefore, the yard was practically deserted, and the plotters were safely ensconsed behind the thick quickset hedge which bounded the little copse, and commanded a good view of the gap through which the lovers must enter.

[287]

"I knowed she'd be first!" cried Lizzie, with a giggle, as Hannah's square figure came in sight.

"She've a-got a red ribbon under her collar," whispered Alice, "Look how she've a-done herself up! She've curled her hair I d' 'low."

"No, no, her hair curls na'trel. Giles 'ull think hisself in luck," cried Jem, with a wink. "There, I've half a mind to try and cut en out if he don't turn up soon. She *be* a vitty maid, jist about!"

" 'The vittiest maid in the whole o' Darset!' " quoted his neighbour.

Meanwhile Hannah slowly approached, a maidenly shyness checking her too eager feet. It would be more seemly for Giles to be there before her, she had thought, and she had not started till five minutes past eight by the cuckoo clock. He was probably already in the wood, looking at her. She reddened at the thought and tripped in the long grass, recovering herself with an awkward lurch. But there was a bright colour in her cheeks, and a pleasantly expectant light in her eyes, perceiving which, the onlookers nudged each other.

Passing through the gap Hannah gave one quick glance round, and finding that Giles was not there, stood for a moment with a look of blank disappointment, then, as the church clock struck eight she smiled to herself.

"I d' 'low farm clock be fast," she remarked aloud, and forthwith, deeming herself to be alone, devoted herself to the improvement of her appearance. She shook out her skirts, took off and retied the bow of red ribbon; passed the loosened locks about her brow round her toil-worn finger, and finally, shading her

[288]

eyes with her hand, gazed somewhat anxiously in the direction of the village.

"Here he be!" whispered Jem all at once. He had crawled a little way on his stomach in order to obtain a better view.

Hannah, perceiving Giles at the same moment, modestly withdrew from the gap, and sitting down at the foot of a twisted thorn-tree began nervously to pluck and chew the scarcely unfolded leaves of wood sorrel which grew beneath it. The heavy tread drew nearer, and presently Giles' figure appeared in the gap

Hannah looked up bashfully, a tentative smile hovering about her lips. Giles smiled too, very broadly, and stood contemplating her so long that the interested waiters craned their heads in the endeavour to ascertain the cause of the silence.

"He be jist a-lookin' at her," muttered Alice.

"An' she be a lookin' up at he this way," responded Lizzie, with a leer which was a malicious exaggeration of poor Hannah's uncertain smile.

"So you be a-settin' on the ground?" hazarded Giles at last.

He squeezed himself through the gap and came a step nearer. He was a thick-set man, with a broad, good-humoured, stupid face, which was now all creased and puckered with an odd expression that partook as much of anxiety as pleasure.

"Bain't ye afeared o' catchin' cold?" he pursued, illuminated by a sudden idea.

"I'll get up if you like," stammered Hannah.

"Nay now," said Giles, "I don't know as I would."

[289]

He grinned till his eyes positively disappeared as he lowered himself to the ground beside her.

"How's that?" he enquired.

Hannah was at a loss to answer, and, after a moment's pause, he thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out a large hunch of bread and cheese

"Best make the most of our time," he remarked. "We'm ploughin' to-day. Hain't

you brought your breakfast?" he asked, pausing in the midst of mastication.

"I didn't think about breakfast," faltered Hannah.

"Didn't ye now?" said Giles.

He looked reflectively at his portion, and then, apparently deciding that there was only enough for one, continued to dispose of it, albeit with an uneasy and apologetic air. The silence that ensued was so long that the onlookers began to exchange glances somewhat blankly. It would be dull if Giles merely ate his breakfast while Hannah sat by—that was an everyday occurrence. Presently, however, Hannah took the initiative.

"Mr Neale," she said, "did you want to speak to me?"

Giles, with a large lump of bread in his cheek, turned upon her a glance that was half alarmed and half humorous.

"Well, I be come," he said. "B'ain't that enough? Deeds an' not words is my motto."

"Well, an' I be come," said Hannah, with some spirit. "I be come because I did think ye mid ha' summat to say to I."

Giles looked at her knowingly, and remarked with a meaning jerk of his head—

"I d' 'low us do understand each other."

Hannah, pleased but still uncertain, laughed feebly, and began to pleat the hem of her immaculate white apron.

"I didn't never expect nobody to be carryin' on about my bein' a vitty maid," she said presently, in a low voice—not so low, however, but that she was overheard by the delighted spies.

"No," agreed Giles heartily. "Ye wouldn't be like to expect that—no, sure."

Hannah was taken aback for the moment, but remembering Giles' shyness, thought his unwillingness to pursue the complimentary vein which had so much astonished her in his letter, was due to that, and forebore to be offended.

"Tis true ye must feel yerself by times at a terr'ble loss," she continued after a pause.

Giles reflected—

"Well, I haven't got on so bad so far," he observed. "Nay, I haven't got on so bad. But I don't say—" here he gulped down a huge morsel and his natural timidity at the same time. "But I don't say as I shouldn't get on better wi' a 'ooman to do for me. I don't say as I shouldn't. I can't say no fairer than that."

He paused, and then, with a leer that was distinctly amorous, edged himself a little nearer to her. "Seein' as some folks as needn't be mentioned have a-took a fancy to I—"

"Lard, Mr Neale," interrupted Hannah coyly. "Whatever did put sich a notion into your head?"

Again Giles fixed his twinkling eyes upon her

[291]

with a glance that was unutterably knowing, and returned—

"Ye wouldn't be here if ye hadn't, would ye now?"

Hannah gave an assenting giggle, and Giles, after a moment's hesitation, put his arm round her waist, repeating exultantly:

"Would ye now? Not that I ever set up to be a handsome man, ye know," he added more seriously.

"Handsome is as handsome does," exclaimed Hannah, in so heart-whole a fashion that Giles did not ask himself if the compliment were somewhat left-handed.

"Well, if your 'eart's mine, that's enough," went on Giles, after an interval devoted to conscientious endeavours to recall the exact wording of the portentous letter. "I'm willin'—there, ye have it plain. I'm willin'."

"Well," said Hannah, "I'm sure I'm very thankful to ye, Giles. I be proud to think as I be your ch'ice, an' I'll do my very best for to make ye comfortable an' happy."

Giles, pleasantly conscious that this courtship, unlooked for though it might have been, was progressing on lines that were eminently orthodox and satisfactory, eyed her approvingly for some moments, and then, with a burst of enthusiasm, tightened his grip of her solid waist, and exclaimed—

"I d' 'low I be 'appy an' comfortable now."

During the subsequent pause Jem Frisby thrust his sunburnt face between the catkin-tipped willow saplings which protruded from his corner of the

[292]

hedge, and almost choked with laughter as he announced—

"They be a-kissin' of each other!"

The middle-aged lovers sat on for some time in extreme enjoyment of the situation. The spring sunshine fell across their knees and their sturdy clasped hands; the birds sang over their heads, the twisted boughs of the old thorn waved in the light breeze, the leaf-buds, already green though not yet unfolded, flashing like jewels in the light. The bank beneath the hedge was gay with celandines, and the air was sweet with the scent of primroses, with which the place was carpeted, though few of the flowers were yet in full bloom.

Giles and Hannah were scarcely conscious of their surroundings, yet in some indefinite way these added to their blissful state. Just as Giles, with that twinkle in his eyes which heralded, as Hannah had perceived, some particularly ardent speech, had nudged her meaningly and enquired "What about bein' called home," the church clock struck nine, and at the same time the blare of the brewery "whooter" fell upon their ears. Simultaneously with these sounds, others, even more discordant than the hooter startled the pair, who scrambled to their feet in time to see a row of gesticulating figures surmounted by grinning faces, spring up from behind the hedge, which they had believed to shelter them.

"April fools, haw, haw!"…"I d' 'low ye be a proper pair on 'em!"

"April fool, Hannah! Giles, ye be an April fool!"

[293]

"We took in the pair o' ye nicely!"

This was the chorus which greeted their bewildered ears, interspersed with shouts of laughter, while fingers were pointed and heads were shaken waggishly. Giles

was the first to recover his self- possession.

"What be the meanin' o' this?" he enquired angrily. "It's too bad if a man can't step out to have a quiet word wi' a 'ooman!"

"More particular when the 'ooman's took sich a mortal fancy to 'en!" interpolated Lizzie, holding her sides.

"Yes," cried Alice, quick to take up her cue. "Why, Hannah's heart have a-been yours two year an' more. I'm sure I don't wonder at it," she added, "Sich a 'andsome man as you be."

"Who's been a-tellin' ye about that?" growled Giles, turning very red.

"Ask Hannah!" ejaculated Lizzie, in a voice that was scarcely articulate for laughter. "Ask the vittiest maid in the whole o' Darset."

"Giles," exclaimed Hannah tremulously, "somebody must ha' read your letter to me."

The jeers and laughter redoubled, and Jem exclaimed triumphantly—

"Somebody read it, an' somebody wrote it!"

"Wasn't it Giles?" faltered Hannah, turning pale beneath her tan, and beginning to tremble violently. Some instinct of womanly compassion suddenly sobered Alice. Pushing through the hedge she made her way to Hannah's side.

" 'Twas but a joke, my dear," she explained samewhat shamefacedly. "There, 'tis the first of April,

ye see, an' we jist thought we'd play ye a bit of trick. 'Twas made up jist for fun. We wrote Giles a letter in your name asking him to meet ye here an' sayin'——sayin'—"

"What did ye say?" interrupted Hannah, the colour rushing back to her shamed, distressed face. "Oh, Mr Neale, you thought it was me. I'd never ha'wrote no letter, I'd never ha' been so bold. I— I wouldn't ha' come here wi'out I thought 'twas you as axed me. I had a letter this marnin' signed in your name. I thought 'twas from you—I thought—" Breaking off suddenly she raised her apron to her eyes.

Giles made a step towards her, pushed Alice roughly on one side, and jerked the apron down.

"Give over cryin'," he exclaimed gruffly. "Let's get at the rights o' this. I must have a look at that there letter—give it to me."

"Oh, I'd never have the face," Hannah was beginning when he silenced her with the reiterated command in a raised voice—

"Give it to me. I say! I'll ha' the rights o' this—dalled if I don't!"

Very reluctantly Hannah drew the fateful missive from her bosom, a suppressed titter once more breaking the silence which had reigned since the jest had threatened to take a serious turn. Giles unfolded the letter, read it slowly, and then, with an impassive face, handed it back to its original recipient.

"You can keep it," he remarked. "It's my letter right enough."

[295]

"Well, that is a good 'un!" exclaimed the irrepressible Jem.

Giles glowered round at him.

"It's my letter," be repeated doggedly. "It's my name what's signed at the end, an' every word what's in it be mine."

"Giles!" exclaimed Hannah, almost inarticulately.

Giles turned majestically towards her.

"It's right, I tell 'ee," he said firmly. "I'm not a great hand at letter-writin', an' as like as not if I'd ha' tried for to put down what be in my mind I shouldn't ha' done it so clever. I'm much obliged to you, neighbours," he added, raising his voice, and looking triumphantly round at the astonished faces. Then, with a sudden shout of laughter he exclaimed—

"Who's April fools now?"

"Well, there, I'll say you have the best o' it, Giles," said somebody good-humouredly. "I be right 'down glad the matter be going to end this way."

"Thank ye," said Giles.

"We be to wish ye j'y, be we?" said Lizzie, with a scarcely perceptible toss of her head.

"I d' 'low ye be," he affirmed gravely.

"Well, I be pure glad, Hannah, my dear, I'm sure," said Alice, smiling

doubtfully at Hannah as she backed through the hedge.

Hannah made no response; she, too, was looking doubtful, almost piteous, as she gazed at Giles' unmoved countenance.

The company filed away, feeling somewhat flat; the joke had unaccountably missed fire.

[296]

Jem, who was the last to pass through the gap, made a final attempt to put Giles out of countenance.

"'Tis easy seen you be a man o' taste, Giles," he called out. "She be the vittiest maid in the whole o' Darset, bain't she?"

"She be," assented Giles with fervour, "jist about."

He strode towards the hedge, and stood watching the somewhat depressed-looking little procession which filed across the field. When it had disappeared behind the big hayrick at the comet, he turned to Hannah. She had again thrown her apron over her head, and was weeping behind it. He went towards her and pulled it down—very gently this time.

"We have the best of it, I think," he observed.

"Oh, Giles," sobbed she. "You must think—oh, I don't know what you must think!"

"I do think what's wrote in my letter," said Giles.

"Nay now, you couldn't," said Hannah, but there was an unconscious appeal in her voice. "You couldn't ever think I was a vitty maid."

"Well, don't you think I be a 'andsome man, my dear?" cried Giles, advancing, his broad face beaming with good-humoured smiles towards her.

"I do, indeed I do," cried Hannah with eager enthusiasm. "There, I do think ye be the handsomest and nicest man ever I did see. Handsome is as handsome does. An' I d' 'low you've acted handsome."

[297]

"Well, if you think so, I'm satisfied," responded Giles; then, after a pause, he added with his most knowing twinkle—

"Since we agree so well I d' 'low we mid jist so well fall over pulpit at once."

[NP]

PRINTED BY
TURNBULL AND SPEARS
EDINBURGH