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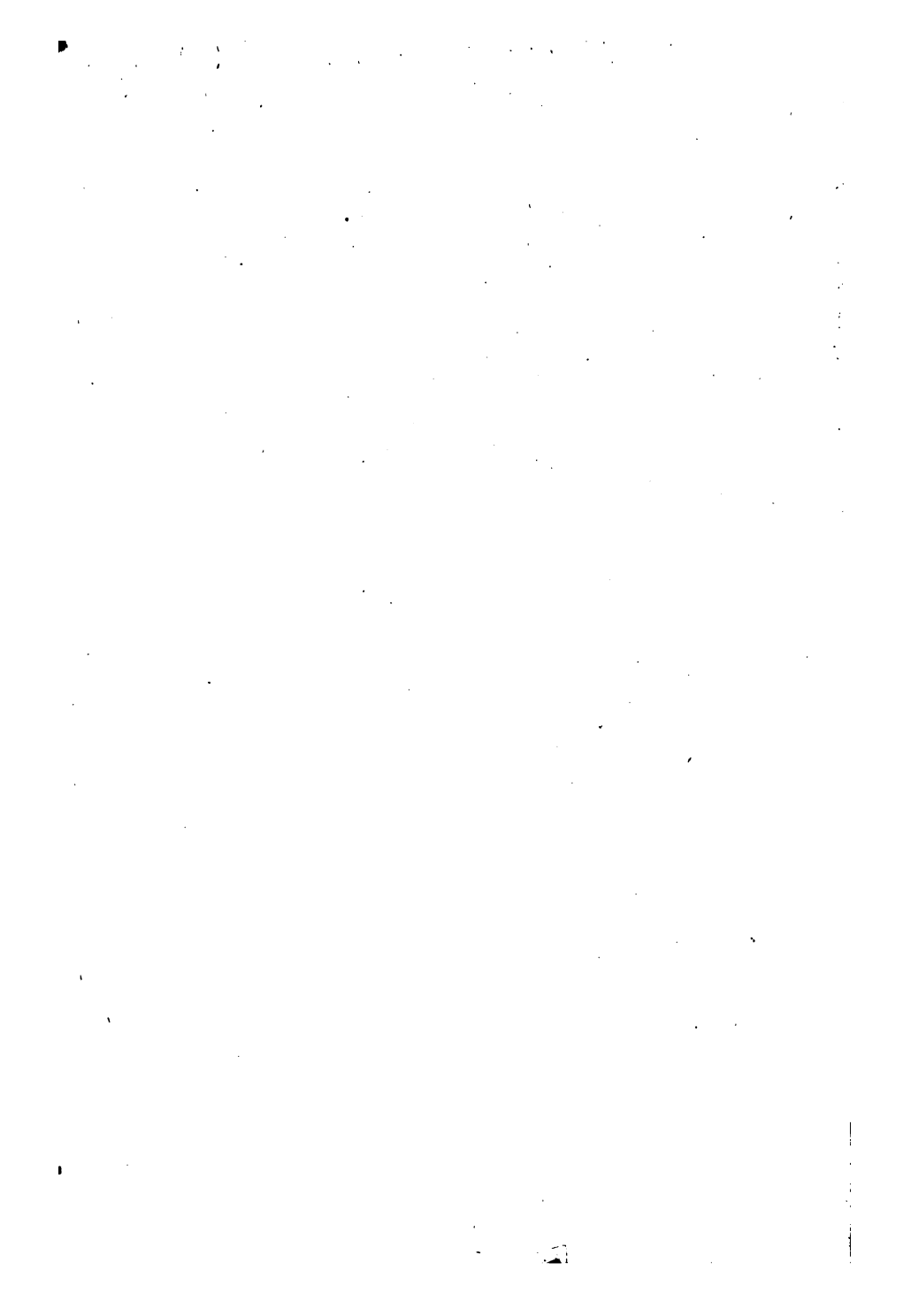
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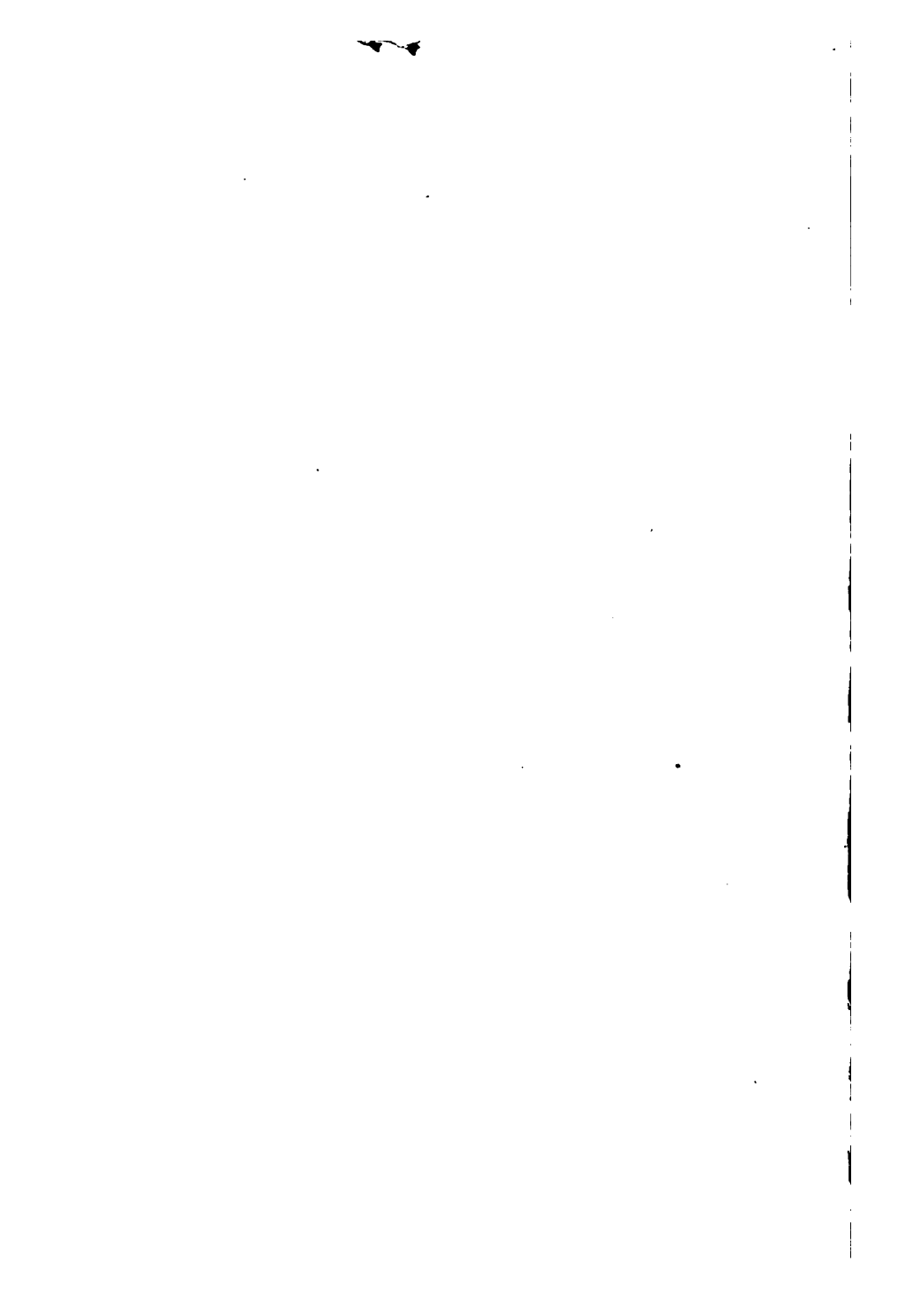
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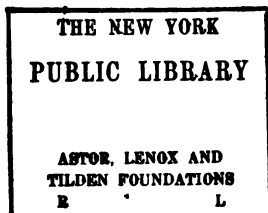
SCHWARTZ



BY

D. CHRISTIE MURRAY

AUTHOR OF 'AUNT RACHEL,' 'THE WEAKER VESSEL,' ETC.



London

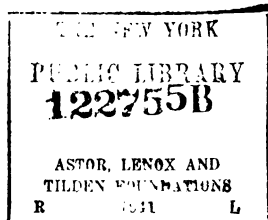
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I

SCHWARTZ: A HISTORY

B



SCHWARTZ: A HISTORY

I

I WAS expatriated by a man with an axe. The man and the axe were alike visionary and unreal, though it needed a very considerable effort of the will to hold them at mental arm's length. I had work on hand which imperatively demanded to be finished, and I was so broken down by a long course of labour that it was a matter of actual difficulty with me when I sat down at my desk of a morning to lay hold of the thread of last night's work, and to recall the personages who had moved through my manuscript pages for the past three or four months. The day's work always began with a fog, which at first looked impenetrable, but would brighten little by little until I could see my ideal friends moving in it, and could recognise their familiar lineaments. Then the fog would disperse altogether, and a certain indescribable, exultant, feverish brightness would succeed it, and in this feverish brightness my ideal friends would move and talk as it were of their own volition.

But one morning—it was in November, and the sand-tinged foam flecks caught from the stormy bay were thick on the roadway before my window—the fog was thicker and more obdurate than common. I read and re-read the work of the day before, and the written words conveyed no meaning. In a dim sort of way this seemed lamentable, and I remember standing at the window, and looking out to where the white crests of the waves came racing shorewards under a leaden-coloured sky, and saying to myself over and over again, ‘Oh, that way madness lies!’ but without any active sentiment of dismay or fear, and with a clouded, uninterested wonder as to where the words came from. Quite suddenly I became aware of a second presence in the chamber, and turned with an actual assurance that some one stood behind me. I was alone, as a single glance about the room informed me, but the sense of that second presence was so clearly defined and positive that the mere evidence of sight seemed doubtful.

The day’s work began in the manner which had of late grown customary, and in a while the fog gave way to a brilliance unusually flushed and hectic. The uninvited, invisible personage kept his place, until, even with the constant fancy that he was there looking over my shoulder, and so close that there was always a risk of contact, I grew to disregard him. All day long he watched the pen travelling over the paper, all day long I was aware of him, featureless, shadowy,

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expressionless, with a vague cheek near my own. During the brief interval I gave myself for luncheon he stood behind my chair, and, being much refreshed and brightened by my morning's work, I mocked him quite gaily.

'Your name is Nerves,' I told him within myself, 'and you live in the land of Mental Overwork. I have still a fortnight's stretch across the country you inhabit, and if you so please you may accompany me all the way. You may even follow me into the land of Repose which lies beyond your own territory, but its air will not agree with you. You will dwindle, peak, and pine in that exquisite atmosphere, and in a very little while I shall have seen the last of you.'

After luncheon I took a constitutional on the pier, not without a hope that my featureless friend might be blown away by the gusty wind, which came bellowing up from the Firth of Forth, with enough stinging salt and vivifying freshness in it, one might have fancied, to shrivel up a host of phantoms. I tramped him up and down the gleaming planks in the keen salt wind for half an hour, and he shadowed me unshrinkingly. With the worst will in the world I took him home, and all afternoon and all evening he stuck his shadowy head over my shoulder, and watched the pen as it spread its cobweb lines over the white desert of the paper. He waited behind my chair at dinner, and late at night, when the long day's work at last

was over, he hung his intrusive head over my shoulder and stared into the moderate glass of much-watered whisky which kept a final pipe in company.

He had grown already into an unutterable bore, and when he insisted upon passing the night with me I could—but for the obvious inutility of the thing—have lost my temper fairly. He took his place at the bed-head, and kept it till I fell asleep. He was there when I awoke in the night, and probably because the darkness, the quiet, and the sense of solitude were favourable to him he began to grow clearer. Quite suddenly, and with a momentary but genuine thrill of fear, I made a discovery about him. He carried an axe. This weapon was edged like a razor, but was unusually solid and weighty at the back. From the moment at which I first became aware of it to that happy hour when my phantom bore departed and took his weapon with him, there was never a conscious second in which the axe was not in act to fall, and yet it never fell. It was always going to strike and never struck.

‘You cannot be supposed to know it, my phantom nuisance,’ I said, being ready to seek any means by which I might discredit the dreadful rapidity with which he seemed to be growing real; ‘you cannot be supposed to know it, but one of these days you will furnish excellent copy. As a literary man’s companion you are not quite without your uses. One of these days I will haunt a rascal with you, and he shall

sweat and shiver at you, as I decline to sweat and shiver. You observe I take you gaily. I am very much inclined to think that if I took you any other way that axe might fall, and sever something which might be difficult to mend. So long as you choose to stay, I mean to make a study of you.'

Most happily I was able to adhere to that resolve, but I solemnly declare it made him no less dreadful. Sometimes I tried to ignore him, but that was a sheer impossibility. Very often I flouted him and jeered at him, mocked him with his own unreality, and dared him to carry out his constant threat and strike. But all day and every day, and in all the many sleepless watches of my nights, he kept me company, and every hour the threatened blow of the razor-edged axe seemed likelier to fall. But at last—thank Heaven—the work was done, I touched the two or three hundred pounds which paid for it, and I was free to take a holiday.

We had grown too accustomed to each other to part on a sudden, even then. I never saw him, for he was always behind me (and even when I stood before a mirror he was invisible but *there*), but he was no longer featureless. His eyes shone through a black vizard with one unwinking, glittering, ceaseless threat. He wore a slashed doublet with long hose reaching to the upper thigh, and he had a rosette on each instep. I can see quite clearly now the peculiar dull cold gleam the razor-edged axe wore as he stood in

some shadowed place behind me, and the brighter gleam it had in daylight in the streets.

When I had borne with him until I felt that I could bear with him no longer, I took him, being back in town again, to a London physician of some eminence. The doctor took him somewhat gravely, insisted upon absolute mental rest, prescribed a tonic, laid down certain rules about diet, certain restrictions upon wine and tobacco, and ordered immediate change of scene.

To begin with I went to Antwerp, thence to Brussels, and thence, by the merest chance in the world, to Janenne, a little village in the Belgian Ardennes, at no great distance from the French frontier. I had no idea of staying there, and on the surface of things there was no reason why I should have prolonged my stay beyond a day or two. People visit Janenne in the summer time, and suppose themselves to have exhausted its limited attractions in four-and-twenty hours. There is nothing at first sight to keep the stranger longer, but if he will only stay for a week he will inevitably want to stay for a fortnight, and if once he has stayed for a fortnight, his business is done, and he is in love with Janenne for the rest of his natural life. Rural quiet has made her home in Janenne, and contentment dwells with her, sleepy-eyed.

Even in the first week of December, the russet and amber-coloured leaves still cling to the branches of the huge old lime-trees of Lorette, and my lonely feet on

the thick carpet of dead leaves below made the sole sound I heard there except the ceaseless musical tinkle of chisel and stone from the distant granite quarries—a succession of notes altogether rural in suggestion—like the tinkle of many sheep-bells. Even in that first week of December I could sit in the open air there, where the mild winter sunlight flashed the huge crucifix and the colossal Christ of painted wood, which poise above the toy chapel carved out of the live rock. The chapel and the crucifix are at one end of a lime-tree avenue a third of a mile long, and the trees are aged beyond strict local knowledge, gnarled and warty and bulbous and great of girth. You climb to Lorette by a gentle ascent, and below the rock-carved chapel lies a precipice—not an Alpine affair at all, but a reasonable precipice for Belgium—say, two or even three hundred feet, and away and away and away, the golden-dimpled hills go changing from the yellowish green of winter grass to the variously-toned grays of the same grass in mid-distance, and then to a blue which grows continually hazier until it melts at the sky-line, and seems half to blend with the dim pallid sapphire of a December sky.

Here, 'with an ambrosial sense of over-weariness falling into sleep,' would I often sit at the foot of the great crucifix, and would smoke the pipe of idleness, a little unmindful, perhaps, of the good London doctor's caution against the misuse of tobacco. It was here that I awoke to the fact one day that the man with

the axe was absent. He had slipped away with no good-byes on either side, and I was blissfully alone again. The sweet peace of it, and the quiet of it no tongue or pen can tell. The air was balsamic with the odours of the pines which clothed the hillsides for miles and miles and miles in squares and oblongs and a hundred irregular forms of blackish green, sometimes snaking in a thin dark line, sometimes topping a crest with a close-cropped hog-mane, and sometimes clustering densely over a whole slope, but always throwing the neighbouring yellows and greens and grays into a wonderful aerial delicacy of contrast. The scarred lime trunks had a bluish gray tone in the winter sunlight, and the carpet at their feet was of Indian red and sienna and brown, of fiercest scarlet and gold and palest lemon colour, of amber and russet and dead green. And everywhere, and in my tired mind most of all, was peace.

I had been a fortnight at Janenne when my intrusive phantom left me on Lorette. I had made no acquaintances, for I was but feeble at the language, and did not care to encounter the trouble of talking in it. The first friendship I made—I have since spent three years in the delightful place, and have made several friendships there—was begun within five minutes of that exquisite moment at which I awoke to the fact that my phantom was away.

There was not a living creature in sight, and there was not a sound to be heard except the distant tinkle

of chisel and stone, and the occasional rustle of a falling leaf, until Schwartz, the subject of this history, walked pensively round a corner eighty yards down the avenue, and paused to scratch one ear with a hind foot. He stood for a time with a thoughtful air, looked up the avenue and down the avenue, and then with slow deliberation, and an occasional pause for thought, he walked towards me. When within half a dozen yards he stopped and took good stock of me, with brown eyes overhung by thick grizzled eyebrows. Then he offered a short, interrogative, authoritative bark, a mere monosyllable of inquiry.

‘A stranger,’ I responded. ‘An invalid stranger.’

He seemed not only satisfied, but, for some unknown reason, delighted. He wagged the cropped stump of a gray tail, and writhed his whole body with a greeting that had an almost slavish air of charmed propitiation; and then, without a word on his side or on mine, he mounted the steps which led to the great crucifix, sate down upon the topmost step beside me, and nestled his grizzled head in my lap. I confess that he could have done nothing which would have pleased me more. I have always thought the unconditional and immediate confidence of a dog or a child a sort of certificate to character, though I know well that there is a kind of dog whose native friendliness altogether outruns his discretion, and who is doomed from birth to fall into error, and to encounter consequent rebuffs which must be grievous to be borne.

My new companion wore a collar, and had other signs that distinguished him from the mere mongrel of the village street, but he was of no particular breed. His coat was of a bluish gray, and though soft enough to the touch, had a harsh and spiky aspect. He came nearer to being a broken-haired terrier than anything else, but I seemed to discern half a dozen crosses in him, and a lover of dogs who asked for breed would not have offered sixpence for him.

II

SOMEWHERE about the year 1560 this tranquil and beautiful country was devastated by a plague which carried off hundreds of its sparse inhabitants, and left many villages desolate. The legends of the countryside tell of places in which no human life remained.

The people of Janenne, headed by the *doyen*, made a pilgrimage in procession to the shrine of Our Lady of Lorette, and offered to strike a bargain. They promised that if Janenne should be spared from the plague they and their descendants for ever would each year repeat that procession in honour of Our Lady of Lorette, and that once in seven years they would appear under arms and fire a salvo. Whether in consequence of this arrangement or not, Janenne escaped the plague, and from that year to this the promised procession has never been forgotten. In course of time it became less the local mode than it had been to carry arms, and nowadays the great septennial procession can only be gone through after a prodigious deal of drilling and preparation.

A week or two after my arrival the villagers began

to train, under the conduct of a stout military-looking personage, who had been in the Belgian cavalry and *gendarmérie*, and was now in honourable retirement from war's alarms as a grocer. He traded under the name of Dorn-Casart—the wife's maiden name being tacked to his own, after the manner of the country. This habit, by the way, gives a certain flavour of aristocracy to the trading names over even the smallest shop windows. 'Coqueline-Walhaert, *negociant*,' is the sign over the establishment wherein a very infirm old woman sells centimes' worth of sweetstuff to the *jeunesse* of Janenne, whilst her husband works at the quarries.

Monsieur Dorn is a man with a huge moustache, fat cheeks streaked with scarlet lines on a bilious groundwork, and a voice raspy with much Geneva and the habit of command. He rides with the unmistakable seat of an old cavalry man, and his behaviour on horseback was a marked contrast to that of the mounted contingent he drilled every day in the open place in front of the hotel. His steed, artfully stimulated by the spur, caracoled, danced, and lashed out with his hind feet, and Monsieur Dorn, with one fist stuck against his own fat ribs, swayed to the motion with admirable nonchalance. His voice, which has the barky tone inseparable from military command, would ring about the square like the voice of a commander-in-chief, and by the exercise of a practised imagination, I could almost persuade myself that I stood face to face with the horrid front of war.

When Monsieur Dorn was not drilling his brigade he was generally to be found at the Café de la Regence, smoking a huge meerschaum with a cherry wood stem and sipping Geneva. Even in this comparative retirement the halo of his office clung about him, and seemed to hold men off from a too familiar intercourse ; but one afternoon I saw him unbending there. He was nearly always accompanied by a dog, spotlessly white, the most ladylike of her species I remember to have seen. Her jet-black beady eyes and jet-black glittering nose set off the snowy whiteness of her coat, and were in turn set off by it. She had a refined, coquettish, mincing walk, which alone was enough to bespeak the agreeable sense she had of her own charms. Perhaps a satiric observer of manners might have thought her more like a lady's-maid than a lady. A suggestion of pertness in her beady eyes, and a certain superciliousness of bearing were mingled with a coquetry not displeasing to one who surveyed her from the human height. To look important is pretty generally to feel important, but is, by no means, to be important. We discern this fact with curious clearness when we look at other people, but it is nowhere quite so evident as in what we call the brute creation. (As if we didn't belong to it !) Perhaps there are intelligences who look at us with just such a pitying amusement and analysis—*our* prosperous relatives, who started earlier in the race of life than we did, and met with better chances.

In spite of airs and graces, natural and acquired, Lil's claims to purity of race were small, though, like my older acquaintance, Schwartz, she was more a broken-haired terrier than anything else. Schwartz was simply and purely *bourgeois*. He had no airs and no pretensions; but Lil, whatever her genuine claims may have been, was of another stamp and fashion.

It was Lil who was the cause of Monsieur Dorn's unbending. The fat old *gendarme* was putting her through a set of tricks, which she executed with complete *aplomb* and intelligence. There was nothing violent in these exercises; nothing a dog of the best breeding in the world could have felt to derogate from dignity. She was much petted and applauded for her performances, and was rewarded by two or three lumps of sugar, which she ate without any of the vulgar haste characteristic of most dogs in their dealings with sweetmeats.

The language of the peasantry hereabouts is that same Walloon tongue in which old Froissart wrote his *Chronicles*. It is little more comprehensible to the average Frenchman than to the average Englishman, but its vocabulary is restricted, and the people who talk it have enriched (or corrupted) it with many words of French. When the loungers in the *café* began to talk, as they did presently, it amused me to listen to this unknown tongue; and whenever I heard '*la procession*' named, I enjoyed much the kind of refreshment Mr. Gargery experienced when he

encountered a J.O., Jo, in the course of his general reading. *La procession* was not merely the staple of the village talk, but the warp and woof of it, and any intruding strand of foreign fancy was cut short at the lips of him who strove to spin it into the web of conversation. I myself ventured an inquiry or two, for all but the most ignorant speak French of a sort. Monsieur Dorn accepted a glass of *pequet* at my request (a fire-water, for a dose of which one halfpenny is charged, and upon which the unaccustomed stranger may intoxicate himself madly at an outlay of five-pence), and the fat and stately old fellow told me all about the origin and meaning of the pious form the village was then preparing to fulfil. He made the kindest allowance for my limited powers of speech, and bounteously fed my native sense of retiring humility with patronage.

The door of the *café* was open to the mild, fir-scented December air, though a crackling fire burnt noisily in the thin-ribbed stove. Lil made occasional excursions to the open doorway, looking out upon the passers-by with a keen alertness. She had some time returned from one of these inspections, and had curled herself at her master's feet, when I heard a singular and persistent tapping upon the unclothed floor, and looking round caught sight of my friend Schwartz, who was making a crouching and timid progress toward us, and was wagging his cropped tail with such vehemence that it sounded on the boards like a light hammer on

a carpeted flooring. At first I fancied that he recognised me, and I held out to him an encouraging hand, of which he took no notice. That air of propitiatory humility which I had seen in him when we had first encountered on Lorette was exaggerated to a slavish adulation. There is no living creature but a dog who would not have been ashamed to show such a mixture of transport and self-depreciation. He fawned, he writhed, he rapped his tail upon the floor in a sustained *crescendo*. The dumb heart had no language for its own delight and humility. Anybody who takes pleasure in dogs has seen the *sort* of thing scores and scores of times. It was the quality of intensity which made it remarkable in Schwartz.

Lil, for whom this display of joy and humbleness was made, was altogether unmoved by it. She was not merely regardless of it, but ostentatiously disdainful. She took a coquettish lady's-maidish amble to the door, passing Schwartz by the way, and yawned as she looked out upon the street. Schwartz fawned after her to the door, and with a second yawn she repassed him, and returned to lie at the feet of the fat old *gendarme*. The absurd little drama of coquetry and worship went on until the old fellow arose with a friendly *bon jour*, to me, and a whistle to Lil, who followed him with a supercilious nose in the air. The despised Schwartz stood a while, and then set out after her at a ridiculous three-legged run, but before he had gone ten yards he stopped short, looked after the

retreating fair in silence, and then walked off with a dispirited aspect in the opposite direction.

So far as I could tell, my shadowy enemy with the axe had taken himself away for good and all, but I was so fearful of recalling him that I kept altogether idle, and in other respects nursed and coddled myself with a constant assiduity. But it is a hard thing for a man who has accustomed himself to constant mental employment to go without it, and in the absence of pens, ink, and paper, books and journals, the procession bade fair to be a perfect godsend. Even when the inhabitants of the village took to rising at four o'clock in the morning, and fanfaronaded with ill-blown bugles, and flaring torches, and a dreadful untiring drum about the street, I forbore to grumble, and when on Sundays they turned out in a body after mass to see their own military section drilled in the *Place* of the Hotel de Ville, one bored valetudinarian welcomed them heartily. The military section had got down uniforms from one of the Brussels theatres,—busbies and helmets, and the gloriously comic hats of the *garde civile*,—dragoon tunics, hussar jackets, infantry shell-jackets, cavalry stable-jackets, foresters' boots, dragoon jack-boots, stage piratical boots with wide tops to fit the thigh that drooped about the ankles,—trousers of every sort, from blue broadcloth, gold-striped, to the homely fustian,—and a rare show they made. They went fours right or fours left with a fine military jangle, and sometimes went fours right and fours left at the same time, with

results disastrous to military order. Then it was good to see and hear the fat Dorn as he caracoled in a field-marshal's uniform, and barked his orders at the disordered crowd like a field-marshal to the manner born.

Monsieur Dorn being thus gloriously lifted into the range of the public eye, Lil seemed to take added airs of importance. I say *seemed*, but that is only because of the foolish and ignorant habit into which I was born and educated. Ever since I can remember, people have been telling stories to prove that dogs have some sort of intelligence, as if—except to the most stupid and the blindest—the thing had ever stood in need of proof. There is nothing much more fatal to the apprehension of a fact than the constant causeless repetition of it. And then the tales of the intelligence of dogs are told as a general thing with a sort of wide-eyed wonder, so that the dog's very advocates contrive to impress their readers with the belief that their commonplace bit of history is remarkable.

Of course there are clever dogs and dull dogs, just as there are sages and idiots, but any dog who was not a fool would have known and recognised his master's splendour and importance if he had belonged at this epoch to Monsieur Dorn. Lil saw him sitting up there in vivid colours, heard him shouting in a voice of authority, and saw people answer to that voice. There was not a Christian in the crowd who had a better understanding of the situation. To see her running in and out amongst the horses' feet, ordering the

sham dragoons and hussars about in her own language, was to know she understood the thing, and had invested herself with some of her master's glory. Wherever she went, in and out and about, Schwartz, with his meek spikes raging in all directions, followed, close at heel. Almost everybody has seen the loud aggressive swaggering boy with the meek admiring small boy in his train. The small boy glorifies the other in his mind, setting him on a level with Three-Fingered Jack, or Goliath's conqueror, and the aggressive boy, feeling rather than understanding the other's reverence, does his best to look as if he deserved it. To see Lil swagger and to hear her bark, and to see the foolish humble Schwartz follow her, admiring her, believing in her, utterly borne away by her insolent pretence that the whole show was got up by her orders—to observe this was to see one half the world in little.

On other days Lil was as other dogs, except, perhaps, to the love-blinded eyes of Schwartz, but on Sundays, so long as the drills for the procession lasted, the field was all her own. One or two of her companions, carried away by her example, dared to run amongst the horses' feet and bark. They were promptly kicked into the ring of spectators, and Lil was left alone in her glory. Of course it all went with his own confiding nature, and the state of complete slavery in which he lived, to persuade Schwartz of her greatness. She deserves at least that one truth should be admitted. She never gave her admirer the least en-

couragement so far as I could see. She never in a chance encounter in the street paused to exchange good-morrow. She never so much as turned a head in his direction. She tolerated his presence and that was all. But wherever she went he shadowed her. He was not obtrusive, but was content to keep at heel, and to be permitted to admire. I have seen him sit for half an hour on a doorstep, a canine monument of patience, waiting for her to come out, and I have seen her travel about the *Place* in apparently purposeless zigzags and circles for the mere pride and vanity of knowing how closely he would follow her least reasonable movements.

A week or two before the grand event came off there was a prodigious excitement in Janenne. An idea, originating in the military spirit of Monsieur Dorn, had been industriously put about, a subscription had been set on foot for it, a committee had been appointed to superintend its working, and now the glorious fancy was actually translated into fact. The procession was to be supplemented by artillery, and now here was a time-eaten old gun, mounted on a worm-eaten old carriage, and trailed in harness of rope by two stalwart Flemish horses. Here also was gunpowder enough to wreck the village, and the Janennois, who for a moral people have a most astounding love of noise, were out at earliest dawn of light on Sunday morning to see the gun fired. The first firing was supposed to be an experiment, and everybody was warned to a safe dis-

tance when the gun was loaded, whilst Monsieur Dorn arranged a train of powder, and set a slow match in connection with it. When the bang came and the old iron stood the strain everybody went wild with joy, and even Monsieur Dorn himself was so carried away by the general enthusiasm that he tested the piece all morning. It was finally discovered that the powder was exhausted, and the hat had to be sent round again for a new subscription.

The annual procession is far and away the greatest event of the year at Janenne, and the septennial procession would of itself be enough to satisfy any resident in the village that he had lived if he had but seen it once. Nobody dreamed of spoiling the procession for the sake of a cart-load or so of gunpowder, and the hat was soon filled. Next Sunday Janenne enjoyed a new series of experiments on the big gun, and what with the banging of the drum, and the blowing of the bugle, and the flaming of torches in the dark morning, and the banging of the big gun from dawn till noon, and the clatter and glitter of the drill in the after part of the short winter day, the atmosphere of the village was altogether warlike.

The big gun gave Lil an added claim on the veneration of her admirer. On the morning of the second firing she came demurely down to the field in which the artillery experiments were conducted, with an air of knowing all about it, and Schwartz, as usual, pursued her. The gun was sponged and loaded, and the charge

was rammed home under Monsieur Dorn's supervision, Lil standing gravely by, and Schwartz grovelling in her neighbourhood. Then the old *gendarme* himself primed the piece, and taking a torch from a boy who stood near him applied it to the touch-hole. Out at the muzzle sprang the answering flame and roar, and away went Schwartz as if he had been projected by the force of the powder. Panic declared itself in every hair, and his usual foolish three-legged amble was exchanged for a pace like that of a greyhound. He had gone but a hundred yards at most, when reason resumed her seat. He stopped and turned, and after a little pause came back with an evident shamefacedness. Lil had stood her ground without the slightest sign of fear, and when Schwartz returned she took to looking so triumphantly, and superintended the subsequent operations with so much authority, that I am profoundly convinced of her intent to persuade her slavish follower that this was some new and astonishing form of bark of which she alone possessed the secret.

Schwartz was most probably willing to believe anything she told him. It is the way of some natures to confide, and it is the way of others to presume upon their confidence.

III

JANENNE is on the outskirts of the Forest Country, and in the shooting season the *chasseur* is a familiar personage. He arrives by evening train or diligence, half a dozen strong. He sups and betakes himself to the singing of comic songs with choruses, moistening and mellowing his vocal chords with plenteous burgundy. Long after everybody else has gone to bed, he tramps in chorus along the echoing unclothed corridor, and he and his chums open bedroom doors to shout Belgian scraps of *facetiae* at each other, or to cast prodigious boots upon the sounding boards. Then long before anybody else has a mind to rise, he is up again promenading the corridor like a multiplied copy of the giant in the *Castle of Otranto*. He rolls away in the darkness with the cracking of whips and jingling of bells, and sleep and silence settle down again. At night he is back to supper with tales of big game multitudinous as Laban's flocks, and a bag unaccountably empty. That same evening he is away to desk or counter or studio in Brussels, Antwerp, or Liège, and Janenne falls back into its normal peace.

It was mid-December, and the snow was falling in powdery flakes, when a sportsman alighted at the Hotel des Postes, and at the first glance I knew him for a countryman. He was a fine, frank, free-hearted young fellow, one of the most easily likable of youngsters, and we were on friendly terms together before the first evening was over. He knew a number of people in the neighbourhood, had received a dozen invitations to shoot, or thereabouts, and meant to put up three weeks at Janenne, so he told me, shooting when sport was to be had, and on other days tramping about the country. He was accompanied by a bull-terrier, who answered to the name of Scraper, a handsome creature of his kind, with one eye in permanent mourning.

'Of course he's no good,' said the young fellow, in answer to an observation of mine, 'but then he's perfectly tamed, and therefore he's no harm. He'll stay where he's told; and I believe the poor beggar would break his heart if I left him behind. Wouldn't you, old chap?'

The young sportsman went away to the chase next morning, taking his bull-terrier with him, and returning at night reported Scraper's perfect good behaviour. In the course of that evening's talk I spoke of certain peculiarities I had noticed in the formation of the country, and my new acquaintance proposed that on an idle day of his next week we should take a walk of exploration. When the day came we started together,

and I showed him some of the curiosities of nature I had noticed.

Round and about Janenne the world is hollow. The hills are mere bubbles, and the earth is honey-combed with caverns. By the side of the road which leads to Houssy a river accompanies the traveller's steps, purling and singing, and talking secrets (as shallow pebbly-bedded streams have a way of doing), and on a sudden the traveller misses it. There, before him, is a river bed, wide, white, and stony, but where is the river? If he be a curious traveller he will retrace his steps, and will find the stream racing with some impetuosity towards a bend, where it dwindles by apparent miracle into nothing. The curious traveller, naturally growing more curious than common in the presence of these phenomena, will, at some risk to his neck, descend the bank, and make inquiry into the reason for the disappearance of the stream. He will see nothing to account for it, but he will probably arrive at the conclusion that there are fissures in the river's bed, through which the water falls to feed the subterranean stream, of which he is pretty certain to have heard or read. If he will walk back a mile, against the course of the stream, will cross the main street of Janenne, strike the Montcourtois Road there, and cross the river bridge, he will see a cavern lipped by the flowing water, and in that cavern, only a foot or so below the level of the open-air stream, he will find its subterranean continuation. It has worked

back upon itself in this secret way, by what strange courses no man knows or can guess. But that the stream is the same has been proved by a device at once ingenious and simple. Colouring matter of various sorts has from time to time been thrown into the water at its place of disappearance, and the tinted stream has poured, hours and hours afterwards, through the cavern, which is only a mile away, and stands so near the earlier stream that in times of rain the waters mingle there.

On the sides of the hills, and in the brushwood which clothes their feet, one finds all manner of holes and caves and crevices, some of them very shallow, and some of them of unknown depth. In the Bois de Janenne alone there are four or five of them.

All this has strictly to do with the history of Schwartz, as will by and by be seen.

When heavy rains fall the river is so swollen that the underground call upon its resources fails to drain it, and it foams above the fissures in full volume, so wild and deep that a passer-by would never guess of the curious trick of nature which is here being played. But the season being exceptionally dry, I was able to show my find, and from the spot of the stream's disappearance I led my acquaintance to the cavern. Here prowling about in a light-footed and adventurous fashion the young Englishman found a hole in the wall of stone, and, venturing into it, discovered to his great delight a passage which seemed to lead into the

very entrails of the hill. He proposed instantly to explore this, and I having that morning purchased of the local tobacconist a box of Italian vestas, each three or four inches long, and calculated to burn for several minutes, and having the same in my pocket at the moment, we set out together on a journey of adventure. The passage varied in width from six to three feet, and in height from eight feet upwards. The faint illumination of the big wax vestas often failed to touch the roof. The way was sometimes over ankle deep in a thick mud, and sometimes strewn with fragments of rock which had fallen from the roof; but we went on gaily until we came to a great slippery boulder, which blocked the passage for some three feet in height. My companion was in act to clamber over this, when the light I carried pinched my thumb and finger with sudden heat, and I dropped it on to the ground. I struck another, and found the youngster perched upon the boulder.

‘Wait a moment,’ said I, ‘and let us see what is beyond. There may be a deepish hole there.’

We leaned over, and could see nothing. My companion got down from the boulder with a grave look.

‘I was just going to jump when you spoke,’ he said. ‘Lucky I didn’t. I wonder how deep it is?’

We hunted about for a stone, and by and by found one about the size of a man’s head. This the youngster tossed over the boulder into the darkness, and we stood looking at each other, by the little clear-

burning light of the wax match. I do not know how long we stood there, for time has a knack of magnifying itself beyond belief in such conditions, but it was long, long before an awful hollow boom came rolling to our ears from the depth. We turned without a word, and stumbled back towards the daylight, and when we reached it I looked at the young Englishman and saw that all the roses had faded from his healthy young cheeks, and that he was as gray as ashes.

‘I was going to jump when you spoke,’ he said. ‘Precious lucky for me I didn’t.’

I congratulated him very heartily on not having jumped, and our search for natural wonders being ended we went back to the hotel. We made inquiry there—at first in vain—about this inner cavern, but at last we came across the Garde Champêtre of the district, who told us that the depth was unknown. He and some of his friends had had the curiosity to try to measure it, but they never had rope enough.

It befell on the morning of the next day that I wandered out alone, and in the course of the first score yards encountered Schwartz, who was demonstrative of friendly civilities. I returned his salutations, and he gave me to understand in his own too-humble manner that he would like to accompany me. I let him know that I should be delighted by his society, and away we went together. The ground was firm with last night’s frost and musical to the sabots of peasants and the iron-shod feet of horses. The hills

and fields were covered with a powdery snow that threw their grays into a dark relief, and the air was so still that I could hear the bell-like tinkle of chisel and stone from the quarry nearly a mile away. We entered the Bois de Janenne together, and wandered through its branchy solitudes by many winding paths. There is a main road running through this wood, cut by order of the commune for the pleasure of visitors, and the middle of this road was white with a thin untrodden snow. On either side this ribbon of white lay a narrower ribbon of gold where the pines had shed their yellow needles and the overhanging boughs had guarded them from the falling snow. The ground ivy was of all imaginable colours, but only yielded its secrets on a close examination, and did not call upon the eye like some of the louder reds and yellows which still clung to the trees. Here and there the *fusain* burned like a flame with its vivid scarlet berries—*chapeau de curé* the country people call them, though the colour is a little too gay for less than a cardinal's wearing. For the most part the undergrowth was bare, and the branches were either purple or of the tone of a ripe filbert, so that the atmosphere, with the reflected dull golds and bluish-reds and reddish-blues, was in a swimming maze like that of a sunset distance, though the eye could scarcely pierce twenty yards into the thick-grown tangle.

Schwartz and I rambled along, now and then exchanging a sign of friendly interest, and in a while

we left the main path and wandered where we would. Suddenly Schwartz began to hunt and sniff and bark on what I supposed to be the recent trace of a rabbit or a hare, and I stood still to watch him. He worried industriously here and there until he disappeared behind a clump of brushwood, and then I heard a sudden 'Yowk!' of unmistakable terror. After this there was dead silence. I called, but there was not even the rustle of a leaf in answer. I waited a while and called again, but still no answer came. Not in the least guessing what had befallen the dog, I mounted the hillside and came to the clump of bushes behind which he had disappeared. There I found a hole some three feet wide and two in height, a hole with sides of moist earth, formed like an irregularly-shaped funnel, and affording at its farther end little more than room enough for a creature of Schwartz's size to pass. At the narrow end the earth was freshly disturbed.

I shouted down this reversed trumpet of a hole. I listened after every call. I explored the place so far as I could with a six-foot wand cut from a near tree. I heard no movement, no whine of distress, and I touched nothing with the wand except the roof of the cavern into which poor Schwartz had fallen. At length I gave him up for dead, remembering the adventure of the day before, the terrible space of time which had elapsed before the echo of the fallen boulder came booming from the abyss, and thinking it as likely as not that Schwartz had fallen to an equal

depth. When I got back to the hotel I told the tale as well as I could, and one of the servants took the news to Schwartz's master.

When once this lamentable accident had happened, it became surprising to learn how frequently its like had happened before. There was scarcely a sportsman in the village who had not his story of some such disappearance of a dog whilst out shooting. The poor beast would become excited in pursuit of game, would dash headlong into a set of bushes and emerge no more. Then a moment's examination would reveal the fatal cave. I am certain that I heard a good half-score of such histories. The cave, by the way, was not always fatal, for I heard of cases in which the dog had been known to find his way out of the underground labyrinth, and return home dreadfully thin and hungry, but otherwise undamaged. These cases gave me some faint hope for Schwartz, but as day after day went by the hope faded, and I made up my mind that I had seen the last of him. I was sorry to think so, for he had been very much a friend and a companion.

IV

It was curious to notice how that unquestioning allegiance and admiration which the missing Schwartz had been used to bestow on Lil was now bestowed by her on the new-comer who answered to the name of Scraper, and how in answer to all her advances and endearments Scraper remained scornful and unresponsive. One knows a hundred poems and legends in which this form of vengeance is taken upon the cruel fair; in which the proud lady who has scorned the humble and faithful heart lives to be scorned in turn. Scraper, probably unconscious of his mission as avenger, fulfilled it none the less on that account.

His master, being an Englishman, had the common English reverence for the Sunday, and would not shoot on that day, though by his conscientious abstention he missed, undoubtedly, the best battue the country-side afforded. We had a brief discussion as to the morality and propriety of the procession, and I pointed out to him that notwithstanding the military element by which it was so strongly marked, it was purely sacerdotal in origin and pious in intent, but he merely

replied that as a form of religious exercise for a Sunday it struck him as being jolly rum. He added shortly afterwards that whether he looked at it or not the coves would do it, and that he therefore felt at liberty to watch them.

Scraper displayed the profoundest interest in the business, and took upon himself the organisation of the whole affair, barking with so much authority, and careering about the cavalry squadron with such untiring energy that he threw Lil's efforts in that way into the shade, and in the course of a mere half-hour had superseded her. Then, just as Schwartz had been used, with every evidence of faith, to follow Lil, regarding her as the very mainspring of the military movement, Lil followed Scraper. Mr. Herbert Spencer has shown that, in spite of the apparent unreasonableness of the fact, humbug and credulity are sworn companions. The savage mystery man, who knows what a humbug he himself is, is the first to yield allegiance and faith to the abler humbug, who has more tricks or bolder invention than he. So, Lil's groundless pretensions of a week ago did not seem in the least to prevent her from being imposed upon by the groundless pretensions of Scraper, much as one might have thought her own career of imposture would have set her upon her guard. She had caught that very fawning method of appeal for a kind regard which had once distinguished Schwartz, and it was obvious that Scraper could make no claim to which she would not be ready

to give adhesion. It is in the very nature of poetical justice that it satisfies the emotions, and I was not displeased to see affairs take this sudden turn, to view the hard and despitiful heart thus humbled.

It was on a Friday that Schwartz's chase had ended so disastrously. It was on the following Sunday that Lil laid down the honours of command at the feet of the new-comer. It was on the Sunday following, the ninth day clear from the date of the mischance, that the great event of the seven years took place. My young acquaintance had two or three days free of engagements, and he spent these in watching the preparations for the procession. He spoke French with a fluency and purity which excited my envy, and he spent most of his spare time among the village people, who talked and thought and dreamed of nothing but the procession. Wherever he went Scraper accompanied him, and wherever Scraper went Lil was to be seen following in fascinated admiration.

For a whole week the drum had known but little rest. I never learned the purpose of the proceeding, but every day and all day, from long before daylight till long after dark, somebody marched about the village and rattled unceasingly upon the drum. It could not possibly have been one man who did it all, for the energies of no one man that ever lived could have been equal to the task. Most of the time it was far away, and it only made two daily promenades past the hotel, but whenever I listened for it I could hear it, beating

the same unweary rataplan. Then at intervals all day and every day, the big gun boomed and the clarion blared until I used to dream that I was back at Plevna or the Shipka Pass, and could not get my "copy" to London and New York because Monsieur Dorn had filled the Houssy Wood with Cossacks from Janenne. It may be supposed that all this *charivari* was but an evil thing for a man as much in need of rest as I was, but I verily believe that the noise and bustle of the preparations, though they robbed me now and then of an hour of morning sleep, were almost as useful to me as the idleness I enjoyed, and the tranquil country air into which I could drive or wander afoot whenever the fancy for perfect quiet came upon me.

At last the great day dawned, and the great event dawned earlier than the day. At five o'clock the noise of drum and clarion began, and the light of torches flared on the painted fronts of houses—yellow and pink and blue—in the quaint old village street. A little later a band came by with shattering brass and booming drum, and for an hour or so the whole place was in a ferment. The cavalry came clattering into the *Place*, the hoarse voice of Monsieur Dorn barked through the orders which had by this time grown conventional, and his squadron jingled for the last time for seven years through the movements he had taught them at the expense of so much time and lung power. Then a strange foreboding sort of quiet, an unnatural tranquillity, settled upon everything and continued until

near upon the hour of ten. A long waggon drawn by four oxen excited, by the freight it bore, a momentary curiosity, and brought faces to doors and windows. The air was keen to-day, and we were at the very season of mid-winter, but in the waggon which the four slow oxen dragged through the streets of Janenne were a dozen lofty shrubs reaching to a height of eight or nine feet at least, the which shrubs were one mass of exotic-looking blossom. I discovered later on that they were nothing more than a set of young pines with artificial paper flowers attached to every twig, but the effect as they went down the wintry street in their clothing of gold and rose and white with the live green of the fir peeping through the wealth of bloom was quite an astonishment in its way. These decorated shrubs were set at the church porch, and seemed to fill the whole of that part of the street with colour and light.

When the procession came at last there was one curious thing about it. Such a crowd of people—for Janenne took part in it—that there was scarcely anybody left to look at it. But then the processionists had the pleasure of looking at each other. The band came first, in blue blouse and clean white trousers. Then came the soldiery, a motley crew, with Monsieur Dorn at their head, drawn sword in hand, and next to him a personage who might have been translated clean from Astley's—a gentleman in long hose, with a flower on each shoe, and a hat of red velvet shaped like a

bread tray, decorated with prodigious coloured feathers, and a slashed doublet gay with many knots of bright ribbon. Years and years ago Janenne had a Count and a *château*. The ruins of the *château* still kept gray guard over the village street ; but there is not even a ruin left of the old family. But in the day when Our Lady of Lorette stayed the local pestilence the existing Count of Janenne was pious enough to ride in the promised procession ; and for a century or so the magnate of the village and its neighbourhood was never absent from the demonstration of thanksgiving. In a while, however, the Counts of Janenne took to wildish ways, and, leaving the home of their ancestors, went away to Paris and led extravagant lives there, gambling and drinking, and squandering their substance in other and even more foolish fashions, and at last there ceased to be estates of Janenne to draw upon, or even Counts of Janenne to draw. But before things came to this pass the absentee Counts had always sent a representative to join the procession to the shrine of Our Lady of Lorette ; and it has come about that the legend has clung in the popular fancy even unto the present day. Somebody—anybody—gets himself up in theatrical guise, and rides at the head of the military forces, between the first rank and the commander-in-chief, as the representative of that extinct great house. On this occasion it was a red-cheeked shy young man, cousin to the chambermaid of the Hotel des Postes, a peasant proprietor who farmed, and still farms, some

ten or a dozen hectares of sour land on the road to Montcourtois. The red-cheeked shy young man's female cousin exchanged a red-cheeked, shame-faced, rustic grin with him as he rode by, and the young man, in imitation of Monsieur Dorn, made his horse caracole, but being less versed in horsemanship than the old *gendarme*, had to hold on ignominiously by the mane in payment for his own temerity.

Following the military came a long array of little girls in white muslin, with sashes blue or red. Half a dozen nuns kept watch over them, pacing sombre in white head-dresses and black gowns by the side of all that smiling troop of glad hearts and childish faces. All the little girls carried bannerets of bright colour, and all went bareheaded, after the manner of the district, where no woman, short of the highest fashion, ever permits herself to wear hat or bonnet, except when going to mass or upon a railway journey. White childish locks, braided and shining, red locks, brown locks, black locks, with bright faces under all, went streaming by, and then a solemn priest or two headed a rambling host of lads with well-scrubbed cheeks and clean collars, and decent raiment of church-going Sunday black. Then came a flock of young women in white muslin, very starched and stiff, with blue bows and blue sashes. In front of these two stalwart wenches bore a flapping banner, inscribed 'La Jeunesse de Janenne'; and closing up the rank of Janenne's youth and rustic beauty came half a dozen chosen damsels, big limbed

and strong, bearing on their shoulders a huge waxen statue of Our Lady of Lorette, and in her arms a crowned child, she herself being crowned with glittering tinsel, and robed in a glowing and diaphanous stuff, which only half revealed the white satin and spangles of the dress below it. Then a number of chubby-cheeked little boys in semi-ecclesiastical costume, improvised—no doubt under clerical supervision—by careful hands at home. Each little boy carried a fuming censer, and it was not difficult to see that they were well pleased with themselves and their office. After them came the *doyen* in full ecclesiastical costume, a little tawdry perhaps, for the village is but poor and with the best heart in the world can only imitate the real splendours from afar. Then following the *doyen* (who, by the way, marched under a canopy like the roof of an old-fashioned four-post bedstead) came the male choir of the church, chanting a musical service, which harmonised indifferently with the strains of the military band in front. Then the big gun, drawn by the two big Flemish horses. Then Jacques, Jules, André, François, Charlot, Pierre, Joseph, Jean, and all the rest, in sabots, short trousers, and blue blouses, marching bareheaded with reverent air, and with them Julie, and Fifine, and Nana, and Adèle, and other feminine relatives, all in their Sunday best, and all devout in mien. Then, at a little distance—the most astonishing and unlooked-for tail to all this village splendour and devoutness—Schwartz.

Schwartz himself, but Schwartz so changed, so lean, so woebegone, as hardly to be recognisable, even to the eye of friendship. Of all his diverse-raging hairs not one to assert itself, but all plastered close with an oily sleekness by a slimy clinging mud, the thin ribs showing plainly, and the hinder part of the poor wretch's barrel a mere hand-grasp. His very tail, which had used to look like an irregular much-worn bottle-brush, was thin and sleek like a rat's, and he tucked it away as if he were ashamed of it. His feet were clotted with red earth, and he walked as if his head were a burden to him, he hung it so mournfully and carried it so low.

My young English acquaintance, who, like myself, had been watching the procession, had posted himself a little farther down the road, with Scraper near at hand. Near to him, employing all the ingratiatory insinuating arts she knew, and so absorbed in Scraper that she forgot even to direct the procession, was Lil. To her, fawning and whining in such an excess of feeble joy as can be rarely known to dogs or man, came the half-starved, half-drowned creature. I was already half-way to Schwartz's rescue, with immediate milk, to be followed by soap and water, in my mind, but I stopped to see how Lil would receive the returned companion of old days. It is scarcely probable that dogs believe in ghosts, and yet it would have been easy to fancy that she saw in him at first some purely supernatural apparition, she recoiled with so obvious a surprise and terror when she first beheld him. The wretched, pro-

pitiatory, humbly-ecstatic Schwartz advanced, but she showed her gleaming teeth, and growled aversion. He stopped stock-still, and whined a little, and Lil responded furiously. I took the returned wanderer up in both hands, and carried him into the hotel scullery, and got milk for him. He lapped it with tears running down his muddy nose; and when I had had him washed and tucked away into an old railway rug, beside a stove in the little room, he lay there winking and blinking, and licked at his own tears with an expression altogether broken-hearted. I should have liked to have known something of the history of his subterranean wanderings, but that was only to be left to conjecture. I bade him be of better cheer, and went outside to wait for the return of the procession, and to smoke a cigar in the open air, and an hour later found that Schwartz had again disappeared. This time, however, he had merely gone home, and though for a day or two he was quite an invalid, he was soon about the streets again, completely rehabilitated.

And now I come to the relation of the one tragic fact which seemed to me to make this simple history worth writing. I hope that nobody will regard it as an invention, or will suppose that I am trading upon their sympathies on false pretences.

On the day of the young Englishman's departure I accompanied him to the railway station. Lil came down in attendance upon Scraper, and barked fiercely at the departing train which bore him away. Schwartz

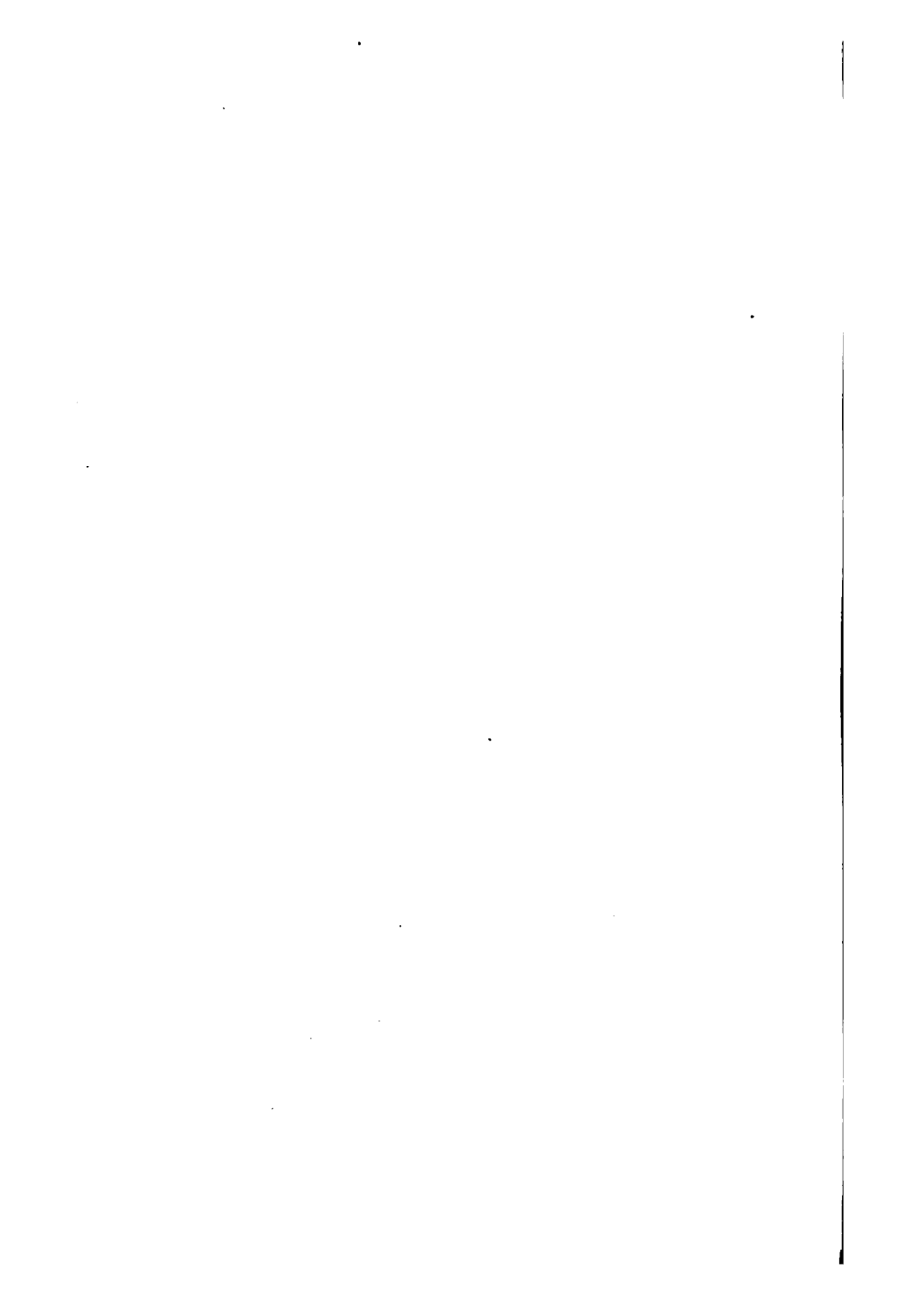
followed in humble pursuit of Lil, who, so far as I could understand affairs, had never forgiven him for intruding himself in so unpresentable a guise, and claiming acquaintance whilst she was engaged in conversation with a swell like Scraper. From that hour she had refused to hold the slightest communion with him, showing her teeth and growling in the cruellest way whenever he approached her. In spite of this, Schwartz seemed to be persuaded that, in the absence of his rival, he still stood a chance, and day after day he followed her with the old fawning humbleness, and day after day she received him with the same anger and disdain.

On a certain Wednesday afternoon the air was wonderfully mild and dry. It was early in January, but the weather was so fine that I had not even need of an overcoat, as I sat in the sunshine smoking and reading. I had seen Monsieur Dorn enter the opposite house, taking Lil with him, and Schwartz had settled himself on the doorstep, as usual, to await her exit. I called him to me, and he crossed over, but soon returned and resumed his place, and sat there waiting still. After a considerable time the door opened, and Monsieur Dorn and Lil emerged together. I looked up at that moment, and saw Lil make a savage dart at her too-persistent worshipper. Monsieur Dorn beat them apart, but Schwartz had attempted no resistance. He was rather badly bitten, and when I picked him up the tears were running fast down his nose, and

he was feebly licking at them, and whining to himself in a way which indicated the extremest weakness of spirit. I sat down with him, and comforted the poor-hearted creature, and he seemed grateful, for he licked my hand repeatedly, but he did not cease to whine and weep.

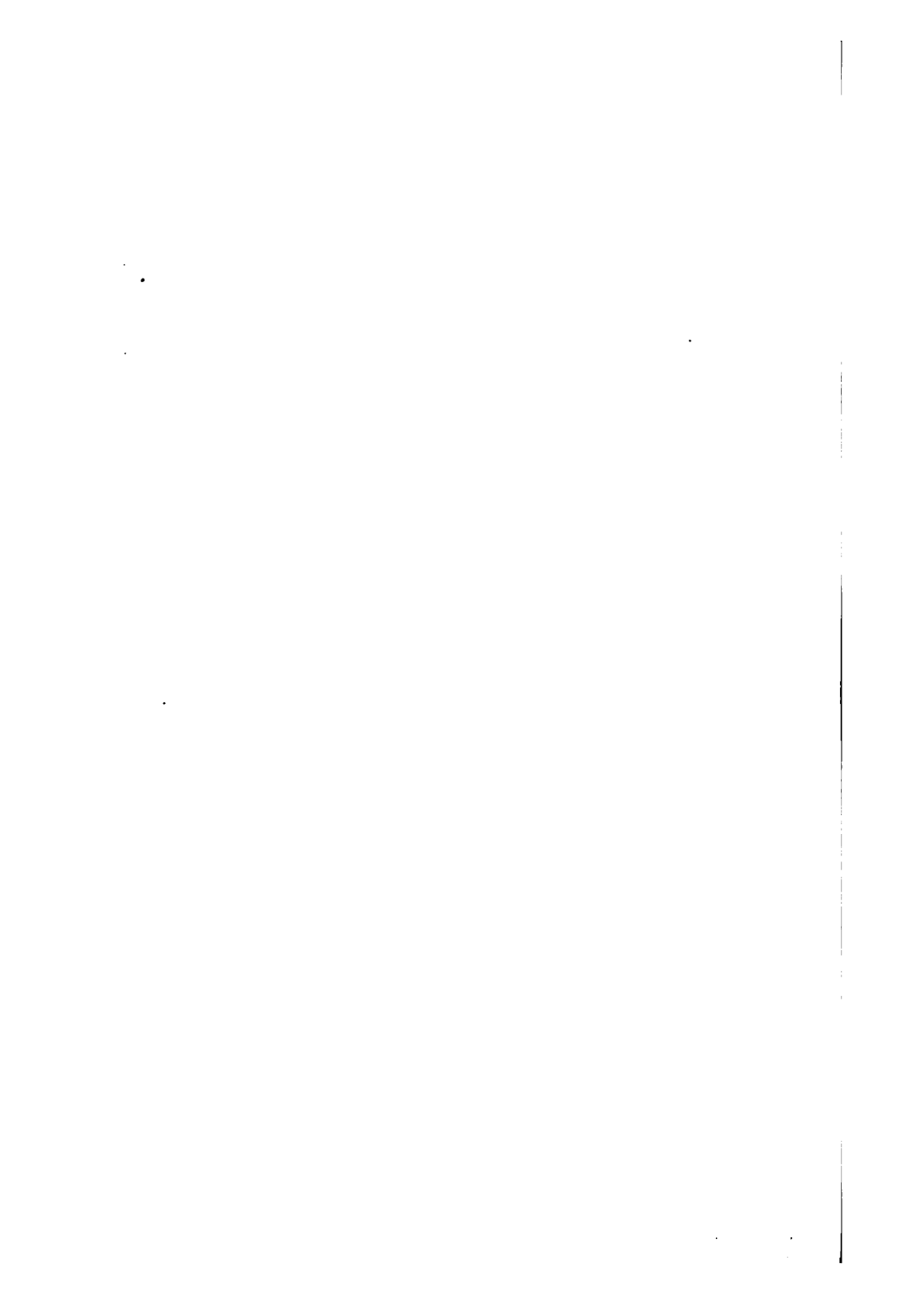
By and by I heard, though I did not notice it at the time, the warning whistle of the approaching train. The station is little more than a stone's throw from the hotel. Schwartz made a leap, licked my face, jumped from the bench, and ambled away. I never saw him alive again, for, on the testimony of the signalman, he ran down to the railway line, stretched himself upon one of the rails, and, in spite of a stone the man threw at him when the train had advanced dangerously near to him, he held his place until the wheels passed over his body.

His remains were buried in his master's back garden. I know that he knew full well what he was doing when he stretched himself upon the rail, and I know that his feeble and affectionate heart was broken before he did it.



II

YOUNG MR. BARTER'S REPENTANCE



YOUNG MR. BARTER'S REPENTANCE

I

MR. BOMMANEY was a British merchant of the highest rectitude and the most spotless reputation. He traded still under the name of Bommaney, Waite, and Co., though Waite had been long since dead, and the Company had gone out of existence in his father's time. The old offices, cramped and inconvenient, in which the firm had begun life eighty years before, were still good enough for Mr. Bommaney, and they had an air of solid respectability which newer and flashier places lacked. The building of which they formed a part stood in Coalporter's Alley, opposite the Church of St. Mildred, and the hum of the City's traffic scarcely sounded in that retired and quiet locality.

Mr. Bommaney himself was a man of sixty, hale and hearty, with a rosy face and white whiskers. He was a broad-shouldered man, inclining to be portly, and he was currently accepted as a man of an indomitable will. There was no particular reason for the popular belief in his determination apart from the fact

that it was a favourite boast of his that nothing ever got him down. On all occasions and in all companies he was wont to declare that no conceivable misfortune could really break a man of spirit. He confessed to a pitying sympathy for mealy-willed people (and everybody knew that Bommaney, in spite of his own strength of mind, was one of the kindest creatures in the world); but, whenever he met a man in trouble, he would clip him by the shoulder, and would say, in his own hearty fashion, 'You must look the thing in the face, my boy. Look it in the face. I'd never let anything break *me* down.'

Since his reputation for fortitude was as solid and as old-fashioned amongst the people who knew him as his business character itself, it would have come as something of a shock upon any of his friends if he could but have been seen by them, or any credible man amongst them, on a certain afternoon in the April of 1880. He had locked himself in his own room, and, sitting there in a big chair before a business-like desk, with a great number of docketed papers in pigeon-holes, and a disordered mass of papers strewn before him, the determined Mr. Bommaney, the decided Mr. Bommaney, the Mr. Bommaney whom no misfortune could subdue, was crying, very feebly and quietly, and was mopping his rosy cheeks, and blowing his nose in an utter and unrestraining abandonment to trouble.

There was another fact which would have come upon his friends with an equal shock of surprise if

they could but have had it brought home to them. The man who sat unaffectedly crying in the big chair in helpless contemplation of the scattered papers was a hopeless bankrupt, and had seen himself sliding towards bankruptcy for years. When men who knew him wanted business advice, they went to him by preference, and nobody came away empty. He knew the City and its intricacies like a book. He knew who was safe and who was shaky, as if by a kind of instinct, and he knew where and when to invest, and where and when not to invest, as few men did. 'You can't get at me,' he would say; for, old-fashioned as he was, he used a little of the new-fashioned slang to give spice and vigour to his conversation. 'There isn't a move on the board that I don't know.' He advised his friends excellently, and there were perhaps half a score of fairly well-to-do speculative people who had to thank him, and him alone, for the comfort they lived in and the consideration they enjoyed. He had been wise for others all his life, and in his own interests he had always acted like a greenhorn. He talked loudly, he spent freely, he paid his way, he expressed the soundest business maxims, and was as shrewd in detail as he was wise in generalities, and these things made a natural reputation for him: whilst he traded for years at the expense of his capital, and went steadily and surely towards the bottomless gulf of insolvency. Now he was on the very verge of it, and to-morrow he would

be in it. It lent a feeble sting to his sufferings to know how surprised people would be, and how completely men would find him out.

He had not very profoundly involved other people in his own ruin, but he had gone a little farther than a man altogether brave, and honourable, and clear-sighted would have ventured, and he knew that some would suffer with him. He might have made arrangements to go a little farther still if he had been courageous, clear-sighted, and dishonest, and might have held his head up for another matter too, perhaps. But he had lacked the nerve for that, and had never consciously been a rogue. He felt even now a pride of honesty. He had been unfortunate, and his creditors would have everything—everything.

He thanked God that Phil's mother had tied her money on her only son, and that the boy at least had enough to begin the world with. How should he face Phil when he came home again? How should he send the news to him? The lad was away enjoying himself, travelling all round the world with a wandering Baronet, who owned a yacht and had an unappeasable taste for the destruction of big game. He would have to surrender his fashionable and titled acquaintance now, poor fellow, and begin the world with a disgraced and broken frame to be a drag and hindrance to him. The more Mr. Bommaney thought of these things, the more unrestrainedly he cried; and the more he cried, the less he felt able or inclined to control his tears.

He wept almost silently, only an occasional sniff betraying his emotion to his ear. He had always held his head so high, and had been so believed in. It was very bitter.

Whilst he was in the midst of this childish abandonment to his grief a set of knuckles softly and hesitatingly tapped the door from without, and directly afterwards a hand made a tentative respectful sort of attempt upon the handle.

'Who's there?' cried Mr. Bommaney, steadying his voice as best he could.

'A gentleman to see you, sir,' answered a smooth voice outside.

Mr. Bommaney pushed back his chair, rose to his feet, and retiring to a smaller room consulted a little square looking-glass which hung upon the wall above his washing-stand. His blue eyes were very tearful and a little swollen, his cheeks and nose looked as if they had been scalded.

'Wait a moment,' he said aloud, and his voice betrayed him by a break. He blushed and trembled, thinking that Mr. Hornett, his confidential clerk, would know how he was breaking down, and would speak of his want of courage and self-command hereafter. The reflection nerved him somewhat, and he sluiced his face with water, making a little unnecessary noise of splashing to tell the listener how he was engaged. He polished his face with the towel, and, consulting the mirror again, thought he looked a little better.

Then he re-entered his business room, and turning the key in the lock opened the door slightly, a mere inch or two.

‘Who is it?’

‘A Mr. Brown, sir,’ said the smooth voice outside. The clerk insinuated a card through the space between the door and door-jamb, and Mr. Bommaney took it from his fingers without revealing himself. He had some difficulty in making out its inscription, for his eyes were newly tearful, and, whilst he peered at it, a reflex of his late emotions brought a sniffing sob again. He was freshly ashamed at this, and said hastily,

‘Five minutes’ time. I will ring when I am ready. Ask the gentleman to wait.’

Mr. James Hornett softly closed the door, and stood on the landing with long lean fingers scraping at his lantern jaws. He was a little man, short of stature, and sparely built. His skin was vealy in complexion, and he had wiry hair of a russet-red. Even when he was clean shaven his fingers rasped upon his hollow cheeks with a faint sound. His nose and chin were long and pointed, and his manner was meek and self-effacing even when he was alone. There was a tinge of wonder in his face, at war with an habitual smile, in which his eyes had no part.

‘Something wrong?’ he said, under his breath. He went creeping softly down the stairs. ‘Something wrong? Mr. Bommaney in tears? Mr. Bommaney!’

Could anything have happened to Mr. Phil? That was the only thing Mr. Hornett could think of as being likely to affect his employer in that way.

Now Mr. Hornett had been in his present employ for thirty years, man and boy, and he was human. Therefore, when at the expiration of a little more than five minutes' time Mr. Bommaney's bell rang, he himself ushered the visitor upstairs, and in place of retiring to his own pew below stairs, lingered in a desert little apartment rarely used, and then stole out upon the landing and listened. He was the more prompted to this because the visitor, who had a bucolic hearty aspect, and was very talkative, had told him downstairs that Mr. Bommaney and himself were old friends and schoolfellows, and had been in each other's confidence for years.

'I am afraid, sir,' Mr. Hornett had said, when the visitor first presented himself, 'that Mr. Bommaney may not be able to see you at present. He gave orders not to be disturbed.'

'Not see me?' said the visitor with a laugh. 'I'll engage he will.' And then followed the statement about his old acquaintanceship with Mr. Hornett's employer.

If there were anything to be told at all, it seemed not unlikely that this visitor might be the recipient of the intelligence, and Mr. Hornett lingered to find if haply he might overhear. He heard nothing that enlightened him as to the reasons for his employer's disturbance, but heard most that passed between the two.

Bommaney had succeeded in composing himself and in washing away the traces of his tears. Then he had taken a stiffish dose of brandy and water, and was something like his own man again. He received his visitor cordially, and in his anxiety not to seem low-spirited was a little more boisterous than common.

'I'm busy, you see,' he said, waving a hand at the papers scattered on the desk, and keeping up the farce of prosperous merchandise to the last, 'but I can spare you a minute or two, old man. What brings you up to town?'

'I've come here to settle,' said the visitor. He was a florid man with crisp black hair with a hint of gray in it, and he was a countryman from head to heel. He seemed a little disposed to flaunt his bucolics upon the town, his hat, his necktie, his boots and gaiters, were of so countrified a fashion, and yet he looked somehow more of a gentleman than Bommaney.

'Yes,' he said, 'I've come to settle.' He rubbed his hands and laughed here, not because there was anything humorous and amusing in his thoughts, but out of sheer health and jollity of nature. Bommaney, still distrustful of his own aspect, and afraid of being observed, sat opposite to him with bent head and fidgeted with his papers, blindly pretending to arrange them.

'To settle,' he said absently. Then, rousing himself with an effort, 'I thought you hated London?'

'Ah, my boy,' said his visitor, 'when you're in the

shafts with a whip behind you, you've got to go where you are driven.'

'Yes,' said Bommaney mechanically, 'that is so. That is so.'

The visitor was laughing and rubbing his hands again in perfect happiness and self-contentment, and had no eye for Bommaney's abstraction.

'Yes,' he said, 'it's Patty's doing. I've sold up every stick and stone, and I've taken a house in Gower Street. Do you know, Bommaney,' he added, with an air and voice suddenly serious and confidential, 'the country's going to the devil. Land's sinking in value every year. I've been farming at a growing loss these six years, and rents don't come in as they used to do. I got my chance and I took it. Lord Bellamy wanted to join the Mount Royal and the three estates. My little bit o' land lay between 'em, and I sold it to him. Sold it, too, begad, as well as I could have done half a dozen years ago.'

Then he laughed once more with great heartiness, and unbuttoning his overcoat, groped in an inner pocket. After a struggle, in the course of which he grew very red in the face, he drew forth a pocket-book of unusual dimensions, and slapped it on the desk so vigorously that his companion started.

'I got a tip the other day,' he went on; 'that old bank at Mount Royal, Fellowes and Fellowes, is going to crack up, my boy. There's something very queer in the commercial atmosphere just now,

Bommaney. There are lots of old-fashioned solid people breaking up.'

To Bommaney's uneasy fancy there was in his visitor's voice an accent which sounded personal.

'I—I hope not,' he answered, somewhat feebly, 'so much depends——' (he tried hard to rally himself), 'so much depends upon a spirit of commercial confidence.'

'Exactly,' cried the visitor, laying hands upon the pocket-book and opening it. 'I went to the bank and saw young Fellowes myself. "Look here, Fellowes," I told him, "I want my daughter's money." He stuck to it, sir; like a dog holding on to a bone. He growled about it, and he whined about it, said it wasn't fair to withdraw the money on short notice. Said I couldn't do better with it anywhere, and at last I told him, "Look here, Fellowes, I shall begin to think by and by there's something wrong." He went as red as a turkey-cock, begad, and drew a note on their London agent like a lord, and here I am with the money. Eight thousand pounds.'

By this time he had drawn a bundle of bank-notes from the pocket-book, and now sat flicking the edges of the notes with the tips of his great broad fingers. Bommaney heard the crisp music, and looked up with a momentary glance of hunger in his eyes.

'That's Patty's little private handful,' the visitor continued, opening the packet of notes, and smoothing it upon his knee. 'Eighty notes of a hundred. Pretty

little handful, isn't it? They don't look,' he added, with his head reflectively on one side and his eyebrows raised a little, 'they don't look as they'd buy as much as they will'

Bommaney tried to find a commonplace word by answer, and an inaudible something died drily in his throat. When his companion began to speak again, the bankrupt merchant wondered that he made no comment on his ghastly face—he knew his face was ghastly—or his shaking hands. There was an intuition in his mind so strong and clear that he trembled at its prophecy.

'Patty,' said the visitor, 'will have everything in time, and a pretty good handful, too. But she's bent on being independent, and she wants to have her own money in her own hands. She pretends it's all because she wants to pay her milliner's bills, and that kind of thing, herself; but I know better. The fact is'—he lowered his voice and chuckled—'the fact is, she doesn't want me to know how much she spends in charity. You look here, Bommaney'—the merchant's heart seemed to stand still, and then to beat so wild an alarum that he wondered the other did not hear it. The intuition multiplied in strength. He heard beforehand the spoken words, the very tones which marked them. 'You're a safe man, you're a smart man. I suppose there isn't anybody in London who can lay out money to more advantage than you can. I know it's a great favour to ask, but I think you'll

do it for Patty's sake and mine, if I do ask you. Take this, and invest it for her. Will you, now ?'

He stood up with the bundle of notes outstretched in his hand. The merchant rose and accepted it, and looked him, with a sudden curious calm and steadiness, straight in the face.

II

MR. BOMMANEY was alone again, and if it had not been for the actual presence of the bundle of bank-notes upon the table, he could well have thought that the whole episode had been no more than a dreadful and disturbing dream. It was very hard, he thought complainingly, that a man should come and put so horrible a temptation in his way. He would not yield to it—of course he would not yield to it. He had been an honest and honourable man all his life long, and had never so much as felt a monetary temptation until now. It was humiliating to feel it now—it was horrible to have his fingers itching for another man's money, and his heart coveting it, and his brain, in spite of himself, devising countless means of use for it. It was quite unbearable to know that the money *might* tide him over his troubles and land him in prosperity again, if he could only dare to use it, and risk engulfing it with the lost wreckage of his own fortunes.

But no, no, no. He had never meant to use it. His only reason for accepting it had been that he had not found the courage to declare his true position

to his old friend and school companion. Perhaps, he told himself (trying to silence and cajole that inward monitor and accuser who would not be silenced or cajoled), perhaps if Brown had been less confident and truthful—if he had had less faith in his old companion's powers as a man of business—it would have come easier to tell the truth. And how futile a thing it was to stave off discovery for a single day! How doubly ashamed he would have to feel after that poor pretence of responsible solidity! If he had only been disposed to be tempted at all—here surely was an added reason for yielding to temptation.

Obviously the first, and, indeed, the only thing to be done, was to bank this money in Brown's name, and so have done with it; and yet any feeling of haste in that respect would seem to imply a fear of temptation, which he was, of course, quite resolute not to feel. He was not going any more to run away from his own suspicion of himself than he would have run from another man's. So, in and out, and up and down, contradicting himself at every turning, with an underlying surety in his mind so fast rooted and so dreadful that he did not dare to look at it.

When the adieux were being said between the old friends, Mr. James Hornett had slid noiselessly downstairs, his mind inflated by pride. He was not proud of having played the eavesdropper, for even in Mr. Hornett's economy of things, that was an act to be proud of; but he was very proud, indeed, to be asso-

ciated with a gentleman so magnificently respected as Mr. Bommaney. There were not so very many people, he told himself, even in the City of London, which was full of wealth and probity, into whose hands so large a sum would be placed with so little a sense of the necessity of precaution. He felt as if he himself had been treated in this majestic manner, and the feeling warmed his heart. He bowed Mr. Brown from the office door with an *empressement* which he feared a moment later might almost have betrayed him, and he went about his duties for the rest of the day in a mood of unusual contentment. The earlier memory of his employer's disturbance crossed him sometimes, and always excited his curiosity; but the later feeling dominated him. He was delighted by his association with a concern so eminently respectable as that of Bommaney, Waite, and Co.

Meanwhile Mr. Hornett's employer, with that dreadful rooted secret in his mind, which he did not dare to look at, sat alone, looking with staring eyes before him, and drumming in a regular tune upon the topmost note of the terrible little pile. He had locked the notes away before Brown's departure, but they had seemed to draw him to the safe with almost a physical compulsion, and he had brought them out again to look at them, to handle them, to count them, to resolve in his own mind that he did not hanker after them, and was honourable to the core. It was so new a thing to be tempted, that at times his own self-deception

was made easy to him. It did not occur to him to reflect that the need and the means had never so presented themselves together until now, or that his life-long honour had depended upon their absence.

When he had sat in silence for a while he awoke to the fact that the interview had been nothing but a succession of shocks to him, and that he was bodily exhausted. He rose, and, walking feebly to the inner room, applied himself anew to the brandy bottle he kept there. He had gone much too often to that deceptive solace lately, and he knew it; but each successive visit carried its own excuses with it, and it had never in any individual instance been worth while to resist a habit which it was always easy to condemn in the main.

The brandy enlightened him and opened new sluices of emotion. Perhaps for the moment he was a better man because of it. He seemed to wake to a more determined sense of the enormity of the temptation which lay before him. He thought of his own son, and a shadow took him from head to foot as, in a brandified nervous vision, he beheld some shadowy supposititious creature in the act of telling the tale to Phil. The vice of drink has had the creation of many other vices laid to its charge, but for once in the world's history the obfuscated vision was clearer than the natural, and Philip drunk a better man, and a more righteous and honourable, than Philip sober.

At bottom, Philip Bommaney knew himself too

well to be at all sure that this phase of feeling would endure with him; and in a half-conscious dread of the return of that baser self, whose first appearance in his history had so affrighted him, he hurriedly attired himself for out-of-doors, crammed the bundle of notes into an inner pocket of his overcoat, and, after a final appeal to the decanter, left his room with a somewhat hysteric sense of courage and self-approval. He had been tempted—he was ready to recognise that the temptation was over, that he had well-nigh succumbed to it—but he had triumphed! He was a man again. He had been weighed in the balances and not found wanting. There were some tears in his eyes compounded of brandy and nerves and affections and remorse as he hurried into the street. Phil should never be ashamed of his father. Old Brown, who had trusted him like a brother, should never learn to shun and hate him. He had to go under—the thing was inevitable, unescapable, but he would at least go under like a man. His heart beat to the tune of the ‘Conquering Hero,’ where it might have beat to the ‘Rogue’s March,’ but for that friendly nip of brandy and the all-covering mercies of Heaven.

Quickly as his resolution had been taken, he had fully arranged for the details of the task which lay before him. With the notes he had thrust into his pocket a little handful of business papers involving a knotty and delicate point of business, and he intended that the discussion of the point they raised should act

as the prelude to the disclosure and the restitution he desired to make. He could not, even in his new-found heroism, and with whatever hysteric hardihood he was prepared to meet the stroke of fate, he could not as yet encounter Brown, and lay bare before him the plot of the melancholy farce he had played an hour ago. But there was an old friend of his, and an old friend of Brown's into the bargain, a solicitor, keen as a needle and kindly as sunshine, one Barter, whose business chambers were in Gable Inn, and who was of all men the man he could confide in with least shame and best hope of help. He hailed a cab, and bade the driver drive his fastest. Gable Inn lay tranquil, the afternoon shadows already settling deeper on the little quadrangle than on the broad and roaring thoroughfare without. There was no light in the windows of the rooms in which Messrs. Fellowship, Freemantle, and Barter had done business and received their clients fifty years ago, and in which the sole surviving member of the firm still maintained its old-established reputation for honour and astuteness.

Bommaney was chilled by the silence and darkness of the rooms, and he shivered to see the temptation he had conquered looming again before him. He knocked loudly with a trembling hand, and the noise of iron on iron went rolling and echoing up the staircase and came back in a hollow, lonely, sounding murmur from the rooms within. His heart sank, and a horrible fear of himself got hold of him. He had actually con-

quered, and here was the fight to be fought over again with almost a certainty of defeat at the end of it. Indeed, the defeat in that bare moment of time had grown so certain, that he was conscious of a distinct state of disappointment when a sudden footstep within the rooms answered his noisy summons.

The door opened, and a young man stood before him, peering at him with half-closed uncertain eyes through the dark. He was a young man of the fleshly school, something too stout for his years, very pallid, and more than commonly personable, with a fine broad forehead, fine frank eyes, and features modelled with an engaging regularity. When he recognised his visitor his pale and handsome face glittered with a sudden smile of welcome, teeth and eyes gleaming quite brightly, and the whole face lighting up in the pleasantest and friendliest fashion conceivable.

This agreeable expression faded into one of almost mechanical dolor, and the personable young man shook hands with Mr. Bommaney sadly, and sighed as if he suddenly recalled an idea that sighing was a duty.

'Come in, Mr. Bommaney,' he said. 'Come in, sir. I have sent home all the clerks, and was just about to lock up for the night. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? Let me light the gas.'

Bommaney, the door being closed behind him, stumbled along the darkened passage after the more assured and accustomed steps of young Mr. Barter, and the inner office being gained, and the gas being

lighted, allowed himself to be motioned to a chair. What with having been too much agitated by the contemplation of his troubles to be able to eat at all that day, and what with the fight he had had with his temptations, and the too frequent applications he had made to the brandy, it happened that for the moment he was by no means certain of his purpose. He sat for a little while wondering rather hazily what had brought him there. As often happens with absent-minded people, his hands remembered what had been required of them before his brain began to act again, and by and by the fact that he had unbuttoned his overcoat, and had taken a bundle of papers from his pocket, recalled him to his purpose.

'I wanted,' he said, emerging from his haze, and holding the bundle of papers nervously in both hands, 'I wanted to see your father upon very special and urgent business.'

'My father?' the young man answered, with a look and accent of pained surprise. 'Do you mean to say, sir, that you haven't heard the news?'

'The news?' cried Bommaney, feeling blindly as if some new misfortune threatened him. 'What news?'

'My father, sir,' said young Mr. Barter, with a certain blending of professional airs, something of a legal impress mingled with something of the manner of a medical man conveying mournful intelligence to the relatives of a patient, 'my father, sir, was struck

down by an omnibus in the street this morning. He is terribly injured, and not expected to recover.'

'God bless my soul!' Bommaney cried out. His chin fell upon his breast, and his eyes stared at the floor, seeing nothing. He felt like a man upon a raft, who sees the bindings of the frail thing break apart. Shipwrecked already, and now the last hope gone! He hardly knew, if he could have asked himself the question clearly, why he so particularly desired to see Barter. He hardly knew what Barter could have done for him, except to listen to his troubles and take charge of the eight thousand pounds which tempted him, and yet the disappointment seemed as heavy and as hard to bear as anything he had hitherto endured. He sat staring forlornly before him, with tears in his eyes, and young Mr. Barter, in much astonishment at his susceptibility and tenderness, sat watching him. Something slid from Bommaney's hands with a rustle, and dropped upon the floor. Young Mr. Barter made a mere hint or beginning of a movement, as if he would have picked it up for him. Bommaney made no movement at all, but stared before him with his blue-gray eyes filling more and more with tears, until two or three brimmed over and trickled down his cheeks. He said, 'God bless my soul!' once more, mechanically, and restored what remained of his bundle of papers to his pocket. Young Mr. Barter looked with one swift and vivid glance from the fallen bundle to his guest's face, then back again. Bommaney rose

from his seat, buttoned his overcoat with awkward and lingering fingers, and put on his hat. He was evidently unconscious of his own tears, and made no attempt to disguise them, or to wipe them away. He said, 'God bless my soul!' a third time, and then, shaking young Mr. Barter by the hand, murmured that he was sorry, very sorry, and so went stupidly away. Young Mr. Barter accompanied him to the door, casting a strange backward glance at the papers as he left the room, and was curiously voluble in his dismissal of his visitor. Anything he could do—Mr. Bommaney might rest perfectly assured—the clerks would be back to-morrow in any case—he would advise Mr. Bommaney of his father's condition by that night's post—he himself was naturally most profoundly anxious. In this wise he talked Bommaney from the chambers, and when once he had closed the door behind him, went back along the dark little corridor with an unnecessarily catlike tread. He could hardly have been other than certain that he was alone, yet when he reached the inner room he looked about him with a keen quick darting suspicion, and for half a minute ignored the fallen papers on the floor.

'Dear me!' he said, when at length he suffered his eyes to rest upon them. 'What can that be? How did that come here?'

He stooped, picked up the papers, laid them upon his desk, and smoothed them out, making a fold lengthways to counteract the creases into which they had already fallen. He saw a crisp clean Bank of England

note for a hundred pounds, and, lifting it, found another. Then he lifted half the bundle, and, finding a note of the same value, gave an inward gasp, and expelled his breath slowly after it. Then he looked at the last note of all, and sat down with the whole bundle in his hands. His pale and fleshy features had taken an unusual colour, and his breathing was a good deal disturbed. A watcher might have guessed that he was profoundly agitated from the swift unintermittent rustle the paper made in his hands. He seemed to sit as steady as a rock, and yet the crisp paper rustled noisily.

Mr. Brown's bank-notes had been a fruitful source of emotion that day already, and, in Bommaney's mind at least, had raised very dreadful doubts and perplexities. There were doubts and perplexities in the mind of young Mr. Barter, but they were altogether of another order. Young Mr. Barter was perfectly aware that he was being tempted, and felt that, in its way, the temptation was a kind of godsend. He even said as much in a low murmur to himself. His perplexities related to other things than the fear of any fall from honour. Bommaney had evidently been very queer. Bommaney had been horribly cut up about something, even before he heard the news the young solicitor had to give him. But was he so disturbed as to be likely to forget where he had last secured so considerable a sum of money? This mental inquiry naturally set young Mr. Barter to work to discover how considerable

the sum of money actually was. He laid the notes upon the table, and tried to wet his thumb upon his lips. There was no moisture there, and his mouth was as dry as touchwood. He drank a little water, and then began to count the notes. He made them eighty-one at first; and then, recounting, made them seventy-nine. Counting them a third time, he made them eighty.

'Damn it all!' said young Mr. Barter, 'can't I count? I suppose the old buffer will come back for them.' He tried a fourth time, and confirmed his third counting. 'They'll get stopped at the Bank,' he said. 'They'll be no use to anybody.' He sat for a while thinking, with his eyes half-closed, drumming out a tune upon the table with the tips of his fat white fingers, then he folded the notes with great precision and delicacy, put them into his pocket, found his hat, overcoat, and walking-stick, and made ready for the streets. In the quiet of these legal chambers many chance noises from without had from time to time been clearly audible. He heard now a hurrying step upon the pavement of the quadrangle, and, with a palpitation at the heart, he moved swiftly to put out the light, and listened. The step stumbled at the entrance to the staircase, at the foot of which the outer door stood closed. Young Mr. Barter's heart beat, if possible, faster than before; and the veins in his head so throbbed, that only the confining rim of his hat seemed to keep his head itself from bursting. There

came an eager summons at the door, an imperative rapping with the head of a stout walking-stick. He set his teeth, and, drawing back his lips with a horrible smile in the dark, breathed noiselessly. The rapping grew more and more imperative and urgent, and then came a preternatural silence, with an undercurrent of distant sound in it, and the sudden blare of a cornet in the street, which sounded to his nerves like the trumpet of the herald of the day of judgment. He heard the hurrying feet plunge down the steps again, and cross the quadrangle, and listened until their sound merged into the dull noises of the London night. He stood in the dark after this for what seemed a long time, learning that his features twitched, and teaching himself to control them. Then he left his chambers with great secrecy, and broke into a cold sweat to think, as he stood half through the doorway, how narrowly he had escaped from slamming the door behind him. This was an act which might have been suicidal in its stupidity; for to give any sign of his presence there after that thundering summons at the door would have been to betray himself beyond redemption. He inserted his latch-key noiselessly, and, crouching to escape imagined observers, drew the door gently after him, and turned the key slowly in the lock. As he did this he heard a footstep and a cough together close at hand, and, turning with a start, beheld a pale and slender man of brief stature, who scraped his lantern jaws with apologetic thumb and finger, and

looking at him with a startled meekness, as if he would fain propitiate anger for a possible intrusion, sidled to the foot of the stairs, mounted the stairway with a backward glance and a second cough of apology, and so disappeared.

Young Mr. Barter, with his nerves already shaken by this small episode, walked into the main thoroughfare and merged with the crowd, bearing Mr. Bommaney's eight thousand pounds with him. When he had walked for a while he hailed a cab, and was driven home. He had, or prided himself on having, an exceptional eye for horseflesh, but it was not his faculty in this direction which had led him to choose a cab horsed by a brute of unusual symmetry and swiftness. This was an accident, but, like other accidents in this perplexed world, it served its purpose. It landed him at the paternal door in Harley Street almost at the instant at which Bommaney arrived there in pursuit of him.

Now, although young Mr. Barter had not calculated on meeting Bommaney so soon, and although the meeting was naturally something of a shock to him, he had already schooled himself for interview and inquiry. He went a little paler than common as he grasped his father's old friend by the hand for the third time that evening, and trembled ever so little as he spoke.

'I half expected to find you here,' he said. 'I could see how moved you were by the news of my

father's illness.' The door stood open, and the old-fashioned man-servant within had been in the act of closing it upon Bommaney's retreating figure when cab number two had driven up, and the young master of the house had alighted from it. 'Is the news worse or better?' He laid both hands upon Bommaney's arms as he put this question.

The elderly servitor, who had never had reason given to him to believe that young Mr. Barter was above the reasonable attached to his father, was a little surprised to see the young man so moved. He drew the door gently after him, and came out upon the steps.

'I'm afraid, Mr. John,' he murmured sympathetically, 'that it's practically all over, sir. The poor gentleman's quite unconscious, and the doctor don't expect him to last till morning.'

Young Mr. Barter's mind was active, and accustomed to rapid movement. He knew at once that the old servant read the signs of disturbance in his face and manner, and how far he misread them. So, to insure the misreading, he took out his handkerchief, and groaned at this melancholy intelligence.

'I——,' began Bommaney, stammering and speaking a little thickly, 'I didn't come to ask about your father.' Young Barter's heart at this, though he was perfectly prepared for it, began to beat like a sledge-hammer. 'I've had a dreadful loss. I have called nowhere but at your office since I left my own, and

I have lost eight thousand pounds. I am convinced that I must have left it there.'

'I can't think so, Mr. Bommaney,' said Barter, with a face of innocence. 'We can go back together, if you like, and look for it.' Bommaney's driver lingered for him; the other cabman was already jingling leisurely down the street.

'Johnson,' said young Barter, addressing the domestic, 'you hear what Mr. Bommaney says. This is a matter of the most urgent importance, and must be looked into at once. Tell my mother that I have been home, and that I have been called suddenly back on urgent business.' Bommaney stood in a kind of stupid trance, and the young man, taking him by the arm, had some ado to secure his attention.

'Come! Come, sir,' he said; 'we will look into this at once. You must not remain in suspense about such a matter.'

They rustled together through the straw which had been laid down upon the roadway, and had been scattered by the feet of passers-by upon the pavement, and, mounting the cab, drove in a ghastly silence for a score of yards, and then, with a clatter which made conversation difficult, Bommaney, rousing himself at intervals, shouted his certainty that the notes would prove to have been left at Barter's chambers. Barter, growing curiously inured to the circumstances of the case, shouted back that he dared to say they would be; that it was very likely; that he really did not see

where else Mr. Bommaney could possibly have left them, furtively pressing the notes against his breast meanwhile, and once, at a quiet interval, when Bommaney had sunk into his former stupor, venturing to steal a hand to the pocket in which the stolen money lay, caressing the edges of the notes with the tips of his fingers.

'I'm sure,' said Bommaney, as the cab pulled up at the gate of the quadrangle, 'that we shall find them here.' He spoke with a tremulous uncertainty, and so obviously appealed for a confirmation of his hope, that Barter felt constrained to answer,

'Oh, we are bound to find them.'

The striking of a wax vesta at the door of the chambers, the shaky hunt for the key, the well-known obstinacy of the lock, the opening of the door, the fevered working of Bommaney's fingers, and the flushed eagerness of his face, were all memorable to young Barter for many and many a day. They entered together the room in which their interview had taken place; and Barter, nursing the remnant of the flaming vesta, lit the gas with it, and then, dropping it on the floor, set his foot upon it, and looked at his companion.

'Where do you think you left the notes, sir?' he asked. 'Have you any idea? I think you took out some papers here. You wanted to consult my father about them, I fancy, and, if I remember, you returned them to your pocket.'

Bommaney stood looking about him on the floor, trailing the point of his walking-cane purposelessly hither and thither; and it was at this moment, seeing how confused and broken his victim seemed, that young Mr. Barter tasted the first flavour of safety.

‘I don’t see anything,’ he said.

‘Did you,’ Bommaney asked him, with both trembling hands grasping the knob of his walking-cane, and shaking in appeal before the unsuspected thief—‘did you lock any papers away before you left?’

As a matter of fact, young Barter had not had any papers to lock away that evening after Bommaney’s departure; but he thought the trick worth playing, and, producing his keys again, opened the heavy iron safe which stood against the wall.

‘Yes,’ he said, with an air of hopeful alacrity. ‘By Jove, I did!’ He stood aside, with an outstretched hand, and motioned Bommaney to examine the contents of the safe. There was a parchment there, there were half a dozen bundles of documents tied in pink tape and docketed; but there were no bank-notes.

‘You know,’ said Bommaney, with a fretful wail, ‘I must have left them here; I couldn’t have left them anywhere else. I put it to you—could I?’

Barter looked at him mournfully, with raised eyebrows. There was just a hint of expostulation in his raised eyebrows, and in the expression of his voice.

‘You see, sir,’ he said, waving his white hands—‘you see for yourself, there’s nothing here.’

Bommaney walked to a chair, and, sitting down there, lifted up his voice and wept. 'I've been an honest man, by God! all my life long; and now I'm not merely ruined, but I shall be taken for a thief.' He cried bitterly after this outburst, with his head between his hands. His hat fell off, and his walking-stick tumbled noisily to the floor. Mr. Barter picked them up, and, having set them on the table, looked at the shaking shoulders, and listened to the ruined man's sobs and wailings. It was a pity—of course it was a pity—but young Mr. Barter really did not see how it was in his power to help it.

III

ON a chill spring evening the sunset over London gave a brief radiance of colour to the dull gray roof and smoke-stained chimneys of many thoroughfares. Shadows thickened in the eastern skies as if fold after fold of finest crape were drawn over the field of watery and opalescent light the fallen sun had left behind it. In one great thoroughfare running east and west the sky-line of the houses stood distinct, and bathed in light of many colours; whilst down below there was a wall of shadow. Two parallel walls of shadow rose from a shadowy level, and the dusk had a thousand indistinguishable voices.

The shadowy lines became accented by twin rows of flickering fire, the rear jets seen with a blurred halo of mist round each of them, the halo crawling feebly within itself, tormented by a feeble wind. The long vista of pavement became chequered like a chessboard, with patches of light from shop windows. Gable Inn, staring at the growing darkness with a single fiery eye, looked like a Rip Van Winkle. It had been old when Chaucer and the knights and ladies of whom he sang

were young; and its hoary stunted angles and squat chimney cowls had the grave and impassive aspect proper to great age. It has stood there now for over seven hundred years hoarding a growing store of secrets. It is roughly picturesque in every detail, and its every chamber is a triumph of narrowness, obscurity, and inconvenience.

In the quadrangle the shadows climbed the sturdy walls as if they were an exhalation from the paving-stones. The dim staircase sent down all manner of muffled and echoing voices. Footsteps sounded, and the clang of doors, and the shriek of unwilling keys in rusty locks, and the hurrying traffic of the street without, softened by the moist atmosphere, was like the fading echo of following feet upon the stairs.

Lights sprang up in the basement windows, telling of protractive legal labours. Lights twinkled in the garrets, telling of lonely study or noisy conviviality in the coming hours of darkness. At length one side of the quadrangle viewed by a solitary watcher from a third-floor window of the opposing side, winked with a hundred windows through the wet air and deepening shadow like a blear-eyed Argus.

This watcher, lounging at his own window, was Mr. Philip Bommaney, recently self-entitled the 'Solitary of Gable Inn.' He was eight-and-twenty years of age or thereabouts, a broad-shouldered, deep-chested, manly-looking fellow, with curling brown hair, and a face expressive of pugnacity, good-humour, and many

capacities. He was a little weary now, after a long day of satisfactory work. He watched the mounting shadows, and listened to the weird gamut of the wind among the telegraph lines, until the outer voices made his own dull room seem homely. One ruddy tongue of flame from the expiring fire in the grate played on the narrow walls and low ceiling, and woke twinkling reflections in the spare and battered furniture. A man's dwelling-place is always an index to his character when its arrangement depends upon himself; and signs of Philip Bommaney's nature and pursuits were visible in plenty here. There were symmetrical rows of books on the shelves flanking the fire-place. An orderly stack of newspapers occupied one corner of the room, and a set of boxing-gloves lay on top of the pile, and a pair of dumb-bells beside it. A shaded reading-lamp stood upon the table in the midst of a great litter of papers. The barrels of a huge elephant gun flashed dimly from the wall as the firelight played upon them, and two or three lighter weapons were ranged together lower down.

He turned from the window and lit the lamp, and, wheeling round, held up the light to a photograph, and studied it with a pleased face. It was the portrait of a pretty girl, very sweetly grave, and looking as if it could be very sweetly vivacious. When he had looked at it for a longish time he nodded and smiled, as if the pictured lips had actually spoken to him. There was a tumbler standing beside the photograph with a

bunch of hothouse flowers in it, the one bright spot of colour in the dingy chamber. He took this in his disengaged hand, and nodding and smiling anew at the pretty girl's portrait, he turned about again, and walked into a bedroom beyond a narrow and inconvenient little window. The strident voice of the clock over the entrance of the old Hall, answered or anticipated from multitudinous spires in the City far and near, sounded as Philip entered his bedroom. He stood and listened, counting six jarring strokes. The bedroom was a microscopic apartment, with as many corners in it as any room of its size in London, and the bed itself was a perfect triumph of littleness, so tucked under the sloping roof, and so surrounded by projecting corners, as to make the entry to it or the exit from it a gymnastic performance of considerable merit. The room was not over-light at the best of times, the fourth part of the space of one small window in the sloping wall was filled by its own heavy framework, and for half its height it was shielded by a parapet, which had at least its uses in hiding the occupant of the room from the too-curious observation of those who dwelt in the upper stories of the houses opposite. These houses opposite, compared with Gable Inn, are of a mushroom modernness, and yet are old enough (having begun with a debauched and sickly constitution) to have fallen into an almost complete decrepitude. Their stately neighbour seems to be less grimy with the London smoke than they are, has always been less

susceptible to outside evil influences, even of that unescapable sort, and drives them to an added shabbiness of senility by contrast with its own hale old age.

The bedroom window was already open for the admission of such fresh air as, disguised in London blacks, the exhalations of moist spring pavements, and the reeking odours of the cuisine of Fleeter's Rents, might choose to wander thither. Philip, with the lamp in one hand and the tumbler of flowers in the other, put out his head and looked into the squalid depths below him, and having gazed there a while absently and with no object, drew back with a vague touch of pity upon him for the people who dwelt in so much squalor so near to healthy effort and reasonable competence. He could hardly have told as much, perhaps, but one pallid countenance, shining very dimly at an open window, was very much answerable for that vague touch of pity. The face in the darkness started away from the window as he looked at it, as if his own robust health and the light that dwelt about him startled its pinched shabbiness into solitude. He set the tumbler of flowers upon the window-ledge, and closing the window, made his toilet and returned to the sitting-room. Then, having banked up the fire, and set the matches in such a position that he could easily find them, he blew out the lamp, left his chambers, and ran down the tortuous stairs. As he turned the last corner a door clanged noisily, and the next thing of which he was conscious was that he was struggling in

the embrace of a stranger whom he had doubled up in an angle of the wall.

'I beg your pardon,' he said gaspingly; 'I stumbled.'

'You did,' responded the stranger, gasping also. 'Rather heavily. It was lucky you had something soft to fall on.'

Philip began to make apologies. The stranger, breathless still, but jovially polite, begged him not to mention it. He was a tallish young man, broad set, and a little too fleshy for his years. He had a clean-shaven face, healthily pallid, the whitest of teeth, and a most frank, engaging, and contagious smile.

'Pray don't say anything more about it,' he said in answer to Philip's reiterated apologies. 'You are not hurt, I hope?'

'No, thanks; but I'm afraid you are.'

'Not at all. It was sharp for a minute; but I am all right now. The stairs are very inconvenient, especially to strangers.'

'I haven't even that excuse for my clumsiness, said Philip; 'for I am living here.'

'Indeed; then we are neighbours, and should know each other. Rather an informal kind of introduction, eh?' The stranger said this with a mellow laugh and a flash of his white teeth. He opened his overcoat as he spoke, and produced a card-case, Philip catching the gleam of a gold-studded shirt-front as he did so. 'That's my name, John Barter; and these are my

offices.' The outer oak, cracked and blistered to the likeness of an ancient tar-barrel, bore an inscription, dim with long years—'Fellowship, Freemantle, and Barter'—and the names were repeated on the door-post at the entrance.

'I have no card,' said Philip, accepting the stranger's. 'My name is Bommaney—Philip Bommaney;' Mr. Barter's smiling face was unchanged, though he gave a slight but perceptible start at the name, and repeated it.

'Do you know it?' asked Philip. To the ears of his companion there was something of a challenge in the tone. 'It is not a common name.'

'No. Not a common name. I think I have heard it somewhere.'

They were under the archway by this time, in the brief shelter of which the sanguine-faced, red-waist-coated lodge-keeper was taking his nightly constitutional. They answered the touch of the hat with which he saluted them.

'Which is your way?' asked Mr. Barter.

'Westward,' said Phil.

'Mine is east,' said Barter, 'so we part here. We are bound to meet again before long. Good-night.'

'Good-night, and many thanks for taking my clumsiness in such good part.'

Barter's ready smile beamed out again. They shook hands before parting like old acquaintances, and Philip walked on, through the incessant noise of

Holborn into quieter Bloomsbury Street, along the eastern side of Bedford Square, where the bare trees were shivering in a bath of fog, and into Gower Street. Half way down that hideous thoroughfare he came upon a house, one of the few which still retain the old lamp-iron and extinguisher before their doors, and knocking, was admitted by a trim maid, with the smiling alacrity due to a frequent and favoured visitor, and by her conducted to the drawing-room, where sat a young lady engaged in a transparent pretence of being absorbed in a novel. The pretence vanished as the door closed behind the handmaiden, and the young lady jumped up and ran forward to meet him, with such a glad welcome in her face as answered the appeal in his own. It does not need that we should look at her with Philip's eyes to pronounce her charmingly pretty, or to admire the face, at once shy and frank, with which she nestled beside him.

'I thought you were never coming,' she said.

'Am I so late, then?'

'It seemed so, and now you are come, tell me what you have been doing.'

'Working, and thinking of you.'

'You work too much, Phil.' She did her best to ignore the second item of his day's occupation, but the deepened flush and her avoidance of her lover's eyes answered it more effectively than words could have done. 'You are getting quite pale and thin. No wonder, sitting all alone all day long in those musty old chambers.'

'Well, you see, Patty, the more I work, the sooner I shall cease to be all alone.' The flush deepened again, and the hand trembled in his like a caught bird. 'And as for working too much, I don't believe that's possible. Work never killed anybody yet, and idleness has killed a good many. It's better to work than sit still and wait for briefs which never come. There's no sensation more delightful than that of looking at a good day's work, and thinking that every line and word has brought me nearer to you.'

His tenderness conquered her shyness, and she nestled closer still, looking up at him with a whole-hearted admiration and affection. He felt a little sad and unworthy under it, as almost any honest fellow would have been sure to do, and yet it was wonderfully sweet to him, and more than reward enough for any effort.

'I wish I could help you, Phil. I wish I could do something for you, when you have given up so much for me.'

'Hush!' he said, laying his hand lightly upon her lips. 'We made up our minds long ago that no more was to be said about that.' He was tender still—he could be nothing else with her—but there was a touch of sternness in his manner, too—as if the theme pained him.

'But I can't help thinking of it. It was so noble of you, Phil.'

'It was the only thing to be done—the only thing

possible. It was——' he paused for a second, and then went on resolutely—'it was my father's act by which you suffered. I should have been a scoundrel if I had done otherwise.'

'And are you to do all? and am I to do nothing? It is selfish to keep all the generosity to yourself.'

He laughed as if he found this female paradox a pleasant fancy, but she was not to be put off so.

'If the subject pains you, as I know it does, dear, please understand why I speak of it. I don't want you to think I take your sacrifice as you pretend to take it. It isn't a matter of course, as you pretend it is; and you may say what you like, Phil, but it isn't a thing that everybody would have done. Don't grudge me my gratitude; you did it for the love of me.'

'I didn't do it for the love of you,' said Phil, laughing tenderly; 'how often am I to tell you that, you little mountain of obstinacy? I did it because it was the right thing. I don't say, mind you, that it wasn't easier to do it for you than it might have been for somebody I didn't know or care for; but that—as you will see quite clearly if you'll bring your naturally logical mind to bear upon it—makes the thing so much the less creditable, provided there was any credit due to it at all.'

The loving feminine scorn of this masculine process of reasoning was expressed in a single glance, and was delightful to see.

'It only means waiting a little longer before I claim you.'

The girl would fain have asked, 'Why should you wait when I have enough for both by your gift? What does it matter which of us it is who has the money—you or I?' But this question went unspoken, for obvious reasons. A woman is tongue-tied by the countless conventionalities of education. She must often let her thoughts lie silent in her heart, though she burns to express them, and find what answer she can to questions she dare not offer. Philip had repaired her loss by begging himself. That was noble. But now he persisted in deferring their marriage, and had buried himself in that lofty sarcophagus in Gable Inn, resolved only to claim her, though she was all his own already, when he had reinstated his fortunes by his labour. That was noble also, perhaps, but in her own heart she thought it a trifle foolish—say Quixotic, not to be too severe. She would rather have seen his ardour find a more commonplace expression. She had a general sort of belief that whatever Philip did was bound to be right, and yet this actual experience rather jarred with that assumption.

They found other themes in a while, and talked of the future and the happiness it would bring. That Philip was going to be rich and famous was a prime article in Patty's creed, and he himself, though he had soberer hopes, was not likely to miss any chance of success which labour might bring him. He was more

than modest enough in his conception of his own powers, and was often doubtful as to the fulfilment of the higher ambitions which are the necessary fuel of all artistic fires. Without those fires the chill of modesty will fall to the frost of cowardice, and in Art cowardice means indolence. In his moments of exultation—and these came generally at their strongest when he was in his sweetheart's society—success looked easy enough. The memory of her undoubted belief in him came upon him often with a glow reflected from those magnificently hopeful moments. But then at times of depression it grew to look no more than a foolish unattainable dream. All young artists have times when they are going to be great—when the glory proper to white hairs makes a halo round unwrinkled fronts and curls, brown or golden. They have times when the smartest turn of verse, the most delightful inventions of narrative, the most exquisite contrast of colour or mould of form their genius can compass are stricken through and through with the horror of commonplace. But when a man of the artistic *genius* has once so far learned his own nature he has made a great advance towards the fulfilment of his ambitions. He has to learn that just as the hot fit is followed by the cold the cold fit is succeeded by the hot. He knows how intermittent he is. He learns to mistrust his own mistrust of himself. The periods of depression grow less frequent, and the depression grows less lasting. And then, just as the cold fit

becomes less chilling to the one, the fit of exultation grows less intoxicating. The halo beams less bright—less near.

Yet Philip, with the girl's eyes worshipping him, and her sweet voice cooing hope and praise, and her hands knitted on his shoulder, and her warm breath fanning his cheek, gave himself up to the vision, and felt his heart warm with a world's welcome as yet far away from him.

The prose of life will assert itself, even to visionary eight-and-twenty and sweet eighteen in love with one another. On this occasion it came as a summons to supper. The summoner was a stout and jovial elderly gentleman, about whose somewhat commonplace British exterior there was, to Philip's mind, a reflection of the nimbus which glorified Patty to his mind, for he was Patty's father. He had been called Old Brown at school when he was young—he had been called Old Brown in the country, and the prefix had found him out in town without the need for anybody to breathe a whisper of it. He was Old Brown to his new acquaintances in London before a month had gone by. The name suggests a beverage which is not unlike Old Brown himself—being mild and nutty to the taste as he to the mental palate—ripe and genial. He had a moist twinkle of the eye,—the look which bespeaks the kindly humorist,—and his slightly protruding under lip seemed covertly to taste the flavour of unspoken jokes. Old Brown's jokes were mainly left

unspoken, but he spent a good part of his life in laughing without any very apparent reason for laughter, and may have been internally the way he looked to be.

He shook hands with Philip, and chucked Patty under the chin with a waggish aspect, which called an appealing blush into the girl's face. Perhaps the blush stayed the intended quip, but any way the old gentleman contented himself with a beaming laugh, and led the way to the supper table, rubbing his hands and chuckling.

The meal was quietly jovial, and if, after it, Old Brown was not quite so fast asleep as he pretended to be, at least his patience gave the lovers the shelter they needed. He snored in mellow murmurs from behind his bandanna, and they sat and talked together in low tones lest they might awaken him, until the time came for parting.

Outside the mist had given place to a dull persistent rain, and a peevish wind was complaining in area and chimney cowl. Philip turned to the street with a pleasantly haunting vision of Patty's vivacious face outlined against the warmth and brightness of the hall. The touch of her good-night kiss lingered on his lips like live velvet, and he carried warmth and brightness enough within him to defy all the rain that ever rained, and all the wind that ever blew on smoky London.

The rain had cleared the streets, and the occasional

gleam of a policeman's cape or a furtive figure seeking the shelter of a doorway against the drifting showers was all he saw as he bored his way against the rising wind to the corner of Holborn. He was so absorbed by that fancy of music to which his own quick tread kept time that a shuffling step behind him rapidly drawing nearer failed to reach his sense. But as he came to the corner, a hand clutched his arm.

He turned, with the quick defensive gesture natural to a man so accosted at such a time, and faced the unexpected figure. An old man, clad in filthy fluttering rags, stood staring at him, with both hands stretched out. The rags shook as much with the horrible cough that tore him as with the cruel wind. He was a dreadful creature, with watery eyes, and a head and moustache of dirty gray. His long and unvenerable hairs strayed loose beneath the dunghill relic which crowned them. The rain was in his hair and beard, and had so soaked his tattered dress that it clung to him like the feathers of a drenched fowl. He shook and wheezed and panted, and gripped the air with tremulous fingers, and through the rents in his clothing his white flesh gleamed in the gas-light.

The look of surprise and pity which Philip bent upon this unclean apparition was startled into one of sudden fear and horror. In the very instant when these emotions struck him, they were reflected in the other's face. The man made a motion to run, but

Philip clutched his arm, and he stood cowering and unresisting.

‘You ! Here in London ?’

‘Phil,’ said the spectre imploringly, ‘for God’s sake help me. I didn’t know it was you, when I followed you. I thought——’ his voice trailed into silence.

‘You have come to this ?’

‘Yes, Phil ; this is what I’ve come to.’ The cough took him here again, and tore him so that he was fain to lean against the shutters of a shop near at hand.

‘Why do you come back here ? Are you mad ?’

‘I am—almost. What could I do ? I’m as safe here as I am anywhere. Who would know me ? or, if they did, who would hurt a wretch like me ? I haven’t slept in a bed for weeks, Phil. I haven’t eaten a morsel for three days. For God’s sake ! give me some money. I’ll—I’ll go away ; I’ll never trouble you again.’

‘I’ll give you all I can. But you must go away from London.’

Philip thrust his hand into his pocket and brought up all the pocket’s contents. He took his keys and an unvalued trifle or two from the handful, and held the rest out towards his father. The old man shrunk from him with a terrible appeal and shamefaced gratitude which cut the son’s heart like a knife.

‘Where can I go to ?’

‘Anywhere out of London. You are not—safe here. Go away. Write to me here.’ He thrust an

envelope on which his name and address were written into the old man's dirty trembling hand. 'You must never come to see me. Promise me that.'

'I promise,' he said; and, thrusting the money and the envelope somewhere among his rags, stood silent for a while. 'I'm afraid,' he said, 'I acted very foolishly and very——'

Then his voice trailed away again.

'God help you!' said Philip with a choking voice.

'You'll shake hands, won't you, Phil?' said the old man. Phil took the proffered hand. 'It's something,' said Bommaney the elder, clinging to him, 'to feel an honest man's hand again. God bless you, Phil!—God bless you!'

Philip stood silent, and the old man, with another shame-stricken glance upon him, moved away. His son watched him for a second or two, as he slunk, coughing and shivering, along the gleaming pavement, and then turned and went his own way heavily.

Bommaney senior, discerning the welcome beacon of a public-house, shuffled eagerly towards it, hugging beneath his rags the money his son had given him.

'I beg your pardon, Mr. Bommaney; if you please, sir.' He started at the sound of a voice which had been familiar to him for years. 'I should like a word with you, sir; if you please.'

IV

JAMES HORNETT was less changed than his old employer, but it was evident that he too had fallen upon evil times. For a mere second the familiar tones of his voice were no more than familiar to Bommaney, whose mind was confused by long misery and hunger and sleeplessness, and the shock of his late encounter. But when he turned and saw Hornett's long thumb and finger scraping at his stubbly jaws, the gesture and the attitude of apology brought him back to mind at once. Hornett's coat sleeve was torn, and showed his arm half way down to the elbow, but revealed no hint of linen. The collar of his frock-coat was buttoned tightly about his neck, and there was a sparkling metallic rime upon his cheeks and chin and upper lip. Bommaney was ashamed before him, and afraid of him, and only some faint reminder of self-respect and the pride of earlier days held him back from the impulse to run away.

'You're not afraid of me, sir?' said James Hornett. He had always smiled, and was smiling even now. The smile was no more than a contortion of the

muscles of the face, which made a long mirthless crease on either cheek, and left the eyes untouched by the least light of sympathy. It gave him a propitiatory dog-like look, and there was a hint of fawning in his attitude which matched it perfectly and carried out the likeness. 'You remember me, sir?' he went on, for Bommaney stared at him so wildly that there seemed room for reasonable doubt on that point. 'Hornett, sir. James Hornett. Your faithful servant for thirty years, sir.' Bommaney looked at him with haggard watering eyes, and said nothing as yet. 'It's a bit of a surprise, sir, at first, isn't it?' Hornett went on, with his unchanging smile. There was a good deal of hunger and even triumph in his small soul, but they found no other outward expression, and his attitude and voice were as apologetic and retiring as of old. 'It was rather a surprise to me, sir, when I recognised you. Isn't it a little dangerous for you to be here, Mr. Bommaney?'

They both started, and each looked about him at this mention of the fugitive's name.

'Hush!' said Bommaney. 'Don't call me by that name. Come away from here.'

A policeman strolled along the street, with an echoing tread, and as the two slunk past him he turned a casual glance upon them. The glance touched them like a galvanic shock, and they would have run if they had had courage for such an indiscretion.

'What do you want with me?' asked Bommaney,

when the policeman was out of sight and hearing; Hornett walking beside him, with his lean, propitiatory fingers at his chin, looked up with hesitating meekness.

'Well, you see, sir,' he responded, 'your fall was mine, sir; I was supposed'—he coughed behind his hand here to indicate apology for the introduction of a theme so necessarily disagreeable to the other's feelings—'I was supposed, sir, to have been in your confidence. I made many applications for employment, and nobody would employ me. Young Mr. Weatherall, sir, promised, personally, that if I called again, he'd kick me down the steps.'

Bommaney groaned.

'What do you want with me?' he asked again.

They were standing by this time outside the doors of a public-house, and the wind-driven rain was pelting down heavily.

'I thought, sir——' said Hornett; 'I'm very hard pressed, sir.' The dog-like, propitiatory smile never varied. 'I was following Mr. Phil myself, sir, in the hope that his kindness might run to a trifle.'

'Come in,' said Bommaney; and Hornett eagerly accepting the invitation, they entered the house together. There was an odour of frying in the room, and a hissing noise proceeded from a sort of metal caldron which stood over a row of gas-jets on the pewter counter. A printed legend, 'Sausage and Mashed, 3d.' was pasted on the wooden partition at the side of the box they

entered, and on the mirror which faced them, and displayed their own squalid misery to themselves. A year ago the fare would have seemed uninviting to either at his hungriest moment, but now Bommaney called for it with a dreadful suppressed eagerness, and, the barman serving them with a tantalising leisure, they watched every movement with the eyes of famine.

‘I’ve got a little place, sir, of my own,’ whispered Hornett, when the pangs of hunger were appeased. ‘It’s very humble, but you could put up for the night there.’ Bommaney made no answer, but the two set out again together through the rain, and, pausing once only for the purchase of a flat pint bottle of whisky, made straight for Fleeter’s Rents.

All that nine hundred and ninety-nine in a thousand of the many thousands who pass it every day could tell you of Fleeter’s Rents is that it makes a narrow black gash in the walls of the great thoroughfare, and that it neighbours Gable Inn. It is slimy in its very atmosphere all winter through, and its air in summer time is made of dust and grit and shadow. The old Inn elbows it disdainfully on one side, and on the other a great modern stuccoed pile overtops it with a parvenu insolence. It is the home naturally of the very poor; for no hermit or hater of the world, however disposed to shun his fellows, would hide in its dingy solitudes whilst he had but a mere shilling a day for lodging and bodily sustenance elsewhere.

Hornett led the way up a set of narrow and broken stairs, and having reached the uppermost story of the house, pushed open a broken door, which, depending from a single hinge, scratched noisily upon the uneven flooring of the room. His guest stood shivering in the doorway until a match sputtered and fizzed in Hornett's fingers. Then, guided by that precarious light, he advanced. Hornett lit a candle which adhered by its own grease to the filthy wall and had already made a great cone of smoke with a tremulous outline there. There was a small grate, with a mere double-handful of shavings, chips, and coal behind its rusty bars. Hornett applied the match to the shavings, and, as the fire leapt up, the two men knelt together, coughing and choking in the smoke, and bathing their chilled hands in the flame. Bommaney drew the flat bottle from a pocket hidden somewhere in his multitudinous rags, and drank. Hornett watched him greedily, with hands involuntarily and unconsciously extended. Then when he had drunk in turn, they each shivered over the fire again, stealing furtive glances at each other, each mightily disconcerted when he met the other's eye. Bommaney had aged dreadfully during his year of hiding, and Hornett, who had drunk his employer's health upon his birthdays often enough to know his age to a day, could yet scarce believe that the dreadful spectre who knelt beside him numbered less than fourscore years.

One question perplexed Hornett's mind. How

came it, he asked himself over and over again, that in the space of a mere twelvemonths a man who started with at least eight thousand pounds could have fallen into such a depth of poverty? Eight thousand pounds, if absolutely nothing were done with it for its own increase, meant royal living for a score of years for an unencumbered man. Hornett longed to satisfy his own curiosity upon this point, and felt as if he dared not ask the question for his life. He framed a score of ways by which he might approach it, with a road of retreat behind him, and at last, as if in spite of himself, he said, with apologetic impudence,

'You don't seem to have made the money last long, sir.'

'The money,' cried Bommaney, turning furiously upon him. 'What money?'

Hornett edged away upon his knees, and his thumb and fingers traced the creases of his smile up and down his stubbly cheeks.

'Do you think,' the old man demanded passionately, 'that I took away a penny?'

Hornett was afraid to rise. There was such a despair and so much fury in the other's looks that he could do nothing but crouch at his feet with his mean meek face turned fearfully towards Bommaney, and his body cowering.

'You think I took that eight thousand pounds?' Bommaney quavered, with a voice of bitter disdain.

He had never in his life regretted anything so profoundly as he had regretted his resistance of that temptation. To have had all the blame and shame, and to endure all the miseries a convicted thief might earn for himself, to have been an outcast and a pauper, only because he had been resolute against temptation! It is easy enough for a man whom circumstances keep honest to think himself honourable beyond the chance of temptation. But misery has the virtue of Ithuriel's spear, with a difference. As the one touched the beast and transformed him to the seeming of a high intelligence, so will the other touch a seemingly impregnable armour of bright honour, and turn it into tinder, leaving the poor beast revealed and unprotected from his own base, natural longings. The poor Bommaney was maddened to think he had not done what the other's thoughts charged him with, even though he passionately rebelled against the accusation.

'When did you ever know me to be a rogue, James Hornett?' he asked, with an air and voice to which his passion lent something like dignity. 'When did you ever know me defraud a man of a farthing?'

'Never, sir, I'm sure,' Hornett responded, not doubting in his own mind that Bommaney was guilty. 'But——'

'But what?' cried Bommaney. 'My own son, my own flesh and blood, would hardly shake hands with me. My clerk—I took him out of the gutter,

you know that, Hornett! I took you out of the gutter and made a man of you, and lavished kindness on you. Nobody has a minute's trust in me—nobody thinks of misfortune or disaster. I was right to run away and hide myself, for nobody would have believed me if I had stayed and told the truth.'

Hornett looked more frightened than before after this outburst, but Bommaney read incredulity in his face, and answered it with an added passion.

'What good would it do me to tell lies to you? Suppose I made you believe me, am I such a fool as to think your pity could set me on my legs again?'

He turned away, moved by his own wrath and anguish, and Hornett, rising, made himself as small as he could in the corner beside the grate. Bommaney, in his pitiful broken boots, went shuffling up and down the room.

'What became of the money, sir?' the clerk asked with a shaky voice.

He was ready to run for his life, and he was more than half afraid that the old man was mad—his eyes blazed so, and his voice and gestures were so tempestuous.

'It was lost,' said Bommaney. 'I lost it, Heaven knows how. I've thought a thousand times,' he said, through his clenched teeth, 'that that young Barter must have had it.'

'Young Barter, sir?' said Hornett.

Then Bommaney told all he knew of the story of

his own loss, and at a certain point in the narrative Hornett started and made a step forward. He remembered the night well enough—he had reason to remember it. An appointment for the theatre that evening had led him to call upon a brother clerk in Gable Inn, and he had seen young Mr. Barter leaving his chambers in what had struck him at the time as being an odd and stealthy fashion. He had remarked it for the moment, and had forgotten it afterwards, as men forget a thousand things of the sort which have no interest personal to themselves. But now he saw young Mr. Barter's figure with a singular distinctness, and the face turned round in the gaslight was again as visible as it had been at the moment. He thought he read a meaning in it now. But for this slight confirmation of his employer's story he would probably have disbelieved it, but the accidental character of the clue weighed with him, an apparent touch of romance in it gave it a value beyond its merits.

'Could you tell me, sir,' he asked, 'exactly what time it was when you left Mr. Barter's office?'

'No,' said Bommaney, suddenly weary after his outburst of self-exculpation, 'I don't know. It was after banking hours. It was dark; he had to light the gas. What if I could? What would that have to do with it?'

'Well, you see, sir,' Hornett answered, 'I'm not likely to forget that evening. Of all the evenings of my life, sir, I made a call at Gable Inn myself,

sir, at Number One. If young Mr. Barter had found the notes he wouldn't care to face you again, and he mightn't have answered your knock at the door, though he might have heard it.'

'Any fool could tell me that,' said Bommaney roughly. 'What do you mean?'

'I've noticed, sir,' said Hornett, with marked humility, as if he apologised for having said anything, 'that young Mr. Barter is a gentleman who goes about in rather a large way, and noisy way, sir. He's a biggish man, as it is, and to look at him at first you'd fancy that he was bigger than he is. He talks very loud and cheery, sir, and he bangs things about a good deal.'

'Well?' said Bommaney, irritated by these slow preliminaries, 'what about it all?'

He could see that his late clerk was leading to a point of some sort, and listened with a growing impatience.

'He was leaving his rooms that night, sir,' said Hornett, 'as sly as a cat. I was just on the ground-floor of Number One as he was locking the door behind him. Locking it, don't you see, sir,' said Hornett, beginning to be fired by his imagination, and speaking eagerly, 'so as not to make a noise in pulling it to behind him. I suppose I made some sort of a noise in going behind him, but any way, he looked up at me—I can see him now!' he cried, with a swift conviction, 'as if he was here at this very

minute, white and cowardly. That's what he was, sir. White and cowardly, I can see him now.'

Bommaney grasped him by the wrist.

'Do you remember the time?' he asked, passing one hand confusedly through the tumbled and disgraceful old locks of his hair. 'Do you remember when I left the office? Do you remember when you left it?'

'Almost directly, sir, after you. But you drove, sir, and I walked. I stopped, and had a little conversation with a friend, and just a social glass that might have kept me back five minutes, sir. I was going to dine with Mr. Marshall (White and Fielding's Mr. Marshall, sir) before the theatre.'

Bommaney released his wrist, and dropping on his knees before the fire again, warmed his hands absently and stared into the blaze.

'The notes were all hundreds, James,' he said, after a pause. 'They were stopped at the Bank, I know, because I saw the advertisement. It wouldn't be easy to get rid of them.'

'There are ways and means, sir,' said Hornett. 'They'd have to be disposed of at a loss, of course—a heavy loss—and kept quiet for a considerable time.'

'Have you heard of any of them coming into circulation?' asked Bommaney.

'I haven't been in the way to hear of anything, sir,' the clerk answered mournfully, 'but,' with a sidelong look at his old employer, 'if I could only get

to look a bit respectable, I could make inquiries in an hour. I have no doubt I could find out, sir.'

'My boy believes I'm guilty, like the rest,' said the old man, moaning and shivering and coughing again. The passion of his protest and the warmth of heart which Hornett's returning confidence had taught him had all died away, and he was his bankrupt, disgraced, and broken self again, old and maudlin, and strickenly conscious of his miseries.

'Phil might help me,' he said shakily. 'He could, but he won't. He's got plenty of money. If I'd been a rogue, James Hornett,' and there he flashed up again, ever so little, 'I could have robbed my own flesh and blood with safety. A rogue would have done it. I was his sole trustee, and I could have had nine thousand by a stroke of the pen at any minute.'

'Mr. Phil, sir,' said Hornett. 'Mr. Phil hasn't got much money left.'

'Why not?' the old man asked, staring round at him with his watery eyes.

'He paid Mr. Brown the eight thousand in full, sir, and divided the rest, as far as it would go, amongst the poorest of the creditors.'

Bommaney turned back towards the fire, and drooped there. He seemed very impassive under this intelligence, but he was deeply moved by it all the same. The sense of his son's high feeling of honour gave him a keen throb of pride, and then he thought bitterly that his own ill-luck pursued his offspring.

The loss was double. It had disgraced and ruined him, and had robbed his son of his inheritance.

‘Hornett,’ he said, ‘James Hornett.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I was brought up,’ the old man said, in a muffled voice, advancing and retiring his hands before the fire, and chafing them automatically, ‘I was brought up by Christian parents. I never did a dishonourable act in all my days. I have been a God-fearing man and a—a steady church-goer. I give it all up. I renounce it. I don’t believe in God. I don’t believe in religion. I don’t believe in being honest. It’s a—it’s a vile wicked world, Hornett, and it’s my belief the devil rules it.’

‘Oh, sir,’ cried Hornett, ‘you mustn’t talk like this, sir. You must excuse me speaking free, sir, but I can’t stand by and hear you talk like that. I can’t listen to it, sir—I can’t really. I’ve never said a disrespectful word to you, Mr. Bommaney, but I really must speak out now, sir. It isn’t respectable, sir, to talk like that.’

After this there was a long silence, and Bommaney, who had repouched the bottle after his last application to it, consulted it again, and handed it wordlessly to Hornett, without looking at him.

‘Phil might,’ he murmured in a while—‘he might be brought to believe me. He’s an honest man himself, James—a very honest high-minded man indeed. I must look where he lives,’ he murmured, seeking

for the envelope his son had given him. 'He gave me his address.'

'His address, sir,' said Hornett. 'You could almost lay your hand on him. He lives there. That's his window with the light in it.' Bommaney moved to the window, and followed with his glance the direction of Hornett's outstretched finger. There was a window a few feet higher than the one at which he stood, and half-hidden from observation by a stone parapet. A shadow obscured the light, and moved about the ceiling, visible from below.

'I saw him there to-night, sir,' said Hornett. 'I saw his face at the window. He put a glass of flowers outside. That's his shadow moving about there now.'

'Phil!' groaned the wretched father, straining his dirty wasted hands together. 'Phil!'

'I'm not the figure, sir,' said Hornett, 'to call upon a gentleman like Mr. Phil; nor yet are you, sir, if you'll excuse my saying so. But if you'd let me go, sir, and put the case to him, he might come and see you here, sir, and you might set yourself straight with him, sir, which would at least,' the seedy man added, somewhat moved by the old man's tears and tremblings, 'be an advantage to a father's heart.'

Bommaney stood in silence, looking upward. The moving shadow settled itself upon the ceiling in a huge silhouette, distinctly traceable. There was no doubting it was Phil's dear head that threw the shadow, himself invisible, so near, so far. The foolish outcast's

heart ached bitterly, and he stretched both hands towards the shadow, not knowing that he moved.

‘Shall I venture, sir?’ asked Mr. Hornett, more moved than ever, and coughing to clear a little huskiness in the throat. ‘Shall I venture, sir, to look in on Mr. Phil in the morning?’

‘Yes, go, James,’ said Bommaney, sobbing outright by this time. ‘Perhaps—perhaps he may believe me.’

V

WHEN young Mr. Barter took time to think about things, he began, for more reasons than one, to be sorry. It is necessary for the due development of this history to go back a little, and to take up Mr. Barter on the day following the commission of his crime. The young man felt that he was unable to afford candour, and discreetly avoided the naming of his own action. Eight thousand pounds is a sum which most people would find tempting. Young Mr. Barter would never have found it tempting in the criminal way (though, if he had given his mind to the consideration, he could at any time have seen how enviable its unencumbered possessor might be) if he had not at the moment felt himself under considerable pressure. Mr. Barter's fleshy and well-formed fingers were somewhat too familiar with the feel of cards. These fingers of his were peculiarly dexterous to look at, and had even an unnecessary braggadocio air of dexterity when he was engaged in his favourite occupation. Experienced people watched his shuffling and dealing with great care. In Mr. Barter's frank and engaging countenance,

and in that ready smile in which the faultless teeth shone so conspicuously, there was no hint of danger to the most unwary. Even the wariest, listening to his genial mellow laughter, and seeing the jolly shoulders shake with mirth, were inclined to think him a loyal honest-hearted fellow. His loud swagger, his frank rollicking gait, his hail-good-fellow-well-met shake of the hand, the other hand clapped upon the shoulder, the noisy greeting, and that unfailing smile, not merely disarmed suspicion, but made the mere fancy of it impossibly absurd. But young Mr. Barter had accustomed himself to associate with people whose experiences had forced them to be observant, and to these the dexterous caressing fingers with which he manipulated all instruments employed in games of chance seemed to justify a fairly constant watchfulness. The fingers handled the cards as if they loved them, as if they had been accustomed to them from the cradle. The tips turned back a good deal, and the nails hooked a little forward. There were little bulbs of tact at every tip, the hands were made for a gambler, and could by no possibility have belonged to anybody else.

The chief ground for the young man's sorrow may be very easily and briefly stated. The packet which the unfortunate cruelly-tempted Bommaney had let fall in his half-drunken abstraction on the floor of young Mr. Barter's private room was made up exclusively, as we know already, of notes for one hundred pounds.

Now Bank of England notes for one hundred pounds, though valuable, and easily enough employed in all civilised countries when honestly come by, are only to be got rid of when dishonestly acquired at great risk and loss. A note for a mere five pounds may pass through scores of hands before being stopped at the bank. Tens, so the experienced in such matters will tell you, are a little difficult. Twenties are inquired into rather carefully. Fifties are positively dangerous to handle in this way. Hundreds are, except after great lapse of time, almost impossible; and as for a thousand, a man might almost as well steal a white elephant as a bank-note of that value, except that it will cost him nothing for keep, unless you count the tremor of soul and nerve, which is surely worth something, in which a man criminally possessed of another's property is almost certain to live.

Mr. Barter, then, had eight thousand pounds in ready money, was liable, if discovered, to penal servitude, and was unable to touch a farthing of his ill-got gains. There are many men in the world, the world's experience proves it hourly, who set so small a price upon their self-respect, that they will sell it for a shilling, for a drink, for a word. But there is hardly any man so lost to the natural human desire for self-approval that he will actually give away his self-respect for nothing. Now this absurd transaction young Mr. Barter, when he took time to think about things, appeared to himself to have made.

He was not, and never had been, a great reader ; he gave up his mind to pursuits which he found more attractive than the tranquil fields and lanes of literature. Yet he remembered, in a dim sort of way, either that he had read somewhere in his schoolboy days, or that a fanciful old nurse had told him, a story of a person somewhere, who, being possessed of a great chest of money, went one day to look at it, and found that his hard cash had changed to withered leaves. Precisely such a transformation had overtaken that eight thousand pounds, at the moment when it had fallen from the hands of a man who might have made an honest use of it. The fable was, and was not, true, so far as he remembered, and his fancy dwelt curiously about the history. There was no possibility of turning back the withered leaves to gold, and making them jingle and glitter again as only one's own ready money can jingle and glitter. But, useless as these crisp and rustling leaves of paper were to him, they held still all their old potentialities, and in the hands of honest men or courageous rascals each leaf might still transmute itself into a hundred golden emblems of sovereignty and power. He was neither that honest man nor that courageous rascal, and the money grew to be a sort of devilish tantalising fetish to him. Before he had owned it a fortnight, he had felt a hundred times he could have burned it out of the exasperation of mere spite against it.

He heard, of course, of Bommaney's flight, and of

the failure of the old-established business house. People talked about these things a good deal for a time, and he himself listened to and took part in many speculations as to Bommaney's whereabouts, and the means he would take to get rid of the notes and make them available for his own purposes. He found it at first a little trying to the nerves. There was nothing, since Bommaney had accepted his own disgrace and run away, to connect young Mr. Barter with the lost eight thousand pounds, yet it took much courage, and a considerable amount of inward spurring, to bring himself to talk about the business. When a man carries a secret of a quite harmless nature, it happens often, as almost everybody knows, that casual words and quite innocent glances startle him with hints of understanding and participation. What is it when the detection of the secret involves open shame and penal servitude? Can a man of genuine courage be a thief? Is not courage after all at the very bottom of all manly honour, of all sound honesty, all true self-respect? How shall a thief be other than a lurking cur, whose whole soul, such as it is, is bent to a mean suspicion that he is suspected, a continuous terror-stricken watchfulness, a sleeping and waking dread of an awful hand-clap on the shoulder? There are constitutional differences in thieves, no doubt, as there are in other people, but the key-note of the dishonest man's whole thought is fear.

When, after a day or two, young Mr. Barter had

accustomed himself to speak of Bommaney and the lost eight thousand, and had often spoken of them, he began to look out for suggestions that might be useful to himself. He even led the way at times, and speaking to solicitors and barristers of extensive criminal experience, he asked often, for example, how could a scoundrel get rid of such a clumsy handful? Why didn't the fool cash the notes, he would ask contemptuously, before he left town, and before he was suspected? Everybody knew of course that the notes had not been presented, and their numbers were advertised in all the daily papers. Now what could a fellow do who had them, by Jingo? What *could* he do? There was no way open, so far as young Mr. Barter could see, and he was wonderfully engaging and innocent of the world's wickeder ways as he talked thus with the ablest of his fellow professionals.

The fellow professionals cited cases. There was Rosenthal, a noted receiver in his day, to whom a dishonest clerk had sold five thousand pounds for five hundred. Rosenthal had held the notes for six years, and had then put them cautiously on the Continental market. He was an old hand, was Rosenthal, and very clever and leary, but they had bowled him out. The clerk was wanted on another charge, and turned Queen's evidence against the receiver. Almost all the stories had this kind of termination, because the legal gentlemen whom young Mr. Barter consulted remembered mainly cases in which they or

their friends had been engaged, or cases which had resulted in criminal proceedings. Others there certainly were, but they were vague and necessarily without those guiding particulars which he desired.

It has been already hinted that the young man was a gambler, and it is likely that most of the reasons which made the money seem so welcome to him had their sources at the gaming table. He belonged to one of those clubs which deserve to be numbered among the blessings of modern society—where men do not meet for social intercourse and good-fellowship, or for dining purposes, or for any of the common and amiable reasons which draw men into club-life, but simply and purely to the end that they may win one another's money. It was a joint-stock swindling company to which young Mr. Barter belonged, and within its limits every man proposed to himself to get the better of every other man by such means as lay in his power. A pigeon got in amongst them every now and then, of course—came in well-feathered and went out plucked, but for the main part the rooks pecked hungrily at one another, and made but little of their time and pains. The one solitary advantage of these corporations is that they gather the depredatory birds together, and lead them to prey upon themselves instead of wandering abroad for the defeathering of the innocent and artless who abound even in these days. The well-constituted mind can hardly fail to take pleasure in the contemplation of

these resorts, where Greek meets Greek (in the modern French sense as well as the old heroic)—where scoundrel encounters scoundrel, and learns that the pleasure of being cheated is by no means so great as that of cheating.

There were people of widely ranging social position in this curious contingent. One or two men of title, and one or two of the highest social or commercial respectability, lent their names for some inconceivable reason to grace the front page of the neatly-bound little volume of rules which govern, or sometimes fail to govern, the conduct of the corporation. Mr. Barter rubbed shoulders with young men—very young men they were—who would one day have handles to their names, and enjoy the control of considerable estates. He sat at the same table with men whose birth and antecedents, like those of the immortal Jeames, were shrouded in a mystery. He met men of his own position, who like himself were desperately glad of being numbered in the same club society with men eminent on the turf, or familiar in the gilded saloons of the great. He liked to think of those gilded saloons; it might be interesting to know what he thought they resembled—most probably a somewhat old-fashioned earthly paradise of ormolu. He bragged indefatigably of his club and the people whom he met there. He dated all his private correspondence from it, and spent hundreds of daylight hours above the ivories and the pasteboard.

At the time of that foolish and weak-willed Bommaney's disaster there were two or three I.O.U.'s for sums much more considerable than he could afford to part with in the hands of his fellow-members. Law is a necessity to human society. Even a band of brigands can't hang together without it. Debt, outside the club, was by no means a thing to be harshly spoken of, but debt to a fellow-member was a literal millstone round a man's neck, and would sink him out of sight in no time.

The elder Barter had gone over to the majority, despatched by that street accident, and if the old man had known nothing of the young man's courses, he had had it in his power to make him well-to-do. But he had paid his debts once at least, and had more than once had occasion to grieve over the boy's handling of the firm's money, and so had made his will entirely in his wife's favour, leaving his son dependent upon her good graces. The mother was disposed to be a little sterner than the father had been. Perhaps if young Barter had dreaded her less poor Bommaney's fallen notes might have been returned to him.

But, to get on with the story, the young man's chief creditor at the club was one Steinberg, a gentleman whose time appeared to be absolutely at his own disposal, though he was known by some of his fellow-members to have an address in Hatton Garden, and to be more or less of a diamond merchant there. He often carried about with him, in a pocket-book, or in

neat little packages of grocer's gay paper, borne in the waistcoat-pocket, a collection of gems of considerable value, and would show them to his intimates with the *insouciance* of a man who was accustomed to handling things of price. He never was without money, made little journeys at times, which rarely took him away from town for more than a day or two, and was, almost always, wholly unoccupied except for the cards.

Now young Barter had a prodigious idea of this gentleman's astuteness. He had no particular belief in his honesty, and he believed him, not altogether unreasonably as the sequel proved, to be initiated into most of the mysteries of modern rascality. This was merely a general notion, based upon statements made by Steinberg himself, and supported by the opinion of his intimates. Nobody spoke ill of Steinberg; it was only understood that there was no move upon the board with which he was not familiar. Young Barter, meeting him one evening at the club, whilst Bommaney's disappearance was still a fresh topic of town conversation, spoke to him about it, with an assurance clearly begotten of practice.

'Now, look here, Steinberg,' he said, in his open and engaging way. 'Suppose you'd nobbled those notes, what should you do with 'em?'

Perhaps Mr. Steinberg resented the form of this inquiry. But be that as it may, he responded with some tartness,

'Suppose you'd nobbled them?'

At this chance thrust young Barter turned curiously red and white, and had some ado to recover that open smile of his.

'Hang it,' he said, 'you can't suppose I meant it that way. But,' with a half-hysterical courage, 'suppose you had—suppose I had—suppose anybody had—what would he do? You, I, anybody?'

Mr. Steinberg sipped at his lemon squash—he drank that inspiring liquid all the year round, and nothing else until cards for the day were over—and puffed at his cigar, and looking young Barter full in the face, nodded and smiled with an odd mingling of meaning and humour.

'Put him on to me,' he said, with perfect affability. 'I'll put him up to it.'

'Rather dangerous, wouldn't it be?' said Barter, showing his white teeth in a somewhat forced and ghastly manner.

'Everything's dangerous for an ass,' said Steinberg.

'I shouldn't have thought,' laughed Barter, 'that that was your line.'

He spoke as jestingly as he could, but he knew that his laugh was forced, and that the voice in which he spoke was unlike his voice of every day, and he wished, with the whole of his quaking heart, that he had left the theme alone.

'Well, no,' said Steinberg, 'I suppose you wouldn't.' He sipped his liquor through a straw, and blew half a dozen rings of smoke from his lips with practised

dexterity, and kept a glittering German-Jewish eye on Barter. Perhaps he meant something by the glance, perhaps he meant nothing. He was a rather Machiavelian and sinister-looking personage, was Mr. Steinberg, and there was something even in the calm expression of those perfectly-formed rings of smoke and in the very way in which he sipped his liquor, and most of all in the observant glitter of his eye, which spoke of a penetration and shrewdness very far out of the common. More and more young Barter wished that he had not broached this theme with Steinberg.

He could not help it for his soul. He could feel that his colour was coming and going with a dreadful fluttering alternation. He quailed before the Israelitish eye so shrewdly cocked at him, and when in a very spasm of despair he tried to meet it, he was so abjectly quelled by it that he felt his face a proclamation of his secret.

Steinberg went on sipping and smoking, and said nothing ; but when the young scoundrel, his companion, had somewhat recovered himself and dared again to look at him, there was the same shrewd and wary glint in his eyes.

Young Barter had been unhappy enough before this, but after it the money became a burden hateful and horrible. He met Steinberg often, and forced himself to be noisy in his company. In his dread of seeming low-spirited, or ill at ease, he said things about his dead father which he would have left unsaid,

had he consulted the little good that was left in him; and Steinberg seemed to watch him very closely.

Young Barter put off his creditor with promises. He would have lots of money by and by. That seemed credible enough in the position of affairs, and Steinberg waited. In a while, however, he became exigent, and declined any longer to be satisfied with promises. One night the unhappy rascal, playing all the more because of his troubles, all the more wildly, and certainly all the worse, fell back upon his I.O.U.'s. Steinberg followed him from the club. It was late, and the streets were very quiet.

'This won't do, you know, Barter,' said Steinberg, tapping him on the shoulder as they walked side by side.

'Begad it won't,' said young Barter, doing his best to make light of it. 'They've been cutting into me pretty freely this past week or two.'

'Well,' said Steinberg, puffing at his eternal cigar, and looking askant at Barter under the light of a street-lamp which they happened to be nearing at the moment, 'what you've got to do, you know, is to find the man who knows Mr. Bommaney.'

The commotion which assailed Barter at this speech was like an inward earthquake.

'What—what do you mean?' he panted.

'That's what you've got to do,' said Steinberg tranquilly.

‘Do you mean to insinuate——’ Barter began to bluster ; but the older, cooler, and more accomplished scoundrel stopped him contemptuously.

‘You know where they are,’ he said. ‘Why don’t you get at ’em ?’

VI

ABOUT noon on the following day Mr. Steinberg, seated in a small inner chamber in Hatton Garden, leisurely answering his sole business correspondent of that morning, was in no way surprised when the boy he employed to open the door and receive visitors brought in a card bearing the name of 'Mr. John Barter, jun.'

'Show him in,' said Mr. Steinberg; and young Mr. Barter, hearing this in the outer room, came in with a pale-faced and excited alacrity. The diamond merchant dismissed the boy with a word.

'Well,' he said, turning the tip of his cigar upwards by a protrusion of the under lip, 'what is it?'

'About that little matter,' said young Barter nervously, 'we were talking of last night.'

'The little matter we were talking of last night?' asked Steinberg idly, looking at him with half-shut eyes. 'That hundred you owe me?'

'Well, perhaps that afterwards,' said Barter with a frightened breathless laugh in his voice. 'But about the other matter first.'

'The other matter?' Steinberg asked, in a lazier manner than before. 'What other matter?' He took up his pen, dipped it in the inkstand before him, and tracing a line or two of his correspondent's communication with it, turned to his own unfinished letter.

Young Barter was already sufficiently agitated, and this curious reception made him more embarrassed than ever.

'About that affair of Bommaney's,' he said, feeling as if a rapid wheel had been somehow started in his brain.

'Ah!' said Steinberg, writing rapidly, and speaking in a voice which seemed to indicate that he neither understood nor cared to understand, 'that affair of Bommaney's, eh?'

This reception was nothing less than dreadful to the young criminal. He had reckoned on having his way made easy for him. Steinberg had actually offered to become his accomplice in crime, and had lured him to disclosure. He could have wished that the floor would open and let him through. He saw that he had already exposed his hand, and began to imagine all manner of consequences resulting from the exposure. Not one of the consequences he foresaw promised to be of a nature agreeable to himself, and for the moment the hatred with which Steinberg inspired him was of so mad a nature that there was nothing he would not have done to him if he had had the courage and the power.

Steinberg wrote on, shaking his fist in what seemed to be an unusual alert, and even threatening, manner. There was a great deal of unnecessary motion in Steinberg's hand, and Barter, looking at its swift and resolute movements, got a blind sort of impression of strength out of it, and nullified the feeling with which it inspired him. The letter written, enveloped, addressed, and stamped, Steinberg tossed it on one side, and leaning back in his arm-chair, turned an uninterested look once more upon his visitor.

'That affair of Bommaney's,' he said. 'What was that?'

Mr. Barter thought this inquiry altogether too barefaced, and responded, with a hectic flush of courage,

'Come, Steinberg, don't play the fool with a fellow. You know jolly well what it was last night.'

Mr. Steinberg's keen and impassive face underwent no change.

'What did I know last night?' he asked.

'You know,' Barter began angrily; and then the hectic flush of courage died, and a dreadful chill of fear succeeded it. What had he known? He had only guessed—till now. But now, young Mr. Barter felt, to employ the expressive ideas of his set, that he had given himself away. Steinberg capped the question in his mind. What did I know last night?

'You haven't come to waste your time or mine, I suppose? You've come to say something. Why not say it?'

His guest, sitting in a terrible confusion, and feeling himself altogether betrayed and lost, Steinberg marched to the door, and addressing the boy in the outer room, bade him carry the letter to the post and return no more that day. Then, having locked the outer door, he returned and resumed his seat.

‘Now, what is it?’ he asked.

Barter, recognising the fact that his own purpose was already exposed, made a desperate dash.

‘About those notes old Bommaney was supposed to have run away with. I think—I think, mind you, that if there was any way of using them, I could lay my hands upon them.’

‘I remember,’ said Steinberg, ‘you said something of the kind last night. I shouldn’t advise you to touch ’em. It’s a dangerous game. They’re very worthless, and the game isn’t worth the candle.’

‘Worthless?’ echoed Barter. ‘They’re worth eight thousand pounds.’

‘They’re worth eight thousand pounds,’ responded Steinberg, ‘to the man they belong to. They’re not worth eight hundred to anybody else.’

Young Mr. Barter’s whole soul seemed to rise in protest against this abominable fallacy. When he had screwed up his courage so far as to induce himself to accept this older and more experienced scoundrel’s partnership, he had conceived the possibility of the partner crying out for halves. But that he should want so enormous a share of the spoil was quite intolerable.

'Not worth eight hundred?' He could only gasp the questioning protest.

'If I had 'em to sell,' Steinberg answered calmly, flicking the waste from his cigar by a movement of his little finger, 'I should think eight hundred an uncommon good price for 'em. Later on and sold at second hand they might fetch a thousand. Later on and sold at third hand they might fetch fifteen hundred. One can hardly tell. Of course the value will go on mounting with distance from the original source of danger and with the lapse of time.'

He said all this very calmly and reflectively, and young Barter, collecting his whirling wits as well as he could, tried a stroke of diplomacy, which, as he fondly hoped, would answer a double purpose.

'She'll never let them go for that, or for anything like it.'

'She won't, won't she?' asked Steinberg, smiling brightly, as if the statement amused him. 'Then she'll never let 'em go at all, my friend. How did you come to find she had 'em?'

'I made a little bit of a discovery,' Barter answered.

'Ah! That was it, was it,' said the elder rascal, falling back into his utter want of interest. 'You'll let me have that hundred.'

'I will in a day or two,' answered Barter, *arréanti*.

'Well, as for a day or two,' returned Steinberg, rubbing his forehead with the tips of his fingers, and

looking very careless and composed, 'I'm really very much afraid I can't let you have it. It's been outstanding a goodish time, and to tell you the truth, old man, I want it very badly. If you'll let me have it to-night I shall be obliged to you. I've been hit rather hard this last day or two. Shall we make that a bargain? To-night?'

'I—I'm afraid,' Barter stammered, 'it's no use talking about to-night.'

'Well,' said Steinberg, with a pitiless uninterested suavity, 'you know the rules.'

He drew a little book from his pocket, and tossed it over the table to his guest.

'You'll find it on page five. Rule fourteen. It's ticked in red ink, if you'll take the trouble to look at it.'

Barter opened the book and consulted its pages blindly for a while, and then the mist which seemed to obstruct brain and eyesight clearing away, he read the pages indicated. It set forth the principle that all moneys lost at games of skill or chance, or upon bets made within the limits of the club, were payable within four-and-twenty hours. It set forth further that debts not paid within that time might be brought under the notice of the Committee, who were empowered to act under Rule nine. Rule nine ordained the public posting of the defaulter's name, his suspension in default of payment, and, in case of continued obduracy or poverty, his expulsion.

'First and last, Steinberg,' said the wretched criminal, who began to find the way of the transgressor unreasonably hard and thorny, 'first and last, you've had a pretty tidy handful of money out of me.'

'Well, yes,' said Steinberg tangibly. 'Pretty fair.'

His very admission of this fact made Barter's case seem hopeless to himself. If he had brow-beaten, or blustered, if he had shown anger or impatience, or had been querulous, there might have seemed to exist some slenderest chance for him. But Steinberg was so unmoved that he seemed immovable.

'You'd better persuade her,' he said, with a scarcely perceptible grin. Looking at Barter, and observing that he sat with his eyes still bent upon the book of rules, and head dejected, he allowed the grin to broaden. Barter, suddenly looking up at him, saw him smiling like a gargoyle, with a look of infinitely relishing cruelty and cunning.

'You won't find her hard to persuade, I'm sure,' said Steinberg. 'Come, now, I'll talk business to you. I'll take ten of 'em for it, and cry quits, and I wouldn't do that for anybody but a friend.'

The frank admission of the value of his own friendship was plainly legible in that gargoyle smile, and the unhappy Barter read it clearly.

'I'll—I'll see what I can do with her,' he said, with a face and voice of pure misery.

'Do, my boy,' said Steinberg, rising, and swinging the key of his chambers upon his forefinger, 'see what

you can do with her. I shan't send any notification to the Committee before nine o'clock, old chap. You can trust me for that. You go off at once, old fellow, and see what you can do for her.'

The fraudulent possessor of the notes felt their burthen more than ever insupportable. He rose, and went his way with remorse and rage and the bitterness of baffled stratagem in his heart. His wounded mind soared to so lofty a height of egotism in its struggles that he positively found the impudence to curse Bommaney for having dropped the notes in his office. Then he cursed himself for having taken them, and cursed Steinberg for robbing him, and so moved off in a condition quite pitiable to one who could find the understanding and the heart to pity him.

Steinberg stopped behind, and smoked smilingly. He was the successful scoundrel, and found the transaction as sweet as the young Barter found it bitter.

'I don't think he'll have much trouble with her,' he said to himself; and he enjoyed that little jest so much that he caught himself smiling at it a hundred times in the course of the afternoon and evening.

VII

OLD Brown, who was one of the sunniest-natured of men, went gloomy when the news of his old friend's dreadful fall came to his ears. It does him no more than justice to say that he mourned Bommaney senior infinitely more than the money. He liked to trust people, and had all his life long been eager to find excuses for defaulters. He could find no excuse here. The theft was barefaced, insolent, dastardly. He puzzled over it, and grew more cynical and bitter in his thoughts of the world at large than he could have imagined himself. But then, when Bommaney junior came home, and insisted on the restoration of the missing eight thousand from his own small fortune, old Brown brightened up again. There was such a thing as honesty in the world, after all. The restoration warmed his heart anew. At first he fought against it, and would have none of it—the mere candid and honest offer of it was enough for him; but Philip was more resolute than himself, and the stronger man won. Phil should never have cause to repent his goodness, the old fellow declared to himself a thousand times. He

should reap the proper reward of his own honour. Brown admired and loved Phil out of bounds for this little bit of natural honesty and justice. He thought there had never been a finer fellow in the world, and his heart warmed to him as if he had been a son of his own. As for that rascal of a father—and when he got so far in his thoughts he fumed so with wrath that he dared go no farther, and was compelled, for the sake of his own peace, to banish the friend of his schooldays from his mind a thousand times a week.

It was about a year later than the disgrace of the house of Bommaney that old Brown, to his daughter's perplexity and grief, began to show signs of trouble almost as marked as those he had displayed after his old friend's defection. The old boy's newspaper no longer interested him of a morning. He began to be lax about that morning ride which he had once regarded as being absolutely necessary to the preservation of health in London. He had been impassioned with the theatre, and had become a diligent attendant at first-night performances. Even these ceased to have any joy for him, and he neglected, in fine, all his old sources of amusement. He went about sorrowful and grumpy, expressing the dolefullest opinions about everything. There was going to be war, stocks were going down, trade was crumbling, there was no virtue in man.

Patty tried her best to coax him from these pessimistic moods, but the old boy was not to be per-

suaded. On fine evenings, when there was nothing better to be done, he had loved greatly, between the quiet old-fashioned tea and the quiet old-fashioned supper, to dress for out of doors, and with Patty on his arm to wander into Regent's Park, and there inhale the best imitation of country atmosphere that London could afford. He dropped this amiable and affectionate habit, and took to rambling out alone, coming home late, and haggard, and not infrequently, at such times, staring at his daughter with an aspect so sorrowing and wretched that she knew not what to make of him.

The girl, watching him with a constantly increasing solicitude, could at last endure this condition of affairs no longer. He came home one night, leaving neither his stick nor hat in the outer hall, and sat down in the dining-room, muffled and great-coated, the picture of dejection. Patty, kneeling before him, removed his hat, smoothed his hair, and began to unbutton his overcoat.

'Papa!' she cried suddenly, 'what is the matter with you? Why are you so changed?'

He breathed a great sigh, and laid his hand upon her head. Then he turned his face away from her—to hide his eyes, she fancied.

'You are in trouble,' she went on. 'It is not kind to keep it from me. Is it anything that I have done, or anything I could do?'

'No, no, my darling,' he said softly, laying his hand upon her head again.

'Is it money, dear?'

'No, no. It isn't money. Don't talk about it, my dear. Don't talk about it.'

'Now, papa, you make me think it very grave indeed.'

'There,' he said, rising, 'you shan't see any more of it, and we'll say no more about it. We'll be gay and bright again, and we'll hope that things will turn out for the best.'

The attempt to be gay and bright again resulted in most mournful failure, and the girl grew frightened. She had nursed her fears for many days, and had hidden them.

'Papa!' she said, trembling ever so little, 'you must let me know what it is. Let us bear it together, dear. Whatever it may be it can't matter very much if it leaves us two together—and——'

'Ah!' said old Brown, looking at her with a pitying smile.

'Is it anything——?' She stopped short, and really found no courage to complete the question.

'My darling,' he answered, folding her in his arms, and staring sadly over her shoulder. She felt the hands that embraced her quiver, and she knew he had understood her half-expressed query. This frightened her so much that it gave her boldness.

'There is something the matter with Phil,' she said, pushing the old man away, and holding him at arm's length. 'Tell me what it is.'

'My dear,' he answered, 'you shouldn't leap at conclusions in that way.' But the disclaimer was altogether too feeble to deceive her. Philip was the mysterious cause of her father's trouble. Her wandering, pained eyes, her parted lips, the terror and inquiry in her face, frightened the old man. 'No, no,' he cried, 'you must not think it too bad. I'm not sure of anything. I don't suppose it's at all a matter of consequence. I daresay he's an old fool. I hope I am.'

These hints and innuendoes were about the last thing in the world to satisfy a girl who had been made anxious about her lover.

'Tell me,' she commanded. 'I have a right to know. What has happened?' She was no more inclined to be jealous than girls who are in love commonly are. She had, indeed, a native fund of confidence, and her trust in Phil's loyalty had been of the unquestioning sort, quite profound and settled. Yet for a moment there rose before her mental vision the dim picture of some possible rival, and at the mere hint of this she grew ashamed, and flamed into indignation against herself.

'Tell me,' she said; 'I insist on knowing.'

'Well, my dear,' said the old man miserably and reluctantly, 'I've been told that his father hastened his own ruin with dice and cards.' It was the first time he had mentioned Bommaney senior in his daughter's hearing for a year. She looked at him with eyes still intent, but somehow milder and less

alarmed. 'Phil,' the old boy continued, 'I'm afraid that Phil is travelling in his father's steps.'

'Phil a gambler!' she said, with an honest scorn of conviction. 'I know better. What makes you think it?'

'There are a lot of beastly clubs at the West End,' said the old man, beginning to struggle with his overcoat, partly because he wished to avoid the girl's look, and partly because the motion was a relief to him. 'Gambling-places. Places where men meet for no other earthly purpose than to cheat one another. I'm as fond of a rubber at whist as anybody; but no honest man would put his head into one of those holes of infamy if he knew its character.'

'Are you speaking of Phil, papa?' she asked. Her voice was low and tremulous, and there was almost a note of threatening in it. The gentlest creature will fight for her own—a fact for which some of us have reason to be grateful.

'Yes, my dear,' her father answered with a kind of sullen sadness; 'I'm talking about Phil. He's a member of the vilest crowd of the whole lot, and he's there night after night.' He dashed his overcoat into an arm-chair with despairing anger, and went marching up and down the room. 'I saw him one night by accident as he was going in. I knew the place. You might have knocked me down with a feather. I've watched him there night after night. Don't tell me I hadn't the right to watch him. I had the right. My

little girl shan't marry a gambler. I won't have my fortune wasted by a gambler, and my child's heart broken. I took a room,' he pursued wrathfully, 'opposite the place. I've sat there in the dark with the window open, and caught the d—— worst cold I ever had in my life watching for him. I've seen him go in again and again. He's a lost man, I tell you,' he cried in answer to his daughter's look and gesture; 'the man who has that vice in his blood is lost!'

He was storming loudly, for he was one of those in whom emotion must have expression in noise, but a sudden loud peal at the bell cut short his harangue, and he and Patty stood in silence to know who it might be who called so late. As it happened, it was no other than the lost man himself. He was shown in according to wont and usage without previous announcement, and entered gay and smiling, elate and tender.

As he looked from one to the other the expression of his face changed. He moved quickly towards Patty, and took her hands in his.

'There's something the matter,' he said gently. 'You're in trouble!'

The old boy, glaring at him, growled, 'We are,' and snatching up his overcoat, threw it over his arm, and slipped his hat upon his head with a gesture which Philip took for one of defiance. As a matter of fact it expressed no more than wrathful grief, but then gesture

and expression are hard to read unless you have the key to them.

'We'd better have it out, Phil,' said the old man, 'here and now. You've turned gambler, and I've found you out.'

'No,' Phil answered, with an odd smile; 'I haven't turned gambler, I assure you. You've heard that I've joined the Pigeon Trap? That's what they call it in the City. I prefer to call it the Hawks' Roost. There are too few pigeons go there to be plucked to justify the other title, and I give you my word of honour, Mr. Brown, that I'm not one of them.'

The young man's air was candid and amused. There was an underlying gravity beneath the smile, and for people who had believed in him as devoutly as his two listeners it was hard to disbelieve him now.

'You've gone into the infernal hole,' said old Brown, more than half abandoning suspicion, and yet inclined to leave it growlingly, as a dog might surrender a bone he conceived himself to have a right to. 'What do you want there?'

'I want to do a very important stroke of business there, sir,' Philip answered. The smile quite disappeared from his eyes at this moment, and he looked very grimly resolute. 'I will tell you this much,' he added, 'because you have a right to know it. I am in pursuit of a brace of scoundrels there. I think I've salted the tail of one of 'em already. I believe with all my heart, sir, that I'm going to clear my

father's character, and I would go into worse places than the Pigeon Trap if I saw my way to doing that.'

Patty of course was clinging to him without disguise by this time, anxious only to atone for having given an ear to any word against him, even for a moment. Phil put his arm about her waist and kissed her. He had never to his knowledge performed this act in the presence of a third person until now, but he got through it without embarrassment.

'You think you can clear your father's character?' asked his sweetheart's father. There was a tinge of scepticism in his voice, though he tried to hide it.

'Yes, sir,' said Phil, his head thrown back a little, and his eyes gleaming. Nobody had ever looked so handsome to Patty's fancy as he did at that moment. 'I know already that there was no real stain upon his honour, and I'm surprised myself for thinking that there ever could have been, bad as things looked. My father never took wrongful possession of your money. He was robbed of it, and I think I can lay my hand upon the thief.'

There was a prodigious excitement at this declaration, and the young man was overwhelmed with questions. He could name no names, of course, and give no clue, but he sketched the story. He contented himself by describing young Barter as Thief Number One, and he was satisfied to describe Steinberg as Probable Thief Number Two. He had learned, it appeared, that Thief Number One had succeeded on

his father's death to a carefully limited partnership in a business affair in the city. The guiding spirit in the concerns of Thief Number One had been his father's managing clerk. The income of Thief Number One was strictly limited, and his actual control over the affairs of the firm was non-existent. Notwithstanding these facts, the young man was guilty of countless extravagances, and was a reckless gambler. Within the last twelve months he could hardly have paid away at the club less than a thousand pounds. He had been extremely hard up before the loss of the money, and it was in his offices that the roll of bank-notes had been lost. As for Probable Thief Number Two, he played rook to Number One's pigeon. He had a visible hold upon him; Number One trembled before him, and did what he was bidden to do. Number Two had plenty of money, and as shady a reputation as any man in London who was not among the known criminal classes. Phil's belief was that Number Two was disposing of the notes for Number One, and that this simple fact accounted for his power over him.

‘And I’m going to follow their track,’ said Phil, tapping the clenched knuckles of his right hand upon the open palm of his left with a quiet vehemence, ‘until I find out everything, if I follow it until I am gray.’

VIII

It would appear that a spider may be among the most daring, skilful, and predatory of his species, that he may be gifted with the most constant watchfulness and appetite, and yet, whether by the intrusion of an accidental walking-stick or broom (which would assuredly seem providential to the fly), or by stress of weather, or the desperate activity of a victim, may have his best laid schemes brought to nought, and his most mathematically laid web rent to tatters. In the entomological world a solitary interview between fly and spider is usually fatal to the one, and satisfactory to the other. But we of the higher developments, who model ourselves, or are modelled, upon the lines of myriads of remote ancestors, and far-away relatives, have refined upon their primitive proceedings, and have made their simple activities complex by development.

In an absolutely primitive condition the Steinberg spider would have drained the Barter fly at a single orgie, and would have left him to wither on the lines. As things were, he came back to him with a constant

gusto of appetite, tasting him on Monday, despatching him to buzz among his fellows until Saturday, and then tasting him again, the Barter fly seeming for a while—for quite a considerable time in fact—lusty and active and able-bodied, and looking as though this kind of thing might go on for ever without much damage to him, and the spider himself giving no sign of overtaxed digestive powers.

Not to run this striking and original simile out of breath, the Barter fly endured for a round twelve months, without showing signs of anæmia so pronounced as to look dangerous to his constitution. At the end of that time, however, all the surplus blood had been drawn from his body, and the spider had grown so keen by the habit of constant recurrence to him that any prolonged connection between them began to look desperate. In plain English, the eight thousand pounds which had once so lightly passed from the hands of Mr. Brown to the hands of Mr. Bommaney had now passed, with just as little profit to the man who parted with them, from the hands of young Barter to the hands of Steinberg.

It was just about the time when this lingering but inevitable transaction was completed that chance led young Barter to his encounter with the son of the man whose belongings he had appropriated. Everybody knows how apt newly-made acquaintances sometimes are to renew themselves again and again. You meet a man whom you have never seen before,

see him just long enough to take a passing interest in him, and to know generally who and what he is, and you run against him on the morrow, and again on the morrow, and so on, until in a week he has grown as familiar to your thoughts as any other mere acquaintance of whose identity you may have been aware for years. This happened in the case of Philip Bommaney and young Mr. Barter. They entered the Inn together, or left it together, or Philip ran upstairs or downstairs as Barter was in the very act of leaving or entering his chambers. Putting together a certain family resemblance which he thought he noticed, the identity of a rather uncommon name, and the curious frequency of these chance encounters, Barter found it hard to avoid the belief that his new-made acquaintance had a rather careful eye upon him. His nerve was a good deal shaken, and he was by no means the man he had been. To the unobservant stranger the frank gaiety of his laugh was as spontaneous as ever, but then that had never had much to do with Barter's inward sensations. Perhaps he got the laugh in some remote fashion from an ancestor who really ought to have had it, and who may have been as dull and as little laughter-loving to look at as his successor was within. Philip rather took to the fellow at first sight, and was slow to suspect him, even when James Hornett had told his story. But the young Barter was not satisfied, as he should have been, with playing the part of one insect at a time. It was unwholesome enough, one

might have thought, for him to play fly to Steinberg's spider, and yet he must needs take to playing moth to Philip Bommaney's candle, a light of danger to him, as he recognised almost from the first. He was always polite to Phil, and always stopped him for a moment's conversation at their chance encounters. Phil, having been inspired at least with a suspicion that this engaging young man was responsible for the actual disgrace which had fallen upon Bommaney senior, always bent a grave scrutiny upon him. Barter sometimes wondered whether his new-found acquaintance's way of looking at him were habitual or particular, but he could never solve that problem. To Barter's nerves the glance of dispassionate analysis always seemed to ask—Did you steal those notes? and whether his mind and nerves were at accord or no made but little difference to him. His mind rejected the idea of suspicion, but his nerves accepted it with trembling. He knew perfectly well that he could not endure the certainty of Phil Bommaney's knowledge, but none the less he found the uncertainty tantalising and painful. This is perhaps one of the hardest things an undetected criminal has to endure, that he lives in a world of suspicion of his own making, where every imagination is real and as dreadful as the fact. In his own mind young Barter credited himself with courage when he made overtures for Philip's companionship. In reality he made the overtures because he was a coward, and a braver scoundrel would have disdained them.

Philip felt himself impelled to watch this young man, and was not altogether displeased that he found the opportunity thrust upon him. Almost facing the gateway of the old Inn there is an old-fashioned restaurant, deserted from its hour of opening until noon, and from then crowded inconveniently till two o'clock, deserted again till five, and once more inconveniently crowded till seven. Philip, having the power to choose his own time for meals, and frequenting this old house, sometimes met Barter in the act of coming away from it with the dregs of the stream of the late lunchers or diners. He fell into the habit of going a little earlier, and Barter would signal him to the table at which he sat, if by rare chance there happened to be a vacant seat at it. The young rascal's tendency lay towards monologue, and since it was his cue to be open-hearted, and very unsuspecting of being suspected, he talked with much freedom of himself, his pursuits, and his affairs. The question which Barter's nerves were always finding in Philip's eyes was, as a matter of fact, not often absent from his mind. 'Now, how did you steal those notes?' was the one active query of his intelligence as he listened to Barter's candid prattle.

It was in the course of these confidences that Philip learned of the existence of that Pigeon Trap of which Mr. Barter was so proud to be an inhabitant. It was at Barter's solicitation that he visited the place, and it was Barter who proposed him as a member.

Being a member it was not long before he discovered the fact of Steinberg's influence over the young solicitor. He noticed a terrified deference in Barter's manner towards the other, a frightened alacrity of obedience to his suggestions. He noticed also that Steinberg and Barter played a good deal by themselves, and that Barter always lost.

The men of Hawks' Roost talked pretty freely about each other in the absence of such of their fellow clubmen as were under discussion. Barter was spoken of as Steinberg's Mug, Berg's Juggins, Stein's Spoofmarker. It was generally admitted that Stein made a good thing out of him, and the wonder was where Barter got his money. There was a pretty general apprehension that the young man, at no very far future date, would come to grief. The contemplation of this probability affected the Roosters but little in an emotional way, but it made them keen to see that Mr. Barter paid up punctually, and though they were very shy of paper acceptances from their comrades as a general thing, they were shyer of his than of most men's.

These things Philip Bommaney junior attentively noted. At first the clubmen rather wondered at him. He was in their precincts often, and would smoke his pipe and watch whatever game might be going with tranquil interest, but he never played, and could not be induced to bet. *Que diable faisant-il dans cette gaière?* the clubmen wanted to know. He never told

them, and in a while they grew accustomed to him and his ways. He continued his quiet watch upon Mr. Barter, and included Steinberg in his field of observation. One evening, dining at the old restaurant, he marked Barter, melancholy and alone. He was sitting in an attitude of apparent dejection, tapping upon the table with a fork, and deep sunk in what seemed to be an uncomfortable contemplation. But when the moth saw his candle he brightened, and fluttered over to it.

'You might come over,' said Barter, when they had sat together until the latest of the dining guests had gone away. 'You might come over to my chambers and smoke a cigar if you've nothing else to do. I don't care about going down to the club to-night.'

The Steinberg spider was supposed to be waiting there, coldly patient and insatiable, and Barter dreaded him. Philip had never entered the rooms, but they had an attraction for him. He accepted his companion's invitation, and they entered the chambers together. A fire lingered in the grate, and Barter replenished it, and, having produced a box of cigars and a bottle of cognac, proffered refreshment to his guest. The honest man began somewhat to recoil from himself and from his companion. What was he there for? The answer was pretty evident. There was nothing between this loud-babbling youth and himself which could have drawn them into even a momentary comradeship, if it

had not been for the suspicion his father's story had inspired in him. Frankly, he was there because he suspected the man, because he desired to watch him, because, if he found the chance, he was willing to set him in the dock. To smoke his tobacco and drink his liquor in those circumstances had undoubtedly an air of treachery. In a while he hardened himself, and closed his ears to all casuist pleadings, whether for or against the course he had adopted. He would clear his father if he could, and if there were any mere hope of doing it, he would watch this fellow as a cat watches a mouse, and would go on doing it until both of them were gray.

'By the way,' said Barter innocently, 'do you never take a hand at——'

His supple fingers supplied the hiatus, dealing out an imaginary pack of cards with the flourishing dexterity native to them.

'That's what I'm here for, is it?' thought Philip in his own mind. 'We shall see.' He said aloud, 'Sometimes,' in an indifferent tone.

'There's nothing worth seeing anywhere to-night,' said young Barter. 'Suppose we try a hand. What do you say to a game at Napoleon?'

Philip consented, and his host produced two packs of cards from the business safe.

They fixed upon the points and they began to play. The points were not those for which Mr. Barter really cared to play; for he was one of those people

who find no joy in cards unless they risk more than they can afford to lose. But little fish are sweet, and he thought he had secured a greenhorn. As it happened, the greenhorn, though he was but eight-and-twenty, had travelled the world all over, and had found himself compelled to survey mankind from China to Peru. He was, moreover, one of those men who like to know things, and those quietly-observant eyes of his had taken note of the proceedings of a hundred scoundrels in whose hands the redoubtable Steinberg himself would have had but poor chances. The Greek had been Philip's standing joy, the dish best spiced to suit his intellectual palate. He had delighted over him aboard ship, on the monstrous dreary railway journey between Atlantic and Pacific, in the little towns which form the centre of scores of Texan ranches, in hells at the Cape and in California, in the free ports of China, and on the borders of the Bosphorus. In point of fact he was by experience as little fitted to be played upon by a gentleman of young Mr. Barter's limited accomplishments as almost any man alive.

Phil's interest in the game had grown grimly observant in the first ten minutes. Young Mr. Barter had a knack, when he shuffled the cards, of slyly inclining the painted sides upwards. He had another knack of leaving an honour at the bottom. He made a false cut with fair dexterity for an amateur. He could, when occasion seemed to make it profitable, discard

with a fair air of unconsciousness. An ace dropped out of sight a hand or two earlier, was followed by a valueless card dropped openly. The ace was taken to supply its place with a perfect smiling effrontery. But Mr. Barter's favourite trick came out when he had a weak hand. Then he smiled across at his opponent, breathed softly the words 'six cards,' and dropped the worthless hand on the top of the pack, calling for a new deal. All this Philip Bommaney watched with a complete seeming innocence and good temper. He lost his sixpences handsomely, made no protest, and looked unruffled.

'You play false for sixpences, do you?' he said inwardly. 'I suppose a scoundrel is a scoundrel all through, and that if you'll sell your soul for so little, you could hardly object to driving a bargain for a larger sum.'

He was often tempted in the course of a quarter of an hour to try Mr. Barter with a sudden challenge, and see what would come of it. Surveying his companion with that placid inquiry which Barter felt to be so excessively uncomfortable, he came to have but a poor opinion of his courage. He was one of those men who, even without knowing it, take profound observations of their fellow-creatures. The true observer of human nature is by no means a personage who is always on the strain after insight into character. He is, on the contrary, pretty generally an inward-looking man, who seems to notice little, and takes in his sur-

roundings as the immortal Joey Ladle did his wine. Philip judged Barter to be a nervous man, and supposed him, even when strung to his bent, to have no great tenacity or continuance of courage. He had learned more and more to believe his father's story, though he had perhaps too carefully guarded himself from his own eager desire to accept it. Barter's every action with the cards offered confirmation of the belief that he had taken possession of the lost notes. He was certainly a petty rascal, and there was obviously nothing but opportunity needed to make him bloom into a rascal on a larger scale. So the temptation to drop the cards upon the table, to look his companion in the face, and to ask simply, 'How about that eight thousand pounds?' grew more and more upon him, and had to be more and more strenuously resisted. It seemed worth while to resist it. To begin with, if young Barter should be innocent, the querist could evidently expect nothing else than to be taken for a madman. To continue, if his name and the likeness to his father had already set the thief upon his guard, and had prepared him for accusation, the question would only reveal his own suspicion, and thereby weaken the chances of discovery.

Philip combated his inward desire, but could not quell it. There seemed a kind of intuition in it, a lurking certainty lay hidden behind all the doubts he saw, and pushed him forward.

By and by young Mr. Barter tripped on the false

cut, which he had hitherto executed with a fair amateur dexterity.

'Excuse me,' said Phil, as he gathered the spilt cards together. 'You should make the three separate motions look like one. Do the trick so.'

He performed the trick slowly, looking Barter in the face, and then went through it swiftly.

'That is how the thing ought to be done, Mr. Barter,' he said, with a placidity which his companion found singularly disquieting.

And now, that same unhappy want of self-command which had given Steinberg so clear an insight into his young friend's mind, fell once more upon Barter. He tried to look wondering, he tried to laugh. The result of that frightened contortion of the features was nothing less than ghastly. Unhappily for himself he knew it, and so he grew ghastlier yet, and for the life of him could not tell where to set his eyes.

'So you're a sharper in a small way, are you, Mr. Barter?' Philip inquired suavely.

'How dare you talk to me like that?' the detected rascal stammered. 'You come into a gentleman's rooms, and lose an odd half-crown or two——'

When he had got as far as this he ventured to look his companion in the face, and seeing there a very marked and readable prophecy of unpleasant things, he backed, and in the act of doing so, tripped, and fell into a chair. The intention in Phil's mind became simply unconquerable. He cast rapidly about

him for an instant, saw all the consequences of failure which might follow if he denounced the trembling wretch at once, and set him on his guard. And yet he could not help doing what he did, and could not restrain the words which rose to his lips. He took Barter by the collar, and lifted him to his feet with an unsuspected strength, and put the question to him quietly.

'How many of those stolen notes has Steinberg changed for you?'

It was a bold thing to do, it was perhaps a foolish thing to do, and yet it was the game. Barter stared at him speechlessly. His lips moved, but he said nothing. Then his jaw fell as a dead man's jaw falls, and being released at that instant, he dropped into the chair like a sack.

'Now the best thing for you to do,' said Phil, sternly regarding him, 'will be to make a clean breast of it. I have been tracking you since the second day of our acquaintance.'

Barter groaned, with a tremulous and hollow sound, but made no other answer.

'How many of those notes are in Steinberg's hands?' Phil asked.

The rascal's wits had begun to work again, if only a little, and he could by this time have answered if he would. But he knew that his own cowardice, if nothing else, had given away the game. After such a confession as his own terror had made, what was the

use of bluster or pretence? He could not guess how much was known. He was completely cornered, and must fight or yield. His native instinct at any moment was ready to teach him how much discretion was the better part of valour, and now to fight seemed mere madness. In the very terror of the night which thus suddenly enveloped him he saw one gleam of hope. There was one stroke to be made which might save him, in part at least, from the consequences of his own misdeed.

Philip gave these reflections but little time to grow distinct to Barter's mind.

'How many of those notes?' he asked slowly, emphasising almost every word by a tap of his knuckles upon the table, 'have passed into Steinberg's hands?'

'All,' gasped Barter; 'every one of them!'

'That will do for the present,' said Philip, and at that instant there came a loud summons at the door, whereat the miserable Barter started, and clasped his hands in renewed terror. He fancied an officer of justice there, his arrival accurately timed.

Philip, throwing a glance about the room, and assuring himself that there was no means of unobserved exit, answered the summons in person. He had until that moment kept perfect possession of himself except for his obedience to that overmastering intuition, but beholding Mr. Steinberg at the doorway he felt a great leap at his heart, and a sudden dryness in his throat. He examined these phenomena afterwards,

and decided in his own mind that they were assignable to fear. He came to the belief which he cherishes until now, that he had to screw up his courage pretty tightly before he could face the idea of confronting the partners in rascality together. But here it may be observed in passing that this kind of self-depreciation is a favourite trick with men of unusual nerve, and is rarely resorted to by any but the most courageous.

Steinberg recognised him by the light of the gas-lamp.

'Good-evening,' he said, nodding. 'Barter's here, I suppose.'

'Sir,' said Phil, with recovered coolness, a certain light of humour dawning in his mind, 'Mr. Barter is within, and I have no doubt will be very happy to see you.'

Steinberg cast a sidelong glance at him, and entered. Phil closed the door, and followed close upon his heels. Barter, with his pale complexion fallen to the tint of dead ashes, sat huddled in the arm-chair, staring white-eyed like a frightened madman. Steinberg stared back at him in sheer amazement at his looks, and Phil, closing the door, turned the key in the lock and pocketed it.

'Hillo!' cried Steinberg, turning swiftly round at the click, 'what's this mean?' He measured Philip with his eye—a very evil and wicked eye it was—and dropped back a step or two.

'What's this mean?' Steinberg asked again, his quick glance darting from one to the other.

'It means, sir,' said Phil, with a glad tranquillity, 'that your fellow-scoundrel, the courageous gentleman in the arm-chair there, is in the act of making his confession.'

Steinberg sent one savage glance at Barter, and then dashed at him, and planting both hands within the collar of his shirt, so banged him to and fro that he would inevitably have done him a mischief of a serious sort but for Phil's intervention. The method of intervention was less tranquil than Philip's motion up to this time had been. He tore Steinberg from his grip of the betrayer with a force he had no time to measure, and hurled him across the room. He staggered at the door, and his head coming noisily in contact with it, he slipped down into a sitting posture with an expression suddenly changed from ferocity to a complete vacuity and indifference.

Now Mr. Barter, scared as he had been, and shaken to his centre, had begun to think again, and when he saw that Steinberg's chance in the enemy's hands was less than nothing, that fact formed as it were the last necessary plank for the raft of safety he desired to construct. He got up from his place, animated by this great idea, and staggering to the helpless Steinberg, fell down beside him and gripped his hands.

'Tie him, Mr. Bommaney, tie him!' gurgled Barter. 'He's been the ruin of me, curse him. I should have

been an honest man if it hadn't been for him. It's him that led me into it, and he's had every sixpence of the money. I've been his tool, his miserable tool. Tie him, Mr. Bommaney, before he comes round again. I'll hold him for you.'

One may get good advice from the most unexpected quarter, and whencesoever good advice may come it is worth while to follow it. Phil took a dandy scarf from Steinberg's own neck, and tied him tightly, wrist to wrist. Then he helped him to his feet, and set him in a chair.

'He came here to-night,' Barter gurgled on, with tears of sincerest penitence, 'to bleed me again. He's got my I.O.U. for £82 he cheated me of last week. He's had every penny of the money. I haven't had so much as a single farthing of it myself. I'll swear I haven't.'

'That's your lay, is it?' said Steinberg, whose scattered wits were coming back to him. 'You shall answer for this violence in the proper quarter, Bommaney.'

'I will answer for it in the proper quarter,' Phil replied. 'I will trouble you, Mr. Steinberg, to come to the proper quarter now.'

'You won't forget,' said Barter, 'that I helped to capture him. You'll speak a word for me, Mr. Bommaney? I've been that villain's victim all along. I should never have gone wrong if it hadn't been for him, and I've wanted to send the money back over

and over again, but he got it into his own hands and wouldn't listen to it, and after all I never took the money, Mr. Bommaney—I only found it. It was Steinberg kept it. He said I should be a fool to let it go.'

What sentiments of contempt and rage inspired Mr. Steinberg's bosom at this juncture must be imagined. He looked them all, but verbally expressed none of them.

'Get up,' said Phil, addressing him. Steinberg obeyed. 'Take a seat in that corner.' Steinberg obeyed again. 'Now you——' to Barter, 'take a place in that corner, behind the desk.'

'With pleasure, Mr. Bommaney,' said Barter, 'with the very greatest willingness. I desire to make no resistance to the law. I helped to capture the criminal. Please remember that, Mr. Bommaney. Pray remember that.'

He took hold of a heavy ruler which happened to be lying on the desk, and deeming that he and the other rascal were about to be left alone together, he showed it shakily to Steinberg, as a hint that he was not without means of protection against a man unarmed and bound.

Phil unlocked the door, inserted the key on the other side, disappeared, and turned the lock anew. The two criminals heard his footstep sounding elate, triumphant, and threatening to their ears as he went along the boarded floor. They listened as the footstep

crossed the square boulders of the courtyard, and listened still until their sound melted into the blended noises of the outer street. A minute later the step was heard returning, accompanied by another, solid and terrible. They knew it, and their hearts, low as they were already, sank at it. The door opened and Phil reappeared, followed by a policeman.

'I give these two in charge,' the young man said, 'the one as the thief, the other as the receiver of a bundle of bank-notes of the value of eight thousand pounds, the property of my father, Mr. Philip Bommaney of Coalporter's Alley.'

'I'm quite willing to go without resistance,' said Mr. Barter from behind the table. 'I assisted in the capture, and I am ready to say anything.'

'That's the first true word you've spoken,' Steinberg snarled. 'You can take this thing off,' holding out his hands. 'I'll go quietly. I can get bail in an hour.'

'Don't have it taken off, Mr. Bommaney, not if we're to travel in the same vehicle. He threatened me while you were away. He said if they gave him fifty years he'd kill me when he came out again. He'll do it, because I made a clean breast of it, didn't I, Mr. Bommaney? I made a clean breast of it, officer. I'm ready to—tell everything. He's ruined me, and now he says he'll kill me because I'm ready to make a clean breast of it.'

'I choose to be taken separately, if you please. I

myself will pay the fare. I won't travel with that cackling idiot.'

'I will go with Mr. Bommaney with pleasure,' said the penitent. 'I'll go with you with pleasure anywhere. I'd rather go with you a great deal.'

It was hardly to be expected that Philip should feel very warmly towards either of his two companions, but of the two he disliked Steinberg the less. And, since it seemed humane and reasonable to choose, he chose Steinberg as his travelling companion. The officer set Steinberg's hat upon his head, and the quartet set out. The sight of a man with his hands tightly bound with a scarlet muffler gathered a momentary little crowd at the Inn gate; but, a pair of hansoms being summoned, captives and captors were speedily relieved from vulgar observation. The station reached, it turned out that the communicative Mr. Barter, in the exuberance of his heart, had exposed to the officer *en route* the whereabouts of the lost notes. He declared that to his knowledge they rested in a safe, the position of which he indicated, in Steinberg's Hatton Garden office. The Inspector before whom the charge was made deemed this intelligence worthy of being acted on at once. The two prisoners were searched, and Mr. Barter was so good as to point out, among Steinberg's keys, those which were necessary for the purposes of investigation. He even went so far as to offer his assistance as guide; but this was declined with a chilliness singularly at variance with the solicitous warmth of the proposal.

'I think, sir,' said the Inspector, with an arctic disrespect which was so frozen as to be almost respectful, 'that we can manage this without your assistance.'

The Divisional Superintendent, being communicated with by telephone, arrived upon the scene. The matter in hand having been laid before him with curt official brevity, he asked for the keys, called to himself a constable, and was preparing to set out, when Philip begged permission to accompany him.

'The notes, sir,' he said, 'were left in my father's trust by a dear old friend of his. My father himself was supposed to have made use of them—a thing of which he was incapable. If I can take to him the news that they are found, I can lift a load of undeserved disgrace from the mind of an honourable man.'

'I shall be pleased to have your company, Mr. Bommaney,' the Superintendent answered, touched a little by the young man's earnestness. So the three got into a four-wheeler, and bowled away to Hatton Garden, and there made entry into the chambers lately occupied by Mr. Steinberg. There was no gas here, but the constable's dark lantern showed the way. It revealed the safe in the position the communicative criminal had assigned to it. It revealed the notes, snugly spread out in one crisp little heap, and arranged with business-like precision in the order of their numbers.

This golden spectacle once seen, Phil dashed into the

street, hailed a hansom, and drove pell-mell, exciting the cabman who conducted him by the promise of a double fare, to the residence of old Brown and old Brown's daughter. There he told the glorious news, a little broken and halting in his speech. Patty threw her arms about him, and cried without concealment or restraint. Old Brown blew his nose with a suspicious frequency, and shook his adopted son-in-law by the hand at frequent intervals.

'Phil,' he cried at last, 'where's your father? By God, sir, he never had any need to run away from me, because he happened to lose a handful of paltry money. What had he got to do but come and say, "Brown, it's gone!" He hadn't trust enough in me to think I'd believe him. Let's get at him. Where is he?'

The old boy tugged furiously at the bell-pull.

'Send Brenner round to the stable,' he said to the servant. 'Tell him to get the horses to, and bring the carriage round at once. Where's your father, Phil?'

'He's down Poplar way,' said Phil. 'Hornett, his old clerk, is living in the same house with him.'

'We'll go down, and rouse him up,' the old boy said, with a moist eye and trembling hand. 'Phil, my lad,' he went on, grasping the young fellow's hand in his own, 'I'm getting to be an old 'un. You wouldn't think it to look at me, because, thank God, I've always known how to take my trouble lightly, but I've seen a lot of it in my time, and you can take my word for this—there isn't any trouble in the

world that's hardly so bitter as for an honest man to have to take another for a rogue.'

So it came to pass that Bommaney senior, who after all, perhaps, hardly deserved to be made a hero of, was plenteously bedewed with the tears of three most honourable and high-minded people, and was set up in their minds as a sort of live statue of undeserved martyrdom. They who learned the tale afterwards mourned his weakness, and supposed him to be the victim of a too sensitive organisation. He lives now with a genuine halo of sanctity about him, and seems in the minds of some to have suffered for the sake of a great principle, quite noble, but not quite definitely defined.

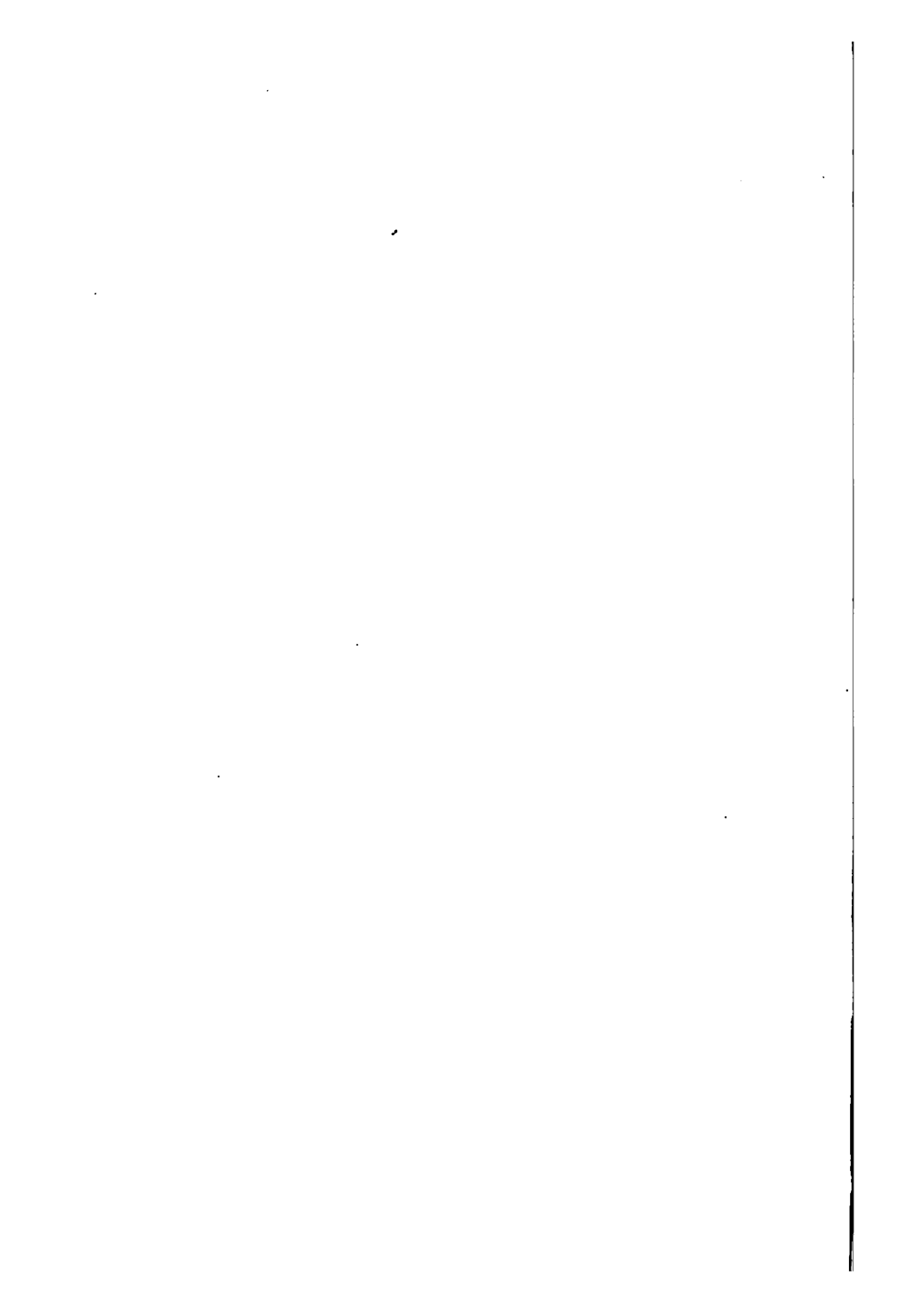
Odd things happen every day in the world, and pass by unregarded. The worship of Bommaney senior's sensibilities seems a trifle dull when all things are considered, though one has to be glad that an honest son can think of him with pity mixed with admiration. But perhaps the oddest thing of all in connection with this story may be looked for in the shorthand reporter's notes of the Recorder's speech at the Old Bailey, when the accusation against Messrs. Barter and Steinberg came to be heard.

'You, Barter,' said the learned Recorder, 'appear to have been drawn into this by the influence of an intelligence stronger and abler than your own. You appear, in a moment of weakness, to have been led away by that stronger intelligence from the paths

of rectitude. But you have displayed so clear a sense of the enormity of your conduct, and have, by your complete disclosures of the crime committed by you and your companion, and, by your evidence in Court to-day, shown so complete a repentance for it, that I do not think that it would be politic or just to lay a severe term of imprisonment upon you. Nevertheless, the law of the land must be justified, and I feel a pleasure in believing that in justifying the law I am affording you an opportunity for reflection, for the formation of good resolutions for the future, and for a confirmation of those better desires which I believe—in spite of your association with this criminal enterprise—to animate your mind.'

Now, to my fancy, this has a distinct element of comedy in it; but the learned Recorder resembled some of his unlearned brethren, in respect to the fact that he could not be expected to know everything.

Mr. Barter thrives again, but he is even now awaiting, with the uneasiest sensations, the liberation of the man who betrayed him into crime.



III

BULLDOG AND BUTTERFLY



BULLDOG AND BUTTERFLY

I

CASTLE BARFIELD, Heydon Hey, and Beacon Hargate form the three points of a triangle. Barfield is a parish of some pretensions; Heydon Hey is a village; Beacon Hargate is no more than a hamlet. There is not much that is picturesque in Beacon Hargate, or its neighbourhood. The Beacon Hill itself is as little like a hill as it well can be, and acquires what prominence it has by virtue of the extreme flatness of the surrounding country. A tuft of Scotch firs upon its crest is visible from a distance of twenty miles in some directions. A clear but sluggish stream winds among its sedges and water-lilies round the western side of the Beacon Hill, and washes the edge of a garden which belongs to the one survival of the picturesque old times Beacon Hargate has to show.

The Oak House was built for a mansion in the days of Queen Elizabeth, but who built it nobody knows at this time of day, or, excepting perhaps a hungry-minded antiquary or two, greatly cares to

know. The place had been partly pulled down, and a good deal altered here and there. Stables, barns, cow-sheds, and such other outhouses as are needful to a farm had been tacked on to it, or built near it; and all these appurtenances, under the mellowing hand of time and weather, had grown congruous, insomuch that the Oak House if stripped of them would have looked as bare even to the unaccustomed eye as a bird plucked of its feathers.

The house faced the stream, and turned its back upon the Beacon with its clump of fir-trees. It had chimneys enough for a village—an extraordinary wealth of chimneys—twisted, fluted, castellated, stacked together in conclave or poised singly about the gables. The front of the house was crossed laterally and diagonally by great beams of black-painted oak. The windows, which are full of diamonded panes, were low-browed, deep-sunken, long, and shallow. The door had a porch, and this porch was covered with creepers. In summer time climbing roses and honeysuckle bloomed there. The garden ran right up to the house, and touched it all round. The fragrant sweet-william, nestling against the walls, looked as though it were a natural fringe. Without the faintest sense of primness, or even of orderliness, everything had an air of being precisely where it ought to be, and conveyed somehow a suggestion of having been there always. The house looked less as if it had been built than as if it had grown, and this feeling was heightened

by the vegetable growth about it and upon it—the clinging ivy, the green house-leek, the purple and golden moss on the roofs and walls. In the course of its three hundred years the Oak House had stood long enough to be altogether reconciled to nature, and half absorbed by it.

In 1850—which, though it seem a long while ago, is well within human memory—and for many years before, the Oak House was tenanted by a farmer who bore the name of Fellowes, a sturdy and dogmatic personage, who was loud at the table of the market ordinary once a week, and for the most part silent for the rest of his life at home. The gray mare was the better horse. Excepting within doors at the Oak House, Fellowes ruled the hamlet. There were no resident gentry; the clergyman was an absentee; the tiny church was used only as a chapel-of-ease; and Fellowes was the wealthiest and most important personage for a mile or two. He was a little disposed to be noisy, and to bluster in his show of authority, and therefore fell all the more easily captive to his wife, who had a gift for the tranquil saying of unpleasant things which was reckoned quite phenomenal in Beacon Hargate. This formidable woman was ruled in turn by her daughter Bertha.

Bertha, unless looked at through the eyes of susceptible young manhood, would by no means be pronounced formidable. She was country-bred and quite rustic; but there are refinements of rusticity;

and for Beacon Hargate, Bertha was a lady. She would have been a lady anywhere according to her chances; for she was naturally sensitive to refining influences, and of a nature which, remembering how strong it was, was curiously tender.

It was May, in the year 1850—mid-May—and the weather was precisely what mid-May weather ought to be, perfumed and softly fresh, with opposing hints of gaiety and languor in it. The birds were singing everywhere—a vocal storm, and the sheep—who can never express themselves as being satisfied in any weather—bleated disconsolately from the meadows. The clucking of fowls, the quacking of ducks, the very occasional grunt of some contented porker in the backward regions of the place, the stamp of a horse's foot, and the rattle of a chain in a manger-ring—sounds quite unmusical in themselves—blended with the birds' singing, and the thick humming of the bees, into an actual music in which no note was discordant. The day was without a cloud, and the soft light was diffused everywhere on a skyey haze of whitish blue.

In this positively delightful weather, Bertha stood with folded hands in the porch of the Oak House (the floor and the far wall of the kitchen behind her patched with gleams of red and brown light), like the central figure of a picture framed in live green. She was pretty enough to be pleasant to look at; but her charms were mainly the growth of tranquil good

temper and sound sense. Broad brow, gray eyes, resolute little chin, the mouth the best feature of the face, her expression thoughtful, serene, and self-possessed, the gray eyes a trifle inclined to dream wide-awake, hair of no particular colour, but golden in the sunlight. She stood leaning sideways, with one shoulder touching the trellis-work of the porch, and one pretty little foot crossed over the other, her head poised sideways and nestled into the ivy. She was looking far away, seeing nothing, and her folded hands drooped before her. A bridge, with a hand-rail on either side of it, crossed the stream and led from a meadow path to the garden. This meadow path was hidden—partly by the garden wall, and partly by the growth of alder and pollard at the side of the stream—and a man came marching along it, unobserved. Before he reached the bridge he brought his footsteps to a sudden halt, and sent a glance towards the porch. Seeing the girl there, sunk in day dreams, he slipped back into the shelter of the withies and took a good long look at her. Twice or thrice, though his feet did not quit the ground, he made a faint movement to go on again, and at length, after two or three minutes of indecision, he walked briskly to the foot of the bridge, threw open the little gate at the end of it, and, suffering it to fall with a clanking noise behind him, tramped across the hollow-resounding boards.

At this sudden break upon the rural stillness—for, in spite of the chorus of the birds and the farmyard

noises which mingled with it, the general effect was somehow of stillness and solitude—the girl looked round at the new-comer, drew herself up from her lounging attitude, placed her hands behind her and there re-folded them, and stood waiting, with an added flush of colour on her cheek. The new-comer strode along in a kind of awkward resoluteness, looking straight at the girl with a glance which appeared to embarrass her a little, though she returned it frankly enough.

‘Here I am, you see,’ said the new-comer, halting before her.

He was tallish, well-made, and of middle age. His expression was a trifle dogged, and for a man who came love-making he looked less prepossessing than he himself might have wished.

‘Good afternoon, Mr. Thistlewood,’ said the girl, in a tone which a sensitive man might have thought purposely defensive.

‘Is it yes or no to-day, Bertha?’ asked Mr. Thistlewood.

‘It has always been no,’ she answered, looking down.

‘Oh,’ he answered, ‘I’m perfectly well aware of that. It always has been no up till now, but that’s no reason why it should be no to-day. And if it’s no to-day that’s no reason why it should be no again this day three months. Maids change their minds, my dear.’

'It is a pity you should waste your time, Mr. Thistlewood,' said Bertha, still looking down.

'As for wasting my time,' returned John Thistlewood, 'that's a thing as few can charge me with as a general rule. And in this particular case, you see, I can't help myself. The day I see you married I shall make up my mind to leave you alone until such time as you might happen to be a widow, and if that should come to pass I should reckon myself free to come again.'

'It has always been no,' said Bertha. 'It is no to-day. It will always be no.'

The words in themselves were sufficiently decisive, and the voice, though it had something soft and regretful in it, sounded almost as final as the words.

'Let's look at it a bit, my dear,' said John Thistlewood, grasping in both hands the thick walking-stick he carried, and pressing it firmly against his thighs as he leaned a little forward and looked down upon her. 'Why is it no? And if it's no again to-day, why is it always going to be no?'

'I like you very well, Mr. Thistlewood,' she answered, looking up at him, 'but I don't like you in a marrying way, and I never shall.'

'As for never shall,' said he, 'that remains to be seen.'

He straightened himself as he spoke, and releasing the walking-stick with his left hand put the point of

it softly, slowly, and strongly down upon the gravel, dinting the ground pretty deeply with the pressure.

'Let's look at it a little further,' he added.

'It is of no use,' the girl answered pleadingly. 'It hurts us both, and it can do no good at all.'

'Let's look at it a bit further,' he said again. 'This day month you said there was nobody you'd seen you liked better than me. Is that true still?'

'It is quite true,' she answered, 'but it makes no difference.'

'That remains to be seen,' said John Thistlewood again. 'And as for not liking me in a marrying way, that's a thing a maid can't be supposed to know much of.' He waited doggedly as if to hear her deny this, but she made no answer. 'You've known me all your life, Bertha, and you never knew anything again me.'

'Never,' she said, almost eagerly.

'I'm well-to-do,' he went on stolidly, but with all his force, as if he were pushing against a wall too heavy to be moved by any pressure he could bring to bear against it, and yet was resolute to have it down. 'I'm not too old to be a reasonable match for a maid of your years. You've had my heart this five years. I waited two afore I spoke at all. There's a many—not that I speak it in a bragging way—as would be willing enough to have me.'

'It's a pity you can't take a fancy to one of them,' she said, with perfect simplicity and good faith.

'Perhaps it is,' answered Thistlewood, with a

dogged sigh; 'but be that as it may, I can't and shan't. Where my fancy lies it stays. I didn't give my heart away to take it back again. You'll wed me yet, Bertha, and when you do you'll be surprised to think you didn't do it long before.'

At this point the voice of a third person broke in upon the colloquy.

'That caps all!' said the voice. 'There's Mr. Forbes, the Scotch gardener at my Lord Barfield's, tells me of a lad in his parts as prayed the Lord for a good consate of himself. That's a prayer as you'll never find occasion t'offer, John Thistlewood.'

'Maybe not, Mrs. Fellowes,' answered Thistlewood, addressing the owner of the voice, who remained invisible; 'but I wasn't speaking in a braggart way.'

'No—no,' returned the still invisible intruder. 'Wast humble enough about it, doubtless. You'm bound to tek a man's own word about his own feelings. Who is to know 'em if he doesn't?'

'Just so,' said Thistlewood, with great dryness. He appeared to be little if at all disturbed by the interruption, but Bertha was blushing like a peony.

'I sat quiet,' said the girl's mother, leisurely walking round the door with a half-finished gray worsted stocking depending from the knitting-needles she carried in both hands,—'I sat quiet so as not to be a disturbance. It's you for making love to a maid, I must allow, John.'

The girl ran into the house and disappeared from view.

'It's me for speaking my mind, at least, ma'am,' returned John, with unaltered tranquil doggedness.

'Ah!' responded the farmer's wife; 'you're like a good many more of 'em; you'd sooner not have what you want than go the right way to get it.'

Thistlewood digested this in silence, and Mrs. Fellowes set the knitting-needles flashing.

'I've always fancied,' he said in a little while, 'as I had your goodwill in the matter.'

'You've got my goodwill, in a way to be sure,' said the old woman. 'You'd mek the gell a goodish husband if her could find a fancy for you—but the fancy's everything—don't you see, John?'

'I'm not above taking advice, Mrs. Fellowes,' said Thistlewood, digging at the gravel with his walking-stick. 'Will you be so good as to tell me where I'm wrong?'

'There's one particular as you're wrong in,' returned Mrs. Fellowes, knitting away with a determinedly uninteresting air, 'and, I misdoubt me, you can't alter it.'

'What's that?' asked Thistlewood, looking up at her suddenly.

'You're the wrong man, John.'

'That remains to be seen,' he answered, with the same dogged patience as before.

'You can't win a maid's heart by going at her as solemn as a funeral,' pursued the old woman. 'If you'd ha' begun sprightly with the gell, you might ha' had a chance with her. "La!" says you, "what a

pretty frock you're a-wearing to-day ;" or "How nice you do do up your hair for a certainty."

'I don't look on marriage as a thing to be approached i' that fashion,' said Thistlewood.

'Well,' returned the old woman, clicking her needles with added rapidity, 'I've always said there's no end to the folly o' men. D'ye hear that there cuckoo? Go and catch him wi' shoutin' at him. An' when next you're in want of toast at tay-time, soak your bread in a pan o' cold water.'

Thistlewood stood for a time in a rather dogged-looking silence, sometimes glancing at the notable woman and glancing away again. Her eye expressed a triumph which, though purely dialectic, was hard for a disappointed lover to endure, even whilst he refused to recognise his disappointment.

'I should regard any such means of gettin' into a maid's good graces as being despicable,' he said, after a while.

'Very well, my Christian friend,' the farmer's wife retorted, with a laugh. 'Them as mek bread without barm must look to spoil the batch.'

'I was niver of a flatterin' turn of mind,' said Thistlewood.

'You niver was, John,' responded Mrs. Fellowes, with an accent which implied something beyond assent.

He flushed a little, and began to tap at his corduroyed leg with the stick he carried, at first with

a look of shamefaced discomfiture, and then with resolution. He finished with a resounding slap, and looked up with a light in his eyes.

'I'm pretty hard to beat, ma'am,' he said, 'though I say it as should not. I'm not going to be conquered here if I can help it. And I look to have you and Mr. Fellowes on my side, as far as may be asked in reason. Her'll find no better husband than I should be to her, I *am* sure. There's more than a wheedlin' tongue required to mek a married woman happy. I've pretty well proved as I'm not changeable. There's a strong arm to tek care of her. There's a homely house with plenty in it. There's a goodish lump at the bank, and there's nothing heart can desire as her might not have by asking for it.'

'Well, John,' said the farmer's wife, clicking her needles cheerfully, 'I've not a word to say again the match. Win the wench and welcome. My dancin' days is pretty nigh over, but I'll tek the floor once more with pleasure, if you won't be too long in mekin' ready for me.'

'There's nothing more to be done at present, I suppose,' the lover said presently, 'and so I'll say good-bye for this afternoon, Mrs. Fellowes.'

With this he turned upon his heel, and marching sturdily down the path and across the little bridge, disappeared behind the withies and pollards.

The farmer's wife waited a while until he was out of hearing, and then, without turning her head, shrilled

out 'Bertha!' The girl came silently downstairs and joined her in the doorway. The mother pursued her knitting in silence, a faint flicker of a humorous smile touching her face and eyes now and again. At length she spoke, looking straight before her.

'Why woot'ent marry the man?'

'Mr. Thistlewood?' asked Bertha, making the feeblest possible defence against this direct attack.

'Ay,' said her mother, 'Mr. Thistlewood to be sure. Why woot'ent marry him?'

'I like him well enough in a way,' the girl answered. 'But I don't like him that way.'

'What way?'

'Why—in a marrying way,' said Bertha.

'Pooh!' answered the notable woman. 'What's a maid know how she'd like a man?'

'I should have the greatest respect for him,' Bertha answered, wisely avoiding the discussion of this question, 'if he wouldn't come bothering me to marry him.'

'Ay!' said her mother, assenting with a philosophic air. 'That's a wench's way. When a man wants nothing her'll give him as much as her can spare. But look hither, my gell! You listen to the words of a old experienced woman. There's a better love comes after the weddin', if a gell marries a worthy solid man, than ever her knows before it. If a gell averts from a man that's another matter. But if her can abide him to begin with, and if he's a good man, her'll be fond of him before her knows it.'

'I should never be fond of Mr. Thistlewood, mother,' the girl answered, flushing hotly. 'It's of no use to speak about him.'

'Did the man ever mek love to you at all,' the mother asked, 'beyond comin' here and barkin', "Wool't marry me?"'

'I wish you wouldn't talk of him, mother,' Bertha answered in a troubled voice. 'I respect him very highly, but as for marrying him, it's out of the question. I can't do it.'

'Well, well,' returned her mother, 'nobody's askin' you to do anything o' the sort. I'm trying to find your mind about him. It's high time 'twas made up one way or other. You've come to a marriageable age.'

'I'm very well as I am,' said Bertha, rather hastily. 'I'm not in a hurry to be married.'

'You've never been much like other gells,' said her mother, with a dry humorous twinkle which looked more masculine than feminine. 'But I reckon you'll be in about as much of a hurry as the rest on 'em be when the right man comes.'

At this moment a whistle of peculiar volume, mellowness, and flexibility was heard. The whistler was trilling 'Come lasses and lads' in tones as delightful as a blackbird's.

'Is this him?' said the old woman, turning upon her daughter.

Bertha blushed, and turned away. The mother

laughed. A light footstep sounded on the echoing boards of the little bridge, and the human blackbird, marching gaily in time to his tune, flourished a walking-stick in salutation as he approached.

'Good-afternoon, Mrs. Fellowes,' cried the newcomer. 'Good-afternoon, *Miss* Fellowes.'

They both returned his salutation, and he stood before them smilingly, holding his stick lightly by the middle, and swinging it hither and thither, as if keeping time to an inward silent tune. His feet were planted a little apart, he carried his head well back, and his figure was very alert and lithe. He made great use of his lips in talking, and whatever he said seemed a little overdone in emphasis. His expression was eager, amiable, and sensitive, and it changed like the complexion of water in variable weather. He was a bit of a dandy in his way, too. His clothes showed his slim and elastic figure to the best advantage, and a bright-coloured neckerchief with loose flying ends helped out a certain air of festal rural opera which belonged to him.

'I passed Thistlewood on my way here,' he said, laughing brightly. 'He looked as cheerful as a frog. Did y' ever notice what a cheerful-looking thing a frog is?'

He made a face ludicrously like the creature he mentioned. The old woman laughed outright, and Bertha smiled, though somewhat unwillingly.

'I don't like to hear Mr. Thistlewood made game of, Mr. Protheroe,' she said a moment later.

'Don't you, Miss Fellowes?' asked Mr. Protheroe. 'Then it shan't be done in your presence again.'

'That means it may be done out of my presence, I suppose,' the girl said coldly.

'No, nor out of it,' said the young fellow, bowing with something of a flourish, 'if it displeases you.'

'Come in, Lane, my lad,' said the mother, genially. 'I've got the poultry to look after at this hour. Bertha'll tek care of you till I come back again.'

Lane Protheroe bowed again with the same gay flourish, and recovering himself from the bow with an upward swing of the head, followed the women-folk into the wide kitchen as if he had been crossing the floor in a minuet. If these airs of his had been assumed they would have touched the ridiculous, but they were altogether natural to him; and what with them and his smiling, changeful, sympathetic ways, he was a prime favourite, and seemed to carry sunshine into all sorts of company.

When the mother had left the kitchen the girl seated herself considerably apart from the visitor, and taking up a book from a dresser beside her, began to turn over its pages, stopping now and again to read a line or two, and rather ostentatiously disregarding her companion. He sat in silence, regarding her with a grave face for a minute or thereabouts, and then, rising, crossed the room and placed himself beside her,

bending over her, with one hand resting on the dresser. She did not look up in answer to this movement, but bent her head even a little more than before above the book.

‘I’m glad to be left alone with you for a minute, Miss Fellowes,’ he began gently, and with a faint tremor and hesitation in his voice, ‘because I’ve something very special and particular to say to you.’

There he paused, and Bertha with a slight cough, which was a trifle too casual and unembarrassed to be real, said, ‘Indeed, Mr. Protheroe?’ and kept her eyes upon the book.

‘They say a girl always knows,’ he went on, ‘and if that’s true you know already what I want to say.’

He paused, but if he expected any help from her in the way either of assent or denial, he was disappointed. He stooped a little lower and touched her hand with a gentle timidity, but she at once withdrew it.

‘You know I love you, Bertha? You know you’re dearer to me than all the whole wide world beside?’

Still Bertha said nothing, but the hand that turned the leaves of the book trembled perceptibly.

‘I’ve come to ask you if you’ll be my wife, dear! if you’ll let me make you my lifelong care and joy, my darling! You don’t guess how much I love you. You don’t know how much your answer means to me.’

The girl rose, and, carrying the book with her,

walked to the kitchen window and looked out upon the garden, the river, and the fields, without seeing anything. She was evidently agitated, and did not find an answer easily. Lane followed her, and when for a moment she dared to look up at him she encountered a look so tender, anxious, and ardent that she lowered her eyes in quick confusion. He seized her hand, and for a brief instant she let it rest in his.

'Speak to me,' he murmured, caressingly and pleadingly. 'Tell me.'

'I don't understand you, Mr. Protheroe,' the girl said pantingly.

'Not understand me, dear?' he whispered; 'I am asking you to be my wife.'

'I understand that,' she answered, drawing herself away from him, and speaking with difficulty. 'It is *you* I don't understand. You—yourself.'

'Tell me how, darling,' he said softly.

'You tell me,' she said, lifting a pale and agitated face, 'that I can't guess how much my answer means to you. But you come here whistling and dancing, as you always come, as if you hadn't a care upon your mind.'

'Don't make that a reproach against me, dear,' said he. 'Why it was just the thought of you made me so happy.'

She looked up at him with an expression of doubt and pain, and as their eyes met he caught one of her hands in both his, and held it.

'Dear Bertha!' he said, with a sudden moisture in his eyes. 'There is nobody so good. There is nobody so lovely.'

She drew away from him again, though some sort of electric influence seemed to come out of him, and draw her strongly to him.

'I must wait,' she said. 'I—I don't know you well enough. I don't understand you. You are too light. You are too careless. I don't know how far I can believe you.'

'Oh!' he cried, 'believe me altogether, dear. I love you with all my heart and soul!'

She moved to the middle of the room, and sheltered herself behind a table which stood there.

'I hardly know whether you have a heart,' she answered then. 'You fancy you feel all you say,' she added quickly. 'You feel it for the minute.'

He stood at the other side of the table with brows suddenly grown gloomy.

'I shall feel it all my life,' he said. 'It's the one thing I've ever been in earnest about. I never thought I should feel as I do. If you like to wait, dear, before answering me, I'll wait just as long as ever you please.' His gloom was gone, and he was all eagerness and vivacity again. 'There's nothing I won't do for your asking. I'll cure every fault I've got. I'll be everything you'd like to have me. Try me, darling. Wait and see. But give me only just a little bit of hope. Don't send me away quite hungry. Tell me you care

for me just a little—not as I care for you—I don't expect that. It doesn't stand to reason yet awhile you should.'

There she shot one swift glance at him, averting her gaze at once.

'I won't say I don't like you,' she answered with a candour half rustic, half characteristic of herself. 'But I won't answer yes or no just yet.'

'Very well, dear,' he answered tenderly. 'You shall have time to know if I'm in earnest, or if I've taken nothing more than a passing fancy. Shall I ask you again this day six months?'

'I won't promise you an answer then,' she said. 'I will answer you when I am certain.'

'You could care for me, then,' he urged her, 'if you were only quite sure I loved you, and always would love you? Why, Bertha, I'd put my hand in that fire to save you from a finger-ache. I'd jump into the Weale there if I thought I could make you happy by doing it. I'd live my whole life your servant for a smile a year.'

His eyes flashed or moistened with every phrase, his gestures were superabundant and intense, and his voice was genuinely tender and impassioned.

His ardent eyes and voice thrilled the girl, and yet she doubted him. There was a fear in her mind which she could not shake away.

People in Beacon Hargate were not rich in opportunities for the study of the acted drama, but Bertha

had seen a play or two in the great town hard by, and Lane looked and talked rather too much like a stage lover to her mind. In the unreal life behind the footlights lovers talked with just such a fluency, just such a tender fiery emphasis. In real life John Thistlewood came doggedly a-wooing with a shoulder propped against a doorpost, and had hard work to find a word for himself. If only that one absent element of faith could be imported into the business, Lane Protheroe's fashion of courting was certain to be infinitely more delightful than John Thistlewood's, but then the absent element was almost everything. And for poor Bertha the worst part of it seemed that she loved the man she doubted, and could not love the man in whose affection she held the profoundest faith. That the rough, clumsy, and persistent courtier loved her was one of the indisputable facts of life to her. She knew it just as surely as she knew that she was alive. She knew it, and the knowledge hurt her, for she could fancy nothing less hopeful than Thistlewood's wooing, and she was without a spark of mere vanity.

'I think it is because you say so much that I don't feel quite able to believe it all,' she said. 'You feel it when you talk about it, but it seems to me as if you *had* to talk before you get to feel it.'

His brows bent down over gloomy eyes again, and he folded his arms as he looked at her. Once more

poor Bertha thought of the stage lover she had seen, and a long-drawn sigh escaped her.

'I can't think it's all quite real,' she said, almost desperately.

'You think I say too much?' he retorted. 'It seems to me as if I said too little. It seems to me as if there weren't any words to speak such thoughts and feelings.'

'Is that because you don't value the words?' she asked him. 'Don't you think that if you felt what the words do mean that they'd seem enough for you?'

'I know I'm a good-for-nothing beggar,' he answered, with a sudden air of weary self-loathing and disdain. 'I know. I've got a way of taking everything in deadly earnest for an hour or two. But,' with a sudden swerve into the track of self-justification, 'if that makes you think I'm fickle and weak-willed, you're all wrong, darling. There are some fellows—I know plenty—who go through life like a lot of oysters. They don't feel anything—they don't care about anything, or anybody. But, bless your heart, my dear, they never get doubted.'

Bertha took this for a satiric dig at the absent Thistlewood, and spoke up for him, needlessly, as it happened.

'Still waters run deep, Mr. Protheroe.'

'Some of 'em do,' responded Mr. Protheroe, with profoundest gloom, which lightened suddenly into a smile as bright as sunshine. 'But some of 'em don't

run at all. And some of 'em are as shallow as any puddle you'll find along the road, only they're so bemuddled you can't see to the bottom of 'em. You can plumb 'em with your little finger, though, if you don't mind soiling it.'

Now this innocent generalisation seemed gratuitously offensive to the absent Thistlewood, and chilled Bertha greatly.

'That may be very true of some people,' she responded; 'but it isn't true of all the quiet people in the world. And I don't think, Mr. Protheroe, that the people who make the greatest parade of their feelings are the people who really have the most to speak of.'

'Why, that's true, too, of some people,' returned Protheroe; 'but there are all sorts in the world, dear. Some say a lot and feel a lot. Some feel a lot and say nothing. Some say nothing and feel nothing. It may be a fault with me—I don't know—but when I start to say a thing I want to say all of it. But surely a feeling isn't less real because you don't seem able to express it whatever words you choose.'

'Where the feeling's sacred the words are sacred,' Bertha objected.

'Tell me what it is you fear about me,' he besought her, leaning across the table, and searching her face with his eyes. 'You don't believe I should have a wandering mind if you said yes, and we should once be married?'

She had laid the book upon the table, and now betook herself to fingering the leaves again.

'I've no right to pick faults in you, or give you lessons, Mr. Protheroe.'

'Oh yes, you have,' he answered. 'All the right in the world. If you'll take in hand to show me my faults, I'll take in hand to cure 'em, so far as a man may.'

'I don't think you're fickle,' said the girl hesitatingly; 'but I do think you're shallow, Mr. Protheroe.'

'Not a bit of it, dear,' he protested. 'I'm as deep as Garrick. As for your still waters running deep, it'd be a better proverb to my mind to say deep waters run still—at times. Niagara's deepish, folks say that have seen it. That's not to say that I even myself with Niagara, you'll understand, though 'tis in my nature to splash about a good deal. But all that apart, Bertha dear, try to make up your mind to take me as I am, and help me to make a man o' myself.'

At this point back came the farmer's wife with a clatter of pails in the back kitchen to indicate her arrival in advance. Lane took his leave with a reluctant air, going away much more gravely than he had arrived.

'Well,' said Mrs. Fellowes, drawing her knitting from a capacious pocket and falling to work upon it at once, 'hast sent Number Two about his business?'

Bertha cast an embarrassed look at her and blushed.

'Mother,' she said, 'you seem to find out everything.'

'Can find my way to the parish church by daylight,' the elder woman answered with complacency. 'But you tek care, my wench, whilst thee beest throwin' all the straight sticks aside, as thee doesn't pick up a crooked 'un at the last. Thee hast a fancy for the lad, too, that's as plain to be seen as the Beacon.'

'Oh!' cried Bertha, reddening again. 'I hope not.'

'For me, my gell,' said her mother. 'For me. And it's outside my thinkin' why a maid shouldn't tek a fancy to him. A lad as is stiddy an' handsome, and as blithe as sunshine! He's as fond as a calf into the bargain.'

She liked to hear him praised, and, woman-like, began to depreciate him faintly.

'I don't think he's very solid, mother,' she said.

The elder woman smiled at the transparent artifice, and refused to be entrapped by it.

'No,' she answered. 'Lane's a bit of a butterfly, I will say. And Jack Thistlewood's a bulldog. Mek your ch'ice betwixt 'em while they'm there to be chose from. Which is it to be? Butterfly or bulldog?'

But Bertha answered nothing.

II

THINGS may have changed of late years, but in those days the parish churchyard was the great meeting-place for lovers who as yet were undeclared or unaccepted. The youth and the maid were both there for a purpose altogether removed from love-making—the meeting had the advantage of being accidental and certain. It was a tacit assignation which was almost certain to be kept, and even the shyest of sweethearts would dare to walk homewards together a little of the way even in the lightest of summer evenings.

When Sunday morning came, and the one musical bell began to tinkle, Bertha stood before her open bedroom window, tying her bonnet-ribbons at the glass, in the embarrassing certainty that both her lovers would be waiting outside the church to meet her. This certainty was the less to be endured, because Bertha had the sincerest desire to close with heavenly rather than with earthly meditations on a Sunday, but she could no more help being flustered by the thought of Lane Protheroe, and being chilled

by the anticipation of Thistlewood's look of bulldog fidelity, than she could help breathing. The girl's trouble was that she could not give her heart to the man who commanded her respect, whilst it was drawn fluttering with all manner of electric palpitations towards another whom she thought infinitely less worthy.

There was nothing in the world against Lane Protheroe in any serious sense. Nobody spoke or thought ill of him, or had ground for ill speaking or thinking. But it was generally conceded that he *was* a butterfly kind of young fellow, and there was a general opinion that he wanted ballast. Rural human nature is full of candour of a sort, and Lane was accustomed to criticism. He took it with a bright carelessness, and in respect to the charge of wanting ballast was apt to answer that ballast was a necessary thing for boats that carried no cargo. Thistlewood was generally admitted to be a well-ballasted personage—a man steady, resolved, serious, entirely trustworthy.

'John Thistlewood's word is as good as his bond,' said one of his admirers one day in his presence.

'John Thistlewood's word is his bond,' said John Thistlewood, 'as any man's ought to be.'

People remembered the saying, and quoted it as being characteristic of the man,—a man cut roughly out of the very granite of fidelity.

Surely, thought Bertha, a girl ought to esteem

herself happy in being singled out by such a man. The cold surface covered so steady, so lasting a glow. And as for Lane—well, Lane's heats seemed the merest flashes, intense enough to heat what was near them, but by no means enduring. There was danger that anything which was of a nature to keep on burning might catch fire at him, and when well lit might find that the creating heat had gone out, or had withdrawn itself. She knew herself, by instinct, faithful to the core, and if once she consented to love the man, she would have to go on doing it. That looked likely to be terrible, and she fought against herself continually. And she not only tried not to love the butterfly, but had tried her loyal hardest to love the bulldog. The last chance of success in the second enterprise went out finally when Thistlewood had once so far conquered his clumsy reticence of manner as actually to put his arm about her waist. Then every fibre of her body cried out against him, and she escaped him, shivering and thrilling with a repulsion so strong that it seemed like a crime to her. How dared she feel the touch of so estimable a man to be so hateful? But from that moment the thing was settled beyond a doubt. She could respect John Thistlewood, she could admire the solidity and faithfulness of his character—but, marry him? That was asking for more than nature could agree to.

If Lane had only resembled John a little—ah! there was a glow of certainty called up by that fancy

which might have been altogether delicious had the fancy been well grounded. If John had only been a little more like Lane? She was hardly so sure. Obviously, John was not the man for this girl to warm her heart at.

The worst of it was that he would never find or look for another girl, and his long courtship, though it could never endear him, or even make him tolerable as a lover, served at least to have established a sort of claim upon her. The great faithful heart might break if she should throw herself away. The depth of his affection, as she realised it for herself, could only be understood by one capable of an equal passion. She never guessed, or came near to guessing, that her conception of him was the realisation of herself; but it is only great hearts which truly know what great hearts can be, and her profound conception of Thistlewood's fidelity was her own best certificate to faithfulness.

The little musical bell went on tinkling as she walked across the fields. It had various rates of movement to indicate to distant worshippers the progress of the time, and she gave a careful ear to its warnings, so regulating her steps as only to enter the churchyard at the last minute.

There sure enough were both John and Lane waiting to pay their morning salutation. Happily, to her own mind, there was time for no more than a mere hand-shaking and a good-morning, and she

walked into the church, beautifully tranquil to look at, though she could hardly believe that all the congregation could not guess with what a startled feeling her heart had begun to beat. By and by the influences of the place and the service began to soothe her, though she only succeeded in excluding her lovers by a conscious process of forgetfulness which was not so far removed from memory as it might have been.

The Thistlewood pew was a little to the front on her right, and the Protheroe pew a little to her front on the left, but she kept her eyes so studiously down-cast that she got no glimpse of either, until a strange and altogether remarkable feeling of something missing surprised her into looking up. Her eyes went first to the Protheroe pew, and Lane was not there. Then in spite of herself she listened for Thistlewood's voice in the Responses, and not detecting it, was impelled to look for him. He also was absent, and she began to quake a little. Was it possible they had stayed outside to quarrel? This fear would have been sufficiently serious at any time, but on a Sunday, during church hours, it magnified itself, which fact is in itself enough to prove that though the idea perturbed her she foresaw no very terrible consequences. It would be hateful to be quarrelled over, but both the combatants—if combatants they were to be—would respect her too much to proceed to extremities, and thereby make the quarrel public, and her a target for all tongues.

John and Lane had met in the churchyard pretty early, and whilst there were friends to greet, and to pass the time of day with, things went smoothly enough. But as the churchgoers filed by ones and twos into the building, each began to be aware of a solitude which was peopled only by the disagreeable presence of the other. John, ostentatiously disregarding of his adversary, planted himself at the gate, so as to be before him in his greeting. Lane, rather unusually erect and martial in his walk, marched past him into the village roadway, and there loitered for the same intent. Thistlewood, recognising the meaning of this manœuvre, strolled into the roadway, and doggedly planted himself a yard or two beyond the spot where his rival had halted. Lane, with an air to the full as ostentatiously and offensively disregarding as the other's, marched past Thistlewood with half a dozen soldierly-looking strides, and bringing himself to an abrupt halt made a disdainful back at him. Again Thistlewood advanced, but this time he drew himself up a trifle behind his rival, and laid a finger on his shoulder.

'Well?' said Protheroe, without turning his head.

'I shall want a word with thee by and by, my lad,' Thistlewood said quietly.

'Have it now,' replied Lane, settling his shoulders jauntily.

'There's time in plenty afore us,' Thistlewood answered, regarding him with supreme disfavour.

The younger man looked straight before him with an exasperating aspect of indifference.

'When you like,' he said.

'Very well,' replied Thistlewood. 'In five minutes' time from now.'

'Church time,' said Lane smilingly, surveying the landscape.

'Beest that keen set on the sermon?' John inquired.

'Don't know that I am,' replied the enemy, rising a little on his toes, and then settling his shoulders anew.

'Five minutes' time from now.'

The jaunty airs and scornful disregard began to warm Thistlewood's blood a little.

'Canst look a man i' the face when thee talk'st to him?' he asked.

'Yes, bless your heart and soul alive!' cried Lane, swaggering round and beaming on him.

For half a minute they looked at each other, the one angry, resolute, and lowering, with head bent a little forward, his glance directed upward past his down-drawn brows, the other smiling with seeming sweetness and gaiety.

Thistlewood seemed to restrain himself with something of an effort.

'We'll talk together by and by,' he said, and turning, deliberately walked back into the churchyard.

For a few seconds Lane stood glorying, but on a sudden it occurred to him that his rival was behaving

in a more dignified manner than himself, and this was a reflection not to be endured without instant action. So he marched back into the churchyard also, and left John in the foreground. When Bertha appeared her elder lover paid his respects first, and Lane came up afterwards, looking, as she remembered later on, prodigiously gloomy and resolved.

The bell had been silent for a minute, and the curate's voice had begun to drone within the building. The rivals were alone, and nobody was within sight or earshot.

'Shall we walk a pace or two, Mr. Protheroe?' asked John.

Mr. Protheroe, without speaking, sauntered out at the gate, vaulted a stile opposite, and paused in a field pathway. Thistlewood followed, throwing first one leg and then the other over the rail with a sort of laboured deliberation.

'Now,' said Lane.

'We'll walk on a little bit,' answered Thistlewood, and there was silence for a minute or two as they strode along the grass. Then when they had reached the shelter of a little copse which hid them from the whole landscape on the church side, John said, 'Now,' in turn, and the two halted. Each was paler than common by this time, and Lane's eyes sparkled, whilst the other's burned steady with resentment.

'Twixt man and man as is willing to come to understand one another, Mr. Protheroe,' said Thistle-

wood, 'a very few words suffices. I'll have thee nor no man else poaching on my manor.'

'Well,' Lane answered, 'if ever I should arrive at owning a manor, I'd say the same. But I'd be sure of my title-deeds afore I took to warning other men off the ground.'

'Let's talk plain English,' said John, apparently quite untouched by this rejoinder.

'With all my heart,' said his rival, 'the plainer the better.'

'I find you very much i' my way,' Thistlewood began ponderously.

'I don't find you a little bit in mine,' Lane answered.

'You talk to sting,' said Thistlewood, with dull dignity. 'I want to talk so as to be understood. I find you very much i' my way, as I was saying, and I won't have you theer.'

'No?'

'No!'

'And how do you mean to set about getting rid of me?'

'I've set about harder jobs than that i' *my* time, lad.'

'Like enough. But how do you mean to set about this one?'

'All in good time,' said Thistlewood. 'Sha'st find out speedily.'

'Show me now,' said Lane.

A breach of the peace seemed imminent, but,

'Afore thee and me comes to that,' the elder answered, 'I want thee to have fair warnin'. It's unbecomin' in a man to brawl over the maid he wants to marry—— I'm a man as never changed nor halted nor turned aside from anything he set his mind upon. I've been courtin' Miss Fellowes now this three year. It stands to reason as a frivolish young chap like you can mek no count of how a man feels, or of what a man 'ud do in a like case.'

'That stands to reason, does it?'

'It stands to reason,' answered Thistlewood.

'I suppose it stands to reason likewise that I am to stand to one side, and leave the road clear after this?'

'It'd be the wisest thing you ever did.'

'Well, now, Thistlewood, you'll please understand that, for all so frivolous as I may be, I'm hardly that easy to be swayed. As for who has a right on the ground, it's a mere piece of impudence to talk about it. That's neither for me nor you to choose. If ever I get straight "No" I'll go, but I'll have it before I go, for that's a man's bounden duty to himself.'

'Understand thyself as bein' warned away,' said Thistlewood.

'Understand thy warning as being laughed at,' answered Lane. 'You talk plain English? So will I. You've got the wrong pig by the ear. You're no better than a dog in the manger. You've always

been spoken of up till now as a man to play fair, but now it strikes me you play very far from fair, and cut a poor figure. As for threats—a man who won't take a hiding when it's offered to him—what's *he* good for, I should like to know ?'

Here, as elsewhere, Mr. Protheroe was true to nature, and spoke with striking emphasis. He was quite red-hot with scorn at the imaginary fellow who would not take the proffered hiding, though a minute earlier, when he had told Thistlewood that he had the wrong pig by the ear, his manner had been marked by a cold and lofty superiority.

'Beest warned!' said Thistlewood, 'that's enough.'

'Not half enough, nor yet a quarter,' cried Lane, with a bellicose air, not unmingled with swagger. 'I've taught my hands to take care of my head, sir, and they'll be ready to do it whenever the time occurs. But it always seemed a bit ridiculous to me to talk about fighting beforehand. When the fight's over there *is* something to talk about.'

'You seem to be in a hurry for that there hiding,' said Thistlewood.

'Hurry's no word for it,' the younger man responded, with cheerful alacrity.

'Very well,' said the elder, taking off his hat and bestowing it carefully upon the grass, 'sha'st have it.'

Lane, for his part, threw down his hat, flourished his coat off, dropped it behind him, rolled up his sleeves, and waited whilst Thistlewood made his pre-

parations more slowly. Protheroe set that mellow whistle of his to work on 'The British Grenadiers,' and his enemy smiled grimly to think how soon he would silence the music.

Half a minute later they were standing foot to foot and eye to eye, the music already silenced. It would have been difficult from the mere aspect of the men to say on which side the advantage lay. In height and reach they were nearly equal, and, if Thistlewood's weight and muscle were in his favour, Protheroe was as active as a cat.

And here might have been recorded a bit of history to warm the blood of such as love and remember the old-fashioned manhood of England. We are grown too refined and civilised nowadays for the old rude arbitrament, and so fair play has ceased to be the Englishman's motto in fighting, and the English rustic shoots and stabs like the rustic of other lands. All fighting is foolish, more or less, but we had the manliest, friendliest, most honourable, and least harmful way of doing it amongst all the sons of men, and so our Legislature killed out the 'noble art' from amongst us, and brought us to the general ugly level.

It was in the reign of the Tipton Slasher—which, as people learned in the history of manners will remember, was a longish time ago—when these two Britons stood up to arrange their differences after the fashion then in vogue. There was nobody to see fair play, and so they saw it for themselves, as all fighting

Englishmen did when there was a code of honour to go by. It was not a mere affair of hammer and tongs, but very fair scientific fighting, the science vivified by enjoyment, and full of energy, but never forgotten for a second. The pleasure was keen on both sides, for from the beginning of their knowledge of each other these two had been in antagonism, and at the last it was a real treat to let all go and have at it.

‘I was always a bit frivolous, as you said just now, Mr. Thistlewood,’ Lane remarked in the first enforced pause of the combat, ‘but I’d like you to bear me witness that I stick to what I’m at while I’m at it.’

This address was delivered pantingly, whilst the speaker lay flat upon his back on the grass, with his arms thrown out crosswise. Thistlewood disdained response, and sat with one great shoulder propped against a dwarf oak, breathing fast and hard. When this sign of distress had a little abated, he arose, and said ‘Time’ as if he had been a mere cornerman in the affair, and rather bored by it than otherwise. Lane rolled over on to his face, rose to his hands and knees, smiled at his adversary for a little while, as if to give him an appetite for the business in hand, and then got to his feet and made ready.

Now for a man to hold his own at this particular form of fighting against an equal adversary for a bare five minutes argues five grand things for

him, and these are chastity, temperance, hardihood, strength, and courage. It speaks well for these admirable qualities in both of them that Messrs. Thistlewood and Protheroe made a good hour of it. The advantages and disadvantages had been so equally distributed that by this time they were pretty nearly harmless to each other, but each was sustained by the hope of victory, and each would have died, and, for the matter of that, would have gone on dying, rather than yield the precious palm to the other.

Now the clergyman who ministered to the spiritual wants of Beacon Hargate was never disposed to gorge his flock with too much doctrine at a time, and on this Sabbath had an invitation to luncheon at a great house some four or five miles away, and so treated his parishioners—to the scandal of some and the joy of others—to the shortest discourse they had ever heard from the pulpit. By this mischance it happened that the combatants were discovered by a silent male advance-guard of the home-returning congregation, who ran back—his footsteps soundless on the grass—to spread the splendid news. Sunday or week-day there was no more welcome break in the monotony of life in Beacon Hargate than that afforded by a fight. The time being church-time, and the combatants men of respectable position, lent piquancy to the event, of course, as who shall say me nay? The churchgoers, two or three farmers, Mr. Drake, the manager of Lord Barfield's estates at Heydon Hey, and a handful of

labourers came up, at first stealthily, and then more boldly, and looked on at the finish.

It was plain that the fight had been severe, but it was equally plain that the best of it was over; and when Farmer Fellowes interposed as *amicus curiæ*, nobody but the two most concerned had any especial resentment against him.

Even for them Farmer Fellowes had a crumb of comfort.

‘Finish it another time, lads,’ he said. ‘Where’s the good o’ goin’ on wi’ it i’ this manner? Why a child might homber the pair on you. Get fresh an’ have another turn to-morrow, if the ’casion’s worth it.’

So the fight was left undecided after all, and the adversaries were led off to the neighbouring brook, where they made themselves as respectable to look at as they could before they took their several ways. They were unsightly for a week or two, and were close watched by their women folk lest they should renew the strife.

Beacon Hargate knew perfectly well the reason of the battle, and Bertha was mightily disdainful and indignant over both her lovers, who, to her fancy, had disgraced themselves and her. Six days after the fight John Thistlewood’s business for once in a way, as well as his inclination, took him to Fellowes’s farm, and there Bertha (who for very shame had not quitted the house since Sunday) first saw the result of the fray. The stalwart farmer’s face was discoloured, and,

in places, still swollen. She saw the wicked handiwork of Lane Protheroe, and vowed within herself that she would see that dreadful young man no more. She could have cried for pity of poor Mr. Thistlewood, who had been thus shamefully treated for the crime of being faithful in love.

If John had known it, he had at this instant the best chance of being taken as Bertha's husband he had ever had, or was like to find. But he was shame-faced about the matter, as heroes not uncommonly are with regard to their achievements, and was disposed to think himself at an even unusual disadvantage.

Bertha stifled in her heart whatever tender sentiments Protheroe had inspired, and was prepared to pass him whenever she might meet him with such a manner as should indicate her new opinion of him beyond chance of mistake. Thistlewood had appeared on the Saturday, and on the Monday the fates threw her younger lover in her way. She discerned him from a distance, herself unseen. His figure dipped down into the hollow, and she could not see him again until they met at some turning or other of the tortuous lane. If pride had not forbidden it she could have turned to fly homewards, but she hardened her heart and went on until his footsteps sounded clearly on the stony road.

Then he turned the corner, and she lifted one glance of superb disdain which melted suddenly under a terror-stricken pity. For this hero was worse battered

than Number One had been, and one of those eyes, which had used to be so expressive and eloquent, was decorated by a shade.

‘Oh, Lane!’ cried the girl, clasping her hands, and turning white with pity.

‘Did I frighten you, my dear?’ said Lane. ‘It’s nothing. It’ll all be right in a day or two.’

‘I hope so,’ she answered, recovering herself, and seizing on principle before it made away for ever. ‘I wish you to know that I think you have behaved very disgracefully, and I hope you will never speak to me again.’

‘Why,’ said Lane, ‘that’s hard measure, Bertha; and as for behaving disgracefully—if a man threatens to punch your head you must give him the chance to punch it. That’s man’s law, anyhow, whether it’s woman’s or not.’

‘I am sure Mr. Thistlewood is no quarreller,’ said Bertha, with great dignity and severity of demeanour. ‘It takes no great penetration to guess who began it.’

‘There’s one thing I will say for him,’ returned Lane; ‘he’s a truth-telling fellow, to the best of my belief. Ask him who began it. He’ll tell you. Not that I should take any particular blame or shame for having begun it myself, but since that’s how you look at it, dear—why, I should like you to be satisfied.’

‘Do you think, Mr. Protheroe,’ demanded Bertha, ‘that it’s the way to win a girl’s esteem to brawl about her in public on a Sunday?’

‘That’s what Thistlewood said,’ Lane answered, with cunning simplicity. “‘It’s unbecoming,” said he, “in a man to brawl over the maid he wants to marry.”’

‘I was certain he would say so, and think so,’ returned Bertha, with a sinking of the heart. She wanted grounds for pardoning Lane.

‘Well,’ said Lane, with a retrospective air, ‘we talked for a while, and he was good enough to promise me a hiding if I didn’t keep out of his way—meaning, of course, at your father’s house. I didn’t seem to take it quite so meekly as he thought I ought to, and by and by says he, “You seem to be in a hurry for that hiding.” So I just made answer that hurry was no word for it, and then, the pair of us being keen set, we got to it. The day was an accident, and I daresay a piece of forgetfulness on both our sides. But you see, my dear, a man’s just as bound to guard his self-respect on a Sunday as on a week-day.’

‘I have been very deeply wounded,’ said Bertha. ‘I wished to respect you both, and now I can respect neither of you. Good-morning, Mr. Protheroe.’

Mr. Protheroe stood discomfited, and looked mournfully after her as she walked away. When she had disappeared round the bend of the road he sat down upon the bank and plucked grasses with mechanical fingers, turning the thing up and down in his mind for an hour or thereabouts. Suddenly he jumped to his feet and resumed his walk, smiling with head erect,

and that mellow whistle of his rose on the air with jollity in every note of it, for it had broken upon his mind like sunshine to remember her first exclamation on seeing him. He was a young man who was in the habit of making sure of things, and he had never in his life been surer of anything than he felt about this. The name, the tone, the look, meant more than a common interest in him. She had called him 'Lane' for the first time in his life. She had clasped her hands, and turned pale at the sight of him. All this meant victory for his dearest hopes, and so he leapt to his feet, and marched off whistling like the thristle.

III

BERTHA pursued her way along the tortuous bridle-path with thoughts which resembled the way she travelled. Like the road, her fancy seemed to turn back upon itself pretty often and yet in the main it held in the same direction. Of course, fighting was a brutal business to a girl's way of thinking, but then, when she came really to think of it; men were strange creatures altogether, half terribly glorious and half contemptible. Lane had endured all these injuries simply and merely because he loved her! She could have no conception of the possibilities of masculine joy in a fight for its own sake, or of the masculine sense of honour which compelled the meeting of a challenge half-way. Of course it was mightily unpleasant to be talked about, as the heroine of such a business. The village tongues had been busy, and would never altogether stop wagging for the remainder of her lifetime.

The influence of long years of respect for Thistlewood seemed to turn her mental steps backward now and then. That so quiet and retired a man, and so

little given to proclaiming himself should have made the most sacred wishes of his heart a matter of common gossip was understandable only on one hypothesis. His love and his despair carried him out of himself. That, of course, was a daring thing for any girl to think, but then Bertha was bound to find reasons.

Mainly, her mind was occupied in the reconstruction of her previous belief about Lane Protheroe. He also, it would seem, had manly qualities in him—could stand up to be beaten in the cause of the woman he loved. The blows hurt her so, in the mere fancy of them, that she more than once put up her hands to her face to guard it. By the time she had accomplished her errand, and was on the way back to her father's farmhouse, she was all tenderness and forgiveness and admiration for the newly-revealed Lane, but then, as the fates would have it, just as she began to think of her cruelty to him, and of the terribly low spirits into which she must have thrown him, the familiar jocund whistle broke upon her ears, and when she stood still in a dreary amaze at this, she could hear the steps of the lover, who ought to have been altogether love-lorn, marching along in something very like a dance in time to his own music. What was one to think of such a man? She was back in a moment to her old opinion of him. No rooted feeling in him—no solidity—nothing to be sure of!

She made haste home, and there shut herself in her own room and cried. Her mother walked upstairs,

and finding the girl thus mournfully engaged, sat down tranquilly beside her and produced her knitting. The click of the needles had an effect of commonplace which helped to restore Bertha to her self-possession, and in a little time her tears ceased, and moving to the window she stood there looking out upon the landscape. The monotonous click of the needles ceased, and she knew that her mother had laid down her work in her lap and was regarding her. She turned, with a ghost of a smile.

‘You’re thinkin’, no doubt, as you’re full o’ trouble, my wench,’ began the mother, ‘and it’s no manner o’ use in talkin’ to young folks to try an’ mek out as a thing as pains don’t hurt. But if you can only bring ’em t’ understand as it won’t hurt much by and by, you’ve done summat for ’em, may be. What’s the trouble, wench? Come an’ tell thy mother.’

‘It’s all over now, mother,’ said Bertha.

‘Not it,’ returned Mrs. Fellowes, ‘nor won’t be yet a while. Beesn’t one as cries for nothing, like most gells. I was niver o’ that kind myself.’

Bertha would not, perhaps could not, make a confidante even of her mother in this matter, but Mrs. Fellowes had a remarkable faculty for striking human averages, and she got near the truth in her guesses.

‘There’s one thing fixed and sure, my dear,’ she said, ‘and that is as follows: ayther you must find a mind to wed one of ’em, or you must pluck up a spirit and tell ’em you’ll wed nayther.’

'I have told Mr. Thistlewood that I can never marry him,' said Bertha.

'And what about Lane?' her mother asked her.

'I can never marry him either,' the girl answered steadily. She had her voice under perfect control, but her averted face and the very lines of her figure enlightened the shrewd old mother.

'Hast told him so?' she asked.

'I have told him,' Bertha answered, 'never to speak to me again.'

'Hoity, toity, deary me!' cried the old woman.

'And what says he to that?'

'He didn't greatly seem to care,' said Bertha, with a beautifully assumed air of indifference.

'Maybe he didn't set such store by what you told him as to tek it in earnest?'

'Oh,' said the girl, languidly and indifferently, 'he knew I meant it.'

'And didn't seem to care? My dear, you're talkin' of Lane Protheroe!'

'He cared for a minute, perhaps,' Bertha said, her assumed indifference and languor tinged with bitterness by this time. 'He cared for a minute, perhaps; just as he does about everything. I heard him whistling an hour afterwards.'

The disguise was excellent, and might have deceived a woman who had known her less intimately and watched her less closely, but it was transparent to the mother.

'That's the trouble, is it?' said Mrs. Fellowes, gravely betaking herself once more to her knitting. Bertha had been crying already, and had hard work to restrain herself. 'Look here, my darlin',' the mother said, with unwonted tenderness of tone and manner, 'if you can't read your own mind, you must let a old experienced woman read it for you. The lad's as the Lord made him. What we see in any o' the men to mek a fuss about, the Lord in His mercy only knows; but, to my mind, Lane's the pick o' ten thousand. He's alive, and that's more than *can* be said of many on 'em. He's a clever lad, he's well to look at, and he's well-to-do.'

'Mother,' cried the girl, almost passionately, her own pain wrung her so, 'he has no heart. He cares for a thing one minute, and doesn't care for it the next. He pretends—no, he doesn't pretend—but he thinks he cares, and while he thinks it I suppose he does care. But out of sight is out of mind with him.'

'Makest most o' thine own troubles, like the rest on us,' said Mrs. Fellowes philosophically. But, in a moment, philosophy made way for motherly kindness, and, rising from her seat, she bestowed her knitting in a roomy pocket and put her arms about her daughter's waist. 'Art fond of the lad all the same,' she said. 'Ah, my dear, there's nothin' likely to be sorer than the natur as picks flies in the things it's fond on. There's a deal o' laughin' at them as thinks all their

geese is swans, but they're better off in the long run than them as teks all their swans to be geese.'

Bertha said nothing, but she trembled a little under the caress, and her mother, observing this, released her, went back to her chair, and once more drew forth her knitting.

'I reckon,' she said, after a pause, 'as John Thistlewood's had the spoiling of thee. Thee'st got to think so much o' them bulldog ways of his'n, that nothin' less 'll be of use to any man as comes a-courtin'.'

'Don't talk about it any more, mother,' said Bertha, with an air of weary want of interest. 'I have said good-bye to both of them.'

And there the interview ended.

IV

It became evident that Bertha was likely to have a troublesome time before her. First of all came John Thistlewood, dogged and resolute as ever, propping himself against the chimney-piece, flogging his gaitered legs with the switch he carried, and demanding Ay or No before his time. Bertha determined to treat him with some spirit.

‘You don’t need me to tell you that I respect you very highly, Mr. Thistlewood. But you oughtn’t to need me to answer your question any more. I shall be obliged if you will be so good as not to ask it again.’

‘I shall ask it,’ said the dogged John, ‘till it comes to be answered one way or another.’

‘It has been answered almost often enough to my way of thinking,’ said Bertha.

She had never been tart with Thistlewood until that moment, but he manifested no surprise or emotion of any kind.

‘It never has been answered, an’ never will be till I see thee married, whether to me or another. When

that day come to pass you've heard the last of my question.'

Thus the dogged John ; and he being disposed of for a while, came Lane. To him the persecuted maid was a little less severe than she had been, but she was inexorable.

'If you like to come here as a friend, Mr. Protheroe, in a few months' time, I daresay we shall all be very glad to see you.'

'Well,' said Lane, with fine irrelevance, 'as an enemy this is a house I shall never make a call at. But look at the matter for a minute, my darling——'

'You must not talk to me like that, Mr. Protheroe,' Bertha said, with great coldness.

'Like what, my dear?' asked the ingenious Lane.

'Like that, Mr. Protheroe,' replied Bertha.

'I think it so often, that I'm afraid I'm bound to say it sometimes ; but, if it offends, I hope you'll forgive me. You know you *are* my darling, don't you ? You know there isn't a queen in the world I'd even with you if every hair of her head was hung with Koh-i-noors. "Out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh," the Wise Man says. So, if I do let slip "my dear" or "my darling" now and then, you'll know it's accident, and you won't take offence at it—will you ?'

This was agile but unsatisfactory.

'Please understand me, Mr. Protheroe,' said Bertha,

with rural dignity ; ' you must not come here again until you can come merely as a friend.'

' Bertha ! You can't mean it ! What have I done ? What has changed you ?'

' Mr Protheroe !'—the rural dignity made an insulted goddess of her to Lane's fancy—' what right have you to say that I have changed ?'

' Why, Bertha,' he said, meekly and strickenly, ' wasn't I to come in six months' time and get an answer ?'

' Will you oblige me by coming for your answer in six months' time,' answered Bertha. ' Good-afternoon, Mr. Protheroe.'

Bertha thought herself more cruel to herself than to him. She knew how infinitely more cruel she was to Thistlewood, but that was not a thing to be avoided. She and he alike must suffer—she in giving pain and he in bearing it. Bertha's heart ached over Lane, and the bitterness of it was to know that in a week or two the butterfly nature would have ceased to care. He was hotly in love to-day, no doubt, but he would be out of love to-morrow, may be, and in a month or two hotly in love again elsewhere.

On the Sunday following these interviews dogged John was at church, and the butterfly Protheroe also. Thistlewood looked as he always looked, rudely healthy, and a masterpiece of masterfulness and sullen perseverance and resolve. Lane was pallid and miserable, and Bertha remarking him was compelled to fall back on

the bitter consolation of her former thoughts. He would take it heavily for a day or two, and would then forget all about it. He cast a glance or two in Bertha's direction, and his eyes were full of melancholy appeal. But for her certainty he would have moved her, for she was predisposed to be moved, and she had hardly expected to have had so much effect upon him. He walked dejectedly out of church at the close of the service, and Thistlewood half by accident shouldered him. He took it meekly, and made no sign.

Two or three days later came a piece of news of the sort Bertha had expected. Mr. Protheroe was heard of as having made one of a picnic party in the neighbourhood of Heydon Hey, and of this party he was said to have been the life and soul. He was reported to have paid marked attentions to Miss Badger, daughter of a wealthy cheesemonger in Castle Barfield High Street. The young lady was rumoured to be possessed of great personal attractions, and, a pretty penny, present and prospective.

Foreseen as it was, the news stung a little when it came. Even the most butterfly-like of lovers might have waited a little longer!

And yet next Sunday, when Bertha went to church, quite resolved not to waste so much as a glance upon him, he looked paler and more dejected than he had done a week ago. She looked in spite of herself—she must needs look at him,—and it was evident that as yet the cheesemonger's daughter had found no way to

cheer him. Thistlewood never altered. Those strong self-contained natures have a power upon themselves as they have on other people. He could last for years in solid and complete devotion—he could apparently wait for ever—and could yet hide from the eyes of the outer world the steady fires which burned within him. That butterfly nature of poor Lane's forced Thistlewood's virtues into prominence by contrast, and the girl had them almost constantly in her thoughts. There was nothing—she told herself remorsefully—that this typical piece of solidity and devotion would not do for her. Her faith in his attachment transcended bounds, and she felt it to be a thousand pities that she could not love him.

It does not happen in every life-history that this sort of profound feeling finds an opportunity of proof, but in the story of the lives of John Thistlewood and Lane Protheroe this thing came to pass in such wise that he who ran might read the natures of the men, and know them once for all.

Bulldog John had gone on doggedly courting, and butterfly Lane had taken to seeing too much convivial company in Heydon Hey and Castle Barfield, and there was a fear in Bertha's mind that if her influence had not been permanent, it had at least started the young man on a track likely to prove disastrous. These emotional people, quick to feel and quick to forget, are hardly to be dealt with without danger.

Lane's dissipations must have been graver than

even rumour gave them discredit for being. His midnight junketings had made a ghost of him, and to see him at any moment when he thought himself unobserved was to wonder how long such a mournful and broken young gentleman could possibly rouse himself to fill the part of King even in a rustic Bohemia.

Autumn was on the land. The corn-shocks were standing in the stubbled fields, and the night air was full of gossamer, which twined itself about the faces of all wayfarers. Rural work had gone on merrily all day, and when the sun set silence fell, and darkness like a warm shroud. Lights flickered a while in the village and the farmhouse, and then went out one by one. The moon stole over the Beacon Hill, and looked mildly across the valley.

There was not a breath of air stirring, and not a sound upon the night except for the placid and continual gurgle of the stream which had no voice at all by day. Yes. One other sound there was, a sound as of some one moving uneasily in a creaking chair. Creak, creak, creak. It grew momentarily. Crackle, crackle, crackle. Still it grew. A tongue like the tongue of a snake—so light and fine and swift was it—flashed out of a crevice, and flew back again, flashed out again, and again withdrew. Then the snake's body flashed out after it, and melted on the moonlit air. Another, and another, and another. Then a low roaring noise, and all the windows of the

basement shone out ruby-coloured, and the moon looked bleared by contrast.

A distant voice from the village called out 'Fire!' There was a crash of opening windows, a tumult of clapping doors, a storm of barking dogs, excited voices, hurrying feet.

Old and young, male and female, robed anyhow, ran hard towards the farmhouse, and poured in a thunderous stream across the echoing wooden bridge which spanned the river. The farmhouse was a tower of flame, fantastic turrets springing here and there. The dry timbers, centuries old, made the best of food for fire, and the place flamed like a tar-barrel. The screams of doomed horses came with hideous uproar from the stables in the rear.

The farmer and his wife, the men servants and the maid servants, were in the garden, all pale with fear and helpless; but the mother tore the night with calling on her daughter's name.

Bulldog John and his rival came last of all, though they ran like hounds, and they crossed the bridge and dashed through the crowd together.

'Oh, John,' cried the agonised mother, clutching at him as though he were an ark of safety. 'You'll save her—won't you? God help her! You'll save her—won't you, John?'

One figure, black as night against the fierce glow of the flame, dashed across the space between the crowd and the farmhouse. It was hardly seen,

and scarce believed in by those who thought they saw.

‘John,’ cried the wretched mother, ‘you’ll save her! You as loved her so! You’ll save her!’

There is no manhood in the world that needs to be ashamed to hang back from an enterprise so hopeless and so terrible. The woman shrieked and prayed—the man stood motionless with white face and staring eyes.

Then came one wild cry from half a dozen throats at once, and next upleapt a roar that struck the noise of the fire out of being for an instant. For the figure, black against the fiery glow, was back again, by some such stupendous chance, or heaven-wrought miracle, as only desperate valour ever wins. A figure huddled in a blanket lay in his arms, and as he came racing towards the crowd they fell together. They were lifted and borne out of the circle of fierce heat and flying sparks.

The house was left to burn, and every thought was centred on the rescuer and the rescued. The fresh air roused Bertha from her swoon, and at the first opening of her eyes and the first words she spoke the mother went as mad with joy as she had been with terror.

‘Alive!—alive! Safe!—safe! And oh, my God! my Christian friends, it was the Butterfly as did it!’

But it was a full month later when Lane Protheroe asked his first question,

‘Where’s Bertha?’

‘Hush! my dear, dear darlin’,’ said Mrs. Fellowes, her eyes brimful of tears. ‘Lie quiet, there’s a dear.’

‘Where’s Bertha?’

‘Safe and well, love; safe and well.’

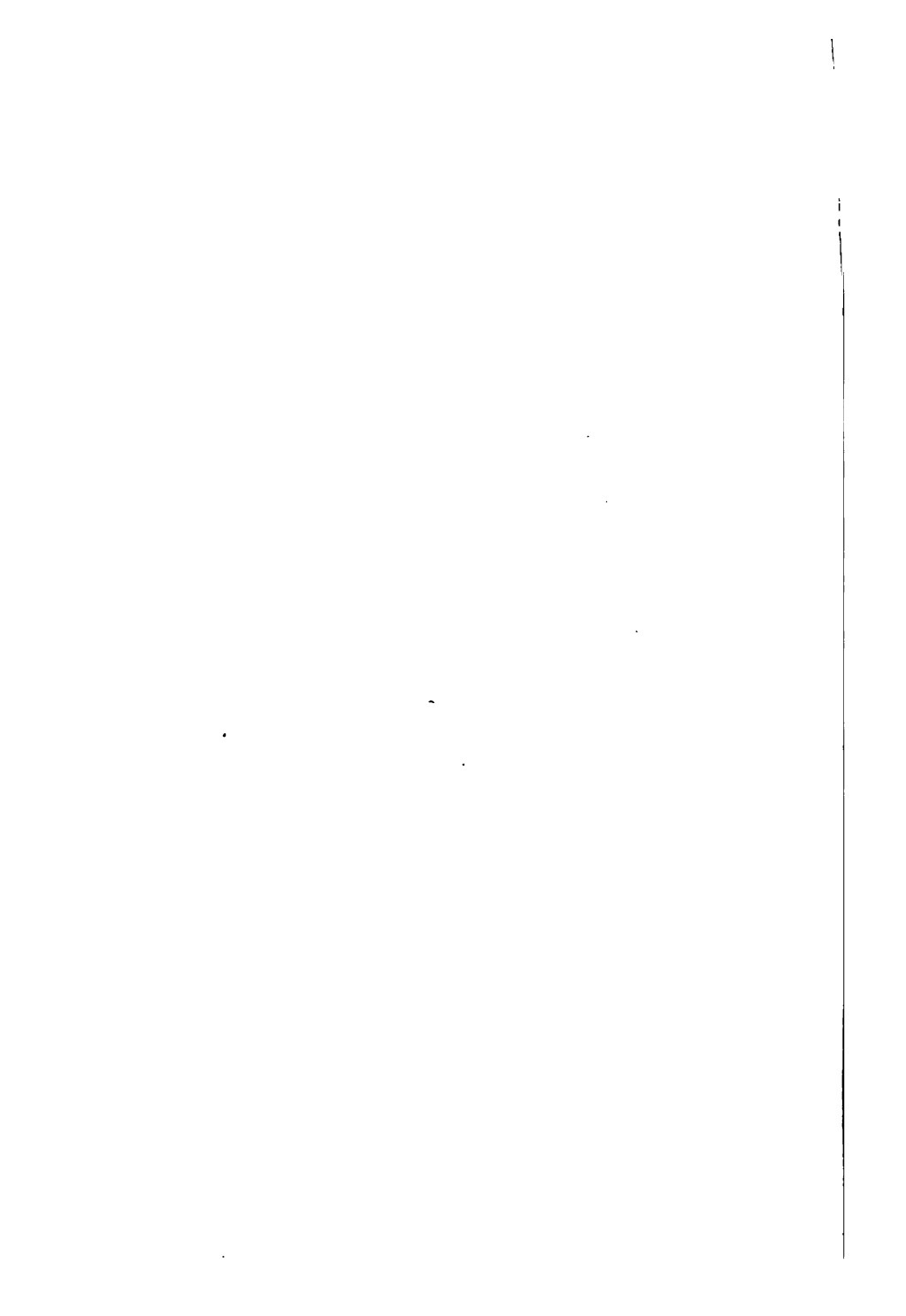
‘I’m thirsty,’ said the Butterfly.

He was supplied with a cooling drink, and fell to sleep smiling, with unchanged posture. In half a dozen hours he woke again

‘Where’s Bertha?’

‘Here, dearest.’

And we leave them hand in hand, yearning on each other through their blissful tears.



IV

JULIA AND HER ROMEO:

A CHRONICLE OF CASTLE BARFIELD

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I

IN the year eighteen hundred and twenty, and for many years before and after, Abel Reddy farmed his own land at Perry Hall End, on the western boundaries of Castle Barfield. He lived at Perry Hall, a ripe-coloured old tenement of Elizabethan design, which crowned a gentle eminence and looked out picturesquely on all sides from amongst its neighbouring trees. It had a sturdier aspect in its age than it could have worn when younger, for its strength had the sign-manual of time upon it, and even its hoary lichens looked as much like a prophecy as a record.

A mile away, but also within the boundaries of Castle Barfield parish, there stood another house upon another eminence: a house of older date than Perry Hall, though of less pleasing and picturesque an air. The long low building was of a darkish stone, and had been altered and added to so often that it had at

last arrived at a complex ugliness which was not altogether displeasing. The materials for its structure had all been drawn at different periods from the same stone quarry, and the chequered look of new bits and old bits had a hint of the chess-board. Here Samson Mountain dwelt on his own land in the midst of his own people.

The Mountain Farm, as it was called, and had been called time out of mind, was separated from the Perry Hall Farm by a very shallow and narrow brook. The two houses were built as far apart from each other as they could be, whilst remaining in their own boundaries, as if the builder of the later one had determined to set as great a distance as he could between his neighbour and himself. And as a matter of fact the Reddys and the Mountains were a sort of Capulets and Montagues, and had hated each other for generations. Samson and Abel kept up the ancient grudge in all its ancient force. They were of the same age within a week or two, had studied at the same school, and had fought there; had at one time courted the same girl, had sat within sight of each other Sunday after Sunday and year after year in the parish church, had each buried father and mother in the parish churchyard, and in the mind of each the thought of the other rankled like a sore.

The manner of their surrendering their common courtship was characteristic of their common hatred. Somewhere about the beginning of this century a

certain Miss Jenny Rusker, of Castle Barfield, was surrounded by quite a swarm of lovers. She was pretty, she was well-to-do, for her time and station, she was accomplished—playing the harp (execrably), working samplers in silk and wool with great diligence and exactitude, and having read a prodigious number of plays, poems, and romances. What this lady's heart forged that her mouth did vent, but no pretty young woman ever looked or sounded foolish to the eyes or ears of her lovers. Mountain and Reddy were among her solicitors. She liked them both, and had not quite made up her mind as to which, if either of them, she would choose, when suddenly the knowledge of the other's occasional presence in her sitting-room made the house odious to each, and they surrendered the chase almost at the same hour. Miss Jenny satisfied herself with a cousin of her own, married without changing her name, had children, was passably happy, as the world goes, and lived to be a profoundly sentimental but inveterate widow. Mountain and Reddy married girls they would not otherwise have chosen, and were passably happy also, except when the sore of ancient hatred was inflamed by a chance meeting on the corn exchange or an accidental passage of the eyes at church. They had no better authority for hating each other than that their fathers had hated each other before them. The fathers had the authority of the grandfathers, and they, that of the great-grandfathers.

It was Saturday afternoon. There was a bleak frost abroad, and even the waters of the brook which divided the two farms were hard frozen. The sun hung low in the western sky, lustreless as a wafer, but ruddy. The fields were powdered with thin snow, and the earth was black by contrast with it. Now and then a shot sounded far away, but clear and sharp, from where the guests of my lord of Barfield were killing time in the warren.

A labouring man, smock-frocked, billy-cocked, gaitered, and hob-nailed, was clamping down the frozen lane, the earth ringing like iron under iron as he walked. By his side was a fair-haired lad of nine or ten years of age, a boy of frank and engaging countenance, carefully and even daintily dressed, and holding up his head as if he were a lord of the soil and knew it. The boy and the labourer were talking, and on the frosty silence of the fields the clear treble of the boy's speech rang out clearly and carried far. A burly man, with a surly red face, who had stooped to button a gaiter, in a meadow just beyond the brook, and had laid down his gun beside him the while, heard both voice and words whilst the speaker was a hundred yards away.

‘But don't you think it's very wicked, Ichabod?’

The labourer's voice only reached the listener in the meadow. He spoke with the Barfield drawl, and his features, which were stiffened by the frozen wind, were twisted into a look of habitual waggery.

'Well,' said he, in answer to his young companion, 'maybe, Master Richard, it might be wicked, but it's main like natur.'

'I shan't hate Joe Mountain when I'm a man,' said the boy.

The surly man in the field, hearing these words, looked on a sudden surlier still, and throwing up his head with a listening air, and holding his ankle with both hands, crouched and craned his neck to listen.

'May'st have to change thy mind, Master Richard,' said the labourer.

'Why should I change my mind, Ichabod?' asked the boy, looking up at him.

'Why?' answered Ichabod, 'thee'lt niver have it said as thee wast afraid of any o' the Mountain lot.'

'I'm not afraid of him,' piped the engaging young cockerel. 'We had a fight in the coppice last holidays, and I beat him. The squire caught us, and we were going to stop, but he made us go on, and he saw fair. Then he made us shake hands after. Joe Mountain wouldn't say he'd had enough, but the squire threw up the sponge for him. And he gave us two half-crowns apiece, and said we were both good plucked uns.'

'Ah!' said Ichabod, with warmth, 'he's the right sort is the squire. And there's no sort or kind o' sport as comes amiss to him. A gentleman after my own heart.'

'He made us shake hands and promise we'd be

friends,' said Master Richard, 'and we're going to be.'

'Make him turn the brook back first, Master Richard,' said Ichabod. The two were almost at the bridge by this time, and the listener could hear distinctly.

'Turn the brook back?' the boy asked. 'What do you mean, Ichabod?'

'Ax thy feyther, when thee gettest home,' answered Ichabod. 'He'll tell thee all the rights on it. So fur as I can make out—and it was the talk o' the country i' my grandfeyther's daysen—it amounts to this. Look here!' He and the boy arrested their steps on the bridge, and Ichabod pointed along the frozen track of the brook. 'Seest that hollow ten rods off? It was in the time o' Cromwell. Hast heard tell o' Cromwell, I mek no doubt?'

'Oliver Cromwell,' said Master Richard. 'He was Lord Protector of England. He fought King Charles.'

'Like enough,' said Ichabod. 'In his daysen, many 'ears ago, there was the Reddys here and the Mountains there'—indicating either house in turn by pointing with his thumb—'just as they be now. The Reddy o' that day—he was thy grandfeyther's grandfeyther as like as not—maybe he was *his* grandfeyther for aught as I can tell, for it's a deadly-dreadful heap o' time long past—the Reddy o' that day went to the wars, and fowt for Cromwell. The Mountain o' that time stopped at hum. Up to then they'd niver been

misfriended as fur as I know. That's how it's put about, anyway. But whilst the Reddy was away what's the Mountain do ?'

The boy was looking at Ichabod, and Ichabod, stooping a little to be the more impressive, was looking at him. The surly-faced man with the gun had hitherto been concealed by the hedge beside which he had knelt to fasten his gaiter, and neither of the two had suspected his presence. It was natural, therefore, that both of them should start a little when his voice reached them.

'Well ?' The voice was sour and surly, like the face, and the word was rapped out sharp and clear. Master Richard and Ichabod turned with one accord. 'Well ?' says the surly man, 'what does the Mountain do ?'

Ichabod, less discomfited by the suddenness of the interruption than might have been expected of him, rubbed the frozen base of his nose with a cold forefinger and grinned. Master Richard looked from one to the other with a frank and fearless interest and inquiry which became him very prettily. The surly man bestowed a passing scowl upon him, and turned his angry regard again upon Ichabod.

'Come, now,' he said, 'you backbiting, scandal-mongering old liar! What does the Mountain do? Out with it!'

'Why, nayther thee nor me was there at the time, gaffer,' responded Ichabod, his frosty features still

creased with a grin. 'So nayther thee nor me can talk for certain. Can us?'

'I suppose,' said the surly, burly man, 'you're going to stuff that young monkey with the old lie about the stream being turned?'

Ichabod made no verbal response, but continued to rub his nose with his forefinger, and to grin with an aspect of uncertain humour. The surly man stooped for his gun, threw it over his arm, and stared at Ichabod and his young companion with eyes of hatred and disdain. Then, having somewhat relieved his feelings by a curse or two, he turned his back and went off with a long, heavy, dogged-looking stride, his feet crunching noisily through the frosty grasses.

'It eeat for me to talk about my betters, and them as the Lord has put in authority over us,' said Ichabod, with an expression which belied these words of humility; 'but I put it to thee, Master Richard. Dost think that old Mountain theer looks like a likeable un? No, no. Might as well expect cat an' dog t' agree as Reddy and Mountain.'

This speech was made in a carefully modulated tone, when he and the boy were at some distance from the surly man, who was still visible, three or four fields away.

'What was it about the brook, Ichabod?' asked Master Richard.

'Why,' said Ichabod, 'when that old longaway grandfeyther o' thine was away a-fighting for Crom-

well, 'tis said his neighbour turned the brook so as to bring in four-score acres o' land as ud niver have been his by right. The Reddy o' that day died in the wars, and his widder could mek no head again the Mountain lot; but her taught her son to hate 'em and look down upon 'em, and hated an' looked down upon is the name on 'em from that day to this.'

'But Joe Mountain didn't do it,' said Master Richard.

'No, no,' assented Ichabod. 'But it's i' this way. It's i' the blood. What's bred i' the bone will come out i' the flesh. Afore thee makest friends with young Joe Mountain, Master Richard, thee ax thy feyther.'

Master Richard, lapsing into silence, thought things over.

'Ichabod,' he said at last, 'is a boy *bound* to be bad if he has a bad grandfather?'

'Sure!' said Ichabod, who was not going to be worsted in argument for want of corroborative fact if he could help it.

Master Richard thought things over a little while longer, and returned to the charge.

'Suppose the boy with the bad grandfather had a good grandmother, Ichabod?'

'None of the Mountain lot ever had,' Ichabod replied. There was no item in Ichabod's creed more fixed than this—the Mountains of Mountain Farm were hateful and contemptible. He had imbibed the

belief with his mother's milk and his father's counsel. His grandfather had known it for the one cardinal certainty of nature.

Just as the serving-men of Capulet hated the serving-men of Montague, so the oldest servants of the Mountains hated the older servants of the Reddya. The men made the masters' quarrel their own. There was a feudal spirit in the matter, and half the fights of this outlying district of the parish were provoked by that ancient history of the brook. At this time of day it mattered very little indeed if the history was true or false, for neither proof nor disproof was possible, and the real mischief was done past remedy in any case.

'Are you sure our side fought for Cromwell, Ichabod?' Master Richard asked, after another long and thoughtful silence.

'To be sure,' said Ichabod.

'I don't think it can be true, then, about the brook,' said the boy, 'because Cromwell won, and everybody who was on his side had their own way. Mr. Greenfell teaches history at school, and he says so.'

This was nothing to Ichabod, whose intellect was not constructed for the reception of historical evidences.

'Then ax thy feyther, Master Richard,' he answered; 'he'll tell thee the rights on it.'

The boy walked on pondering, as children of his age will do. The seniors would be surprised pretty often if they could guess how deep and far the young

thoughts go, but, then, the seniors have forgotten their own young days, or were never of a thinking habit. Ichabod clamped along with his mind on beer. The boy thought his own thoughts, and each was indifferent for a while to outer signs and sounds. But suddenly a little girl ran round a corner of the devious lane with a brace of young savages in pursuit. The youthful savages had each an armful of snowballs, and they were pelting the child with more animus than seemed befitting. The very tightness with which the balls were pressed seemed to say that they were bent less on sport than mischief, and they came whooping and dancing round the corner with such rejoicing cruelty as only boys or uncivilised men can feel. The little girl was sobbing, half in distress, and half because of the haste she had made, and Master Richard's juvenile soul burnt within him at the sight like that of a knight-errant. He had read a great deal about knights-errant for the time which had been as yet allowed him for the pursuit of literature, and he was by nature a boy of much fire and gentleness, and a very sympathetic imagination. So the big heart in the small body swelled with pity and grew hot with valour, and, without parley, he smote the foremost boy, who happened to be the bigger of the two, and went headlong into fight with him.

Ichabod followed the young master's lead without knowing, or in the smallest degree caring, why, and tried to seize the smaller savage, who skilfully evaded

him and ran. The little maiden stood and trembled with clasped hands as she looked upon the fray. Ichabod lifted his smock-frock to get his hands into the pockets of his corduroys, and watched with the air of an old artist standing behind a young one.

‘You shouldn’t work at it so much, Master Richard,’ said Ichabod. ‘Tek it easier, and wait for him. That’s it!’

The combat was brief and decisive. The youthful savage carried the heavier metal, but he was slow with it; but suddenly, as if to show that he was not altogether without activity, he turned and ran his hardest. Master Richard, with blue-gray eyes still glistening and hands still clenched in the ardour of battle, turned upon the little girl, who was some two years younger than himself. At the sight of her he turned shy and blushed, and the little girl turned shy and blushed also. She looked at the ground, and then she looked at Richard, and then she looked at the ground again. She was slender and delicate, and had very beautiful soft brown eyes, and the hero of a minute back was abashed before her.

‘You ’m a Mountain, baint you?’ said Ichabod, looking at her with disfavour. She looked shyly at him, but did not answer. ‘What’s your name?’ he asked, stooping towards her.

‘Julia Mountain,’ said the child, in a trembling treble.

‘Ah!’ said Ichabod, ‘I thought so. Come along,

Master Richard, or else we shall niver get hum again afore dark.'

Master Richard walked away with backward glances, shyly directed at the little girl, and the little girl stood with her cheek inclining to her shoulder, and the shoulder drawn up a little, as if to shelter her, and looked after him. This exchange went on until Ichabod and the boy had turned the corner of the lane, when Miss Julia Mountain ran home as fast as her small legs would take her, and Master Richard Reddy, with a vision in his mind, walked alongside his companion.

'You should tek a lesson or two, Master Richard,' said Ichabod, 'and then thee'dst do a heap better. I'm rusty nowadaysen, but I used to love it when I was a young un.'

Master Richard heard nothing of this or of the advice which followed it. He enacted many times over the small adventure of the last five minutes, and at the end of every mental history he traced, the little figure stood in the lane looking shyly at him over one shoulder as he turned the corner.

II

SAMSON MOUNTAIN went home in an ill-temper, and, as was usual with him when in that condition, did everything he had to do with a sulky and noisy emphasis, bursting open doors with unnecessary violence, slamming them with needless force behind him, and clamping heavily from room to room. His wife, who was submissive at the surface, but unconquerable at bottom, knew these signs, and accepted them with outer show of meekness. Samson tramped into the sitting-room, and there found his wife alone. He flung to the door behind him with a crash which would have been startling if it had been unexpected, and fell heavily into a roomy arm-chair by the fire-side. Mrs. Mountain took no notice of this, but went on placidly with her sewing. Samson threw his heavily-booted feet noisily into the fender, and still Mrs. Mountain went on placidly, without so much as looking at him. Stung by this disregard of his obvious ill-humour, Samson made a lunge with his foot at the fire-irons, and brought them down with a bang.

'Lawk a daisy me, Samson,' said his wife mildly.
'What's the matter with the man?'

'Matter!' growled Samson. 'It's a thing as ud get a saint to set his back up. I was down i' the bridge leasowe bare an hour ago, and who should I see but that young imp of a Reddy along wi' that old viper of a Bubb. Thee know'st the chap — that Ichabod.'

'I know him, Samson,' answered Mrs. Mountain.
'He's the most impudent of all of 'em.'

'They stood atop o' the bridge,' pursued Samson, 'and I could hear 'em talkin'. Th' ode rip was tellin' the young un that outworn lie about the brook. I'd got a shot i' the barrel, and I'd more than half a mind to ha' peppered him. I'd ha' done it if it had been worth while.'

'There's no end to their malice and oncharitableness,' said Mrs. Mountain.

'I heard the young imp say he'd fowt our Joe and licked him,' pursued Samson. 'If ever it should come to my knowledge as a truth I'd put Master Joe in such fettle he wouldn't sit down for the best side a month o' Sundays.'

'They'm giving the child such airs,' said his wife, 'it's enough to turn the bread o' life which nourishes.'

Mrs. Mountain had an object in view, and, after her own fashion, had held it long in view in silence. The moment seemed to her propitious, and she determined to approach it.

'Young toad!' said Samson, rising to kick at the coals with his heavy-heeled boot, and plunging backward into the chair again.

'To hear him talk—that fine an' mincin'—you'd think he was one o' my lord's grandchildren or a son o' the squire's at least,' said Mrs. Mountain, approaching her theme with circuitous caution.

'Ay!' Samson assented. 'It's enough to turn your stomach to listen to him.'

'If they go on as they're going,' pursued his wife, circling a little nearer, 'we shall live to see fine things.'

'We shall, indeed,' said Samson, a little mollified to find his wife so unusually warm in the quarrel. 'There's no such a thing as contentment to be found amongst 'em. They settle up to be looked upon as gentlefolks.'

'Yes; fine things we shall live to see, no doubt, if we don't tek care. But thanks be, Samson, it's left in our own hands.'

'What be'st hoverin' at?' demanded Samson, turning upon her with his surly red face.

'Things ain't what they used to be when you an' me was younger,' said Mrs. Mountain. 'The plain ode-fashioned Barfield talk as you and me was bred up to, Samson, ain't good enough nowadays for the very kitchen wenches and the labourers on the farm. Everybody's gettin' that new-fangled!'

'Barfield's good enough for me, and good enough for mine,' said Samson, with sulky wrath.

'It's good enough for we, to be sure, but whether it's good enough for ourn is another churnin' o' butter altogether,' his wife answered. 'It ud seem as if ivery generation talked different from one another. My mother, as was a very well-spoken woman for her day, used to call a cup o' tay a dish o' tay, and that's a thing as only the very ignorant ud stoop to nowadays.' Samson growled, and wallowed discontentedly in the big arm-chair. 'A mother's got her natural feelings, Samson,' Mrs. Mountain continued, with an air and tone of mildest resignation. 'I don't scruple to allow as it'll hurt me if I should live to see our Joe looked down upon by a Reddy.'

'Looked down upon!' cried Samson. 'Where's the Reddy as can count acre for acre agen us, or guinea for guinea?'

'The Reddys is fairly well-to-do, Samson,' said Mrs. Mountain; 'very nigh as well-to-do as we be.'

'Pooh!' returned Samson.

'Oh, but they be, though,' his wife insisted. 'Pretty near. There's nothing so much between us as'd prevent 'em from taking airs with us if they could find out anything to do it for.'

'If they could!' Samson assented. 'Abel Reddy was a bragger and a boaster from his cradle days.'

'That's where it is,' cried Mrs. Mountain, in a tone which implied that Samson had made a discovery of the first importance, and that this discovery unexpectedly confirmed her own argument. 'Let 'em

have the least little bit of a chance for a brag, and where be you ?'

'You might trust 'em to tek advantage on it if they had it,' said her husband.

'Of course you might,' said she, with warmth, 'and that's why I'm fearful on it'

'Fearful o' what ?' demanded Samson.

'O' these here scornful fine-gentleman ways as'll be a thorn in our Joe's side as long as he lives, poor little chap, unless we put him in the way to combat again 'em.'

'Ah !' Samson growled, suddenly enlightened. 'I see now what thee beest drivin' at. Now, you take a straight sayin' from me, Mary Ann. I'll have no fine-mouthed, false-natur'd corruption i' my household. If the Reddys choose to breed up that young imp of theirn to drawl fine and to talk smooth above his station—let 'em.'

'Well, Samson,' returned Mrs. Mountain, who knew by long experience when her husband was malleable, 'you know best, and you're the master here, as it's on'y fit and becomin' an' in the rightful nature o' things as you should be.'

The first effect of the oil of flattery seemed to be to harden him.

'I be, and I mean to be,' he answered, with added surliness. 'If the speech and the clothes and the vittles as have been good enough for me ain't good enough for any young upstart as may follow after me, it *is* a pity.'

Mary Ann kept silence and looked meek. Samson growled and bullied a little, and wore the airs of a dictator. By and by a serving-maid came in and began to arrange the table for tea, and a little later a boy and a girl stole noiselessly into the room.

'Joe,' said Samson sternly, 'come here!' The boy approached him with evident dread. 'What's this I hear about thee and that young villin of a Reddy?'

'I don't know, father,' the boy answered.

'I heard him makin' a boast this afternoon,' said Samson, rolling bullily in his arm-chair, 'as you and him had fowt last holidays, and as he gi'en you a hiding.'

Joe said nothing, but looked as if he expected the experience to be repeated.

'Now, what ha' you got to say to that?' demanded his father.

'Why,' began Joe, edging back a little, 'he's bigger nor I be, an' six months o'der.'

'Do you mean to tell me,' cried Samson, reaching out a hand and seizing the little fellow by the jacket, 'do you mean to tell me as you allowed to have enough to that young villin?'

'No,' Joe protested. 'That I niver did. It was the squire as parted us.'

'You remember this,' said his father, shaking him to emphasise the promise. 'If ever you agree to tek a hiding from a Reddy you've got one to follow on from me. D'ye hear?'

'Yes, father.'

'Tek heed as well as hear. D'ye hear?'

'Yes, father.'

'And here's another thing, mind you. It's brought to me as you and him shook hands and took on to be friends with one another. Is that trew?' Joe looked guilty, but made no answer. 'Is it trew?' Still Joe returned no answer, and his father changing the hand with which he held him, for his own greater convenience, knocked him off his feet, restored him to his balance, knocked him off his feet again, and again settled him. 'Now,' said Samson, 'is it trew?'

The boy tried to recoil from the uplifted threatening hand, and cried out 'No!'

'Now,' said Samson, rising with a grim satisfaction, 'that's a lie. There's nothin' i' the world as I abhor from like a lie. I'll teach thee to tell me lies. Goo into the brewus and tek thy shirt off. March!'

The little girl clung to her mother's skirts crying and trembling. The mother herself was trembling, and had turned pale.

'Hush, hush, my pretty,' she said, caressing the child, and averting her eyes from Joe.

'March!' said Samson, and Joe slunk out of the room, hardening his heart as well as might be for endurance. But when he was once out of sight of the huge bullying figure and threatening eye and hand, the sight of his cap lying upon a chair in the hall supplied

him with an inspiration. He seized the cap, slipped out at the front door, and ran.

The early winter night was falling fast by this time. Half a dozen stars twinkled intermittently in the black-blue waste of sky, and when the lad paused to listen for possible sounds of pursuit the hollow moaning of the wind and the clang of bare wintry poles mingled with the noise of his own suppressed breathing.

The runaway fancied himself bound (as all British runaway boys seem bound) for sea, and he set out without delay to walk to Liverpool. He got as far as the brook which formed the limit to his father's farm, and lingering before he set foot upon the bridge, began to cry a little, and to bemoan his chances and the dear ones left behind. His father came in for none of Joe's regrets. It was in the nature of things to the boy's mind that his father should administer to him periodical thrashings, whether he had earned them or not. It was the one social relationship which existed between them. It was only quite of late that Joe had begun to discern injustice in his father's bullyings. Children take things as they come, and to the mind of a child—in a modified sense, of course—whatever is, is right. That a thing exists is its own best justification. There is no reason to seek reasons for it. But Joe Mountain, having nearly outgrown this state of juvenile acquiescence, had begun to make inquiry of himself, and, as a result, had familiarised himself with many mental pictures in which he figured as an

adventurer rich in adventures. In his day the youth of England were less instructed than they are now, but the immortal Defoe existed, and Lemuel Gulliver was as real as he is to-day. Perhaps the Board schools may have made that great mariner a little less real than he used to be. Joe believed in him with all his heart, had never had the shadow of a doubt about him, and meant to sail straight from Liverpool to Lilliput. He would defer his voyage to Brobdingnagias until he had grown bigger, and should be something of a match for its inhabitants.

But it was cold, it was darkening fast, it was past his ordinary tea-time. Liverpool and Lilliput were far away, pretty nearly equi-distant to the juvenile mind, and but for Samson's shadow the tea-table would have looked alluring. To be sure of tea, and a bed to sleep in afterwards, it seemed almost worth while to go back to the brewhouse and obey the paternal command to take his shirt off. To do the child justice, it was less the fear of the thrashing than the hot sense of rebellion at unfairness which kept him from returning. His father had beaten him into that untrue cry of 'No,' and had meant to force him to it, and then to beat him anew for it. Joe knew that better than Samson, for Samson, like the rest of us, liked to stand well with himself, and kept self-opinion in blinkers.

Joe set foot on the bridge. He had crossed the boundary brook hundreds of times in his brief life, and it had generally come into his mind, with a boyish

sense of adventure, that when he did so he was putting foot into the enemy's country. But the feeling had never been so strong as now. The Mountain Farm was home, and beyond it lay the wide, wide world, looking wide indeed, and bleak and cold. What with hot rebellion at injustice and cold fear of the vast and friendless expanse, Joe's tears multiplied, and leaning his arms upon the low coping of the bridge, with his head between them and his nose touching the frozen stone, he began to cry unrestrainedly.

Suddenly he heard a footstep, and it struck a new terror into his soul. Freebooters, footpads, kidnappers, *et hoc genus omne*, roamed those fields by night, in course of nature. To the snug security of the home fireside and bed their images came with a delightful thrill of fear, but to be here alone and in the midst of them was altogether another thing. He crept crouching across the bridge, and stowed himself into the smallest possible compass between the end of the stonework and the neighbouring hedgerow, and there waited trembling. His pulses beat so fast and made such a noise in his ears that he was ready to take the sound of footsteps for the tread of a whole ogreish army, when he heard a voice.

'Hode on a minute, while I shift the sack.'

The sack? It was easy—it was inevitable—to know that the sack contained a goblin supper.

'I shall be late for tea, Ichabod,' said another voice, 'and then I shall get a blowing-up for coming.'

Let him who sighs in sadness here,
Rejoice, and know a friend is near.

Joe sprang from his hiding-place, and startled Master Richard and Ichabod more than a little.

‘That thee, Dick?’

He knew it well enough, but it was quite delightful to be able to ask it with certainty.

‘Hillo,’ said Master Richard, recognising his sworn friend. ‘What are you doing? Are you trapping anything?’

‘No,’ the hereditary enemy answered. He had been crying, the poor little chap, until he had been frightened into quiet, and now on a sudden he was as brave and as glad again as ever he had been in his life. Once more adventures loomed ahead for the adventurous, and he shone within and grew warm with the sweet reflux of courage as he whispered, ‘I’m running away from home!’

Once again, the feat was glorious.

‘No?’ said Master Richard, smitten with envy and admiration. ‘Are you? Really?’

‘Yes,’ Joe answered. ‘I’m agooiin’ to Liverpool, to begin wi’.’

This was exquisitely large and vague, and Master Richard began to yearn for a share in the high enterprise upon which his friend had entered. He had half a mind to run away from home himself, though, to be sure, there was nothing else to run away from. In Joe’s case there was a difference.

'Where are you going to stay to-night?' asked Master Richard. The question sounded practical, but at bottom it was nothing of the sort. It was part of the romance of the thing, and yet it threw cold water on Joe's newly-lighted courage, and put it out again.

'I don't know,' said Joe, somewhat forlornly.

'I say,' interjected Ichabod, 'is that young Mountain, Master Richard?'

'Yes,' said Master Richard.

'Thee know'st thy feyther is again thy speakin' to him, and his feyther is again his speakin' to thee.'

'You mind your own business, Ichabod,' said the young autocrat, who was a little spoiled perhaps, and had been accustomed to have his own way in quite a princely fashion.

'I'm mindin' it,' returned Ichabod. 'It's a part o' my business to keep thee out o' mischief.'

'Ah!' piped Master Richard, 'you needn't mind that part of your business to-night.'

'All right,' said Ichabod, reshouldering the sack he had meanwhile balanced on the coping of the bridge. 'See as thee beens't late for tay-time.'

With that, having discharged his conscience, he went on again, and the two boys stayed behind.

'What are you running away for?' asked Richard.

'Why, feyther said it was brought to him as you and me had shook hands and had took on to be friends with one another, and he told me to go into the brewus and take my shirt off.'

'Take your shirt off?' inquired the other. In Joe's lifetime, short as it was, he had had opportunity to grow familiar with this fatherly formula, but it was strange to Master Richard. 'What for?'

'What for! Why, to get a hidin', to be sure.'

'Look here!' said Richard, having digested this, 'you come and stop in one of our barns. Have you had your tea?'

'No,' returned Joe, 'I shouldn't ha' minded so much if I had.'

'I'll bring something out to you,' said the protector.

So the two lads set out together, and to evade Ichabod, struck off at a run across the fields, Joe pantingly setting forth, in answer to his comrade's questions, how he was going to be a sailor or a pirate, 'or summat,' or to have a desert island like Crusoe. Of course, it was all admirable to both of them, and, of course, it was all a great deal more real than the fields they ran over.

The runaway was safely deposited in a roomy barn, and left there alone, when once again a life of adventures began to assume a darkish complexion. It was cold, it was anxious, it seemed to drag interminably, and it was abominably lonely. If it were to be all like this, even the prospect of an occasional taking off of one's shirt in the brewhouse looked less oppressive than it had done.

The hidden Joe, bound for piracy on the high seas,

or a Crusoe's island somewhere, gave a wonderful zest to Master Richard's meal. But an hour, which seemed like a year to the less fortunate of the two, went by before a raid upon the well-furnished larder of Perry Hall could be effected. When the opportunity came, Master Richard, with no remonstrance from conscience, laid hands upon a loaf and a dish of delicious little cakes of fried pork fat, from which the lard had that day been 'rendered,' and thus supplied, stole out to his hereditary enemy and fed him. The hereditary enemy complained of cold, and his host groped the dark place for sacks, and, having found them, brought them to him.

'I say,' said Joe, when he had tasted the provender, 'them's scratchings. That's gay and fine. I never had as many as I should like afore. Mother says they're too rich, but that's all rubbish.'

He made oily feast in the dark, with the sacks heaped about him. With Master Richard to help him, he began to swim in adventure, and the pair were so fascinated and absorbed that one of the farm-servants went bawling 'Master Richard' about the outlying buildings for two or three minutes before they heard him. When at last the call reached their ears they had to wait until it died away again before the surreptitious host dare leave the barn, lest his being seen should draw attention to the place.

Then Joe, who had been hunting wild beasts of all sorts with the greatest possible gusto, began in turn to

be hunted by them. The rattlesnake, hitherto unknown to Castle Barfield, became a common object ; the lion and the polar bear met on common ground in the menagerie of Joe's imagination. Whatever poor blessings and hopes he had, and whatever school-boy wealth he owned, he would have surrendered all of them to be in the brewhouse of the Mountain Farm, even though he were there to take his shirt off. But the empty, impassable, awful night stood between him and any refuge, and he must need stay where he was, and sweat with terror under his sacks, through all the prodigious tracts of time which lay between the evening and the morning. He was to have been up and afoot for Liverpool before dawn, but tired nature chose the time he had fixed for starting to send him to sleep, and when Master Richard stole into the barn with intent to disperse the sacks and clear away any sign of Joe's occupancy, he found him slumbering soundly, with a tear-stained cheek resting on a dirty brown hand.

There had been the wildest sort of hubbub and disorder at the Mountain Farm all night. Mrs. Mountain had wept and wrung her hands, and rocking herself to and fro, had poured forth doleful prophecy. Samson, who had begun with bluster, had fallen into anxiety, and had himself traced the course of the brook for a full mile by lanthorn-light. The farm hands had been sent abroad, and had tracked every road without result. Of course the one place where

nobody so much as thought of making inquiry was the house of the hereditary foe, but pretty early, in the course of the morning, the news of Joe Mountain's disappearance, and something of the reasons for it, reached Perry Hall. Everybody at Perry Hall knew already what a terrible personage Samson Mountain was, and his behaviour on this occasion was the theme of scathing comment.

Master Richard was guilty at heart, but exultant. Being a boy of lively imagination, he took to a secrecy so profound, and became so strikingly stealthy, as to excite observation and remark. He was watched and tracked to the barn, and then the discovery came about as a matter of course. The Reddys made much of Joe—they had no quarrel with an innocent persecuted child—but their kindness and commiseration were simply darts to throw at Samson.

It was noon when Reddy put the trembling adventurer into his trap, and with his own hands drove him home. The two enemies met and glowered at each other.

'I've found your lad and brought him home,' said Reddy; 'though I doubt it's a cruel kindness to him.'

Samson, with all the gall in his nature burning at his heart, lifted Joe from the trap and set him on the ground in silence. Reddy, in silence, turned his horse's head, touched him with the whip, and drove away. Joe was welcomed home by a thrashing, which he remembers in old age.

The episode bore fruit in several ways. To begin with, Master Joe was packed off to a distant school, far from that to which young Reddy was sent. But the boys found each other out in the holidays, and became firm friends on the sly, and Joe was so loyal and admiring that he never ceased to talk to his one confidante of the courage, the friendliness, the generosity, the agility, and skill of his secret hero. The confidante was his sister Julia, to whom the young hereditary enemy became a synonym for whatever is lovely and of good report. She used to look at him in church—she had little other opportunity of observing him—and would think in her childish innocent mind how handsome and noble he looked. He did not speak like the Barfield boys, or look like them, or walk like them. He was a young prince, heir to vast estates, and a royal title in fairyland. If story-books were few and far between, the sentimental foolish widow, Jenny Rusker, was a mine of narrative, and a single fairy tale is enough to open all other fairy lore to a child's imagination. If the little girl worshipped the boy, he, in his turn, looked kindly down on her. He had fought for her once at odds of two to one, and he gave her a smile now and then. It happened that in this wise began the curious, half-laughable, and half-pathetic little history which buried the hatreds of the Castle Barfield Capulet and Montague for ever.

III

IN this Castle Barfield version of Romeo and Juliet the parody would have been impossible without the aid and intervention of some sort of Friar Laurence. He was a notability of those parts in those days, and he was known as the Dudley Devil. In these enlightened times he would have been dealt with as a rogue and vagabond, and, not to bear too hardly upon an historical personage, whom there is nobody (even with all our wealth of historical charity-mongers) to whitewash, he deserved richly in his own day the treatment he would have experienced in ours. He discovered stolen property—when his confederates aided him; he put the eye on people obnoxious to his clients, for a consideration; he overlooked milch cows, and they yielded blood; he went about in the guise of a great gray tom-cat. It was historically true in my childhood—though, like other things, it may have ceased to be historically true since then—that it was in this disguise of the great gray tom-cat that he met his death. He was fired at by a farmer, the wounded cat crawled into the wizard's cottage, and

the demon restored to human form was found dying later on with a gun-shot charge in his ribs. There were people alive a dozen—nay, half a dozen—years ago, who *knew* these things, to whom it was blasphemous to dispute them.

The demon's earthly name was Rufus Smith, and he lived 'by Dudley Wood side, where the wind blows cold,' as the local ballad puts it. His mother had dealt in the black art before him, and was ducked to death in the Severn by the bridge in the ancient town of Bewdley. He was a lean man, with a look of surly fear. It is likely enough that he half expected some of his invocations to come true one fine day or other, with consequences painful to himself. The old notions are dying out fast, but it used to be said in that region that when a man talked to himself he was talking with the universal enemy. Rufus and his mother were great chatterers in solitude, and what possible companion could they have but one?

It is not to be supposed that all the ministrations for which the people of the country-side relied upon Rufus were mischievous. If he had done nothing but overlook cattle and curse crops, and so forth, he would have been hunted out. Some passably good people have been said, upon occasions, to hold a candle to the devil. With a similar diversion from general principle, Rufus was known occasionally to perform acts of harmless utility. He charmed away warts and corns, he prepared love philtres, and sold lucky stones. He

foreran the societies which insure against accident, and would guarantee whole bones for a year or a lifetime, according to the insurer's purse or fancy. He told fortunes by the palm and by the cards, and was the sole proprietor and vendor of a noted heal-all salve of magic properties.

He and his mother had gathered together between them a respectable handful of ghastly trifles, which were of substantial service alike to him and to his clients. A gentleman coming to have his corns or warts charmed away would be naturally assisted towards faith by the aspect of the polecat's skeleton, the skulls of two or three local criminals, and the shrivelled, mummified dead things which hung about the walls or depended head downwards from the ceiling. These decorations apart, the wizard's home was a little commonplace. It stood by itself in a bare hollow, an unpicturesque and barn-like cottage, not altogether weather-proof.

It fell upon a day that Mrs. Jenny Rusker drove over from Castle Barfield to pay Rufus a visit. She rode in a smart little trap, the kind of thing employed by the better sort of rustic tradesmen, and drove a smart little pony. She was a motherly, foolish, good creature, who, next to the reading of plays and romances, loved to have children about her and to make them happy. On this particular day she had Master Richard with her. She kept up her acquaintance with both her old lovers, and was on terms of

rather coolish friendship with them. But she adored their children, and would every now and again make a descent on the house of one or other of her old admirers and ravish away a child for a day or two.

Mrs. Jenny had consoled herself elsewhere for the loss of lovers for whom she had never cared a halfpenny, but she had never ceased to hold a sort of liking for both her old suitors. Their claims had formerly been pretty evenly balanced in her mind, and even now, when the affair was ancient enough in all conscience to have been naturally and quietly buried long ago, she never met either of her quondam lovers without some touch of old-world coquetry in her manner. The faintest and most far-away touch of anything she could call romance was precious to the old woman, and having a rare good heart of her own under all her superannuated follies, she adored the children. Dick was her especial favourite, as was only natural, for he was pretty enough and regal enough with his childish airs of *petit grand seigneur* to make him beloved of most women who met him. Women admire the frank masterfulness of a generous and half-spoiled boy, and Mrs. Jenny saw in the child the prophecy of all she had thought well of in his father, refined by the grace of childhood and by a better breeding than the father had ever had.

So she and Dick were great allies, and there was always cake and elderberry wine and an occasional half-crown for him at Laburnum Cottage. It was

only natural that, so fostered, Dick's affection for the old lady should be considerable. She was his counsellor and confidante from his earliest years, and the little parlour, with its antiquated furniture and works of art in wool, its haunting odour of pot-pourri emanating from the big china jar upon the mantelshelf, and its moist warm atmosphere dimly filtered through the drooping green and gold of the laburnum tree, whose leaves tapped incessantly against the lozenged panes of its barred windows, was almost as familiar in his memory in after years as the sitting-room at home at the farm.

Dick conferred upon its kindly and garrulous old tenant the brevet rank of 'Aunt' Jenny, and loved her, telling her, in open-hearted childish fashion, his thoughts, experiences, and secrets. Naturally, the story of the fight with the paynim oppressors of beauty came out in his talk soon after its occurrence, and lost nothing in the telling. Mrs. Jenny would have found a romance in circumstances much less easily usable to that end than those of the scion of one house rescuing the daughter of a rival and inimical line, and here was material enough for foolish fancy. She cast a prophetic eye into the future, and saw Dick and Julia, man and maid, reuniting their severed houses in the bonds of love, or doubly embittering their mutual hatred and perishing— young and lovely victims to clannish hatred and parental rigour—like Romeo and Juliet.

The boy's account of the fight was given as he sat by her side in her little pony-trap in the cheerfully frosty morning. Dick chatted gaily as the shaggy-backed pony trotted along the resounding road with a clatter of hoofs and a jingle of harness, and an occasional sneeze at the frosty air. They passed the field of battle on the road, and Dick pointed it out. Then, as was natural, he turned to the family feud, and retailed all he had heard from Ichabod, supplemented by information from other quarters and such additions of fancy as imaginative children and savages are sure to weave about the fabric of any story which comes in their way to make tradition generally the trustworthy thing it is.

Mrs. Rusker was strong on the family quarrel. A family quarrel was a great thing in her estimation, almost as good as a family ghost, and she gave Dick the whole history of the incident of the brook and of many others which had grown out of it, among them one concerning the death of a certain Reddy which had tragically come to pass a year or two before his birth. The said Reddy had been found one November evening stark and cold at the corner of the parson's spinney, with an empty gun grasped in his stiffened hand, and a whole charge of small shot in his breast. Crowner's quest had resulted in a verdict of death by misadventure, and the generally received explanation was that the young fellow's own gun had worked the mischief by careless handling in passing through stiff under-

growth. But a certain ne'er-do-well Mountain, a noted striker and tosspot of the district, had mysteriously disappeared about that date, and had never since come within scope of Castle Barfield knowledge. Ugly rumours had got afloat, vague and formless, and soon to die out of general memory. Dick listened open-mouthed to all this, and when the narrative was concluded, held his peace for at least two minutes.

'*She* isn't wicked, is she, Aunt Jenny?' he suddenly demanded.

'She? Who?' asked Mrs. Rusker in return.

'The little girl, Julia.'

'Wicked? Sakes alive, whatever is the boy talking about? Wicked? O' course not. She's a dear good little thing as iver lived.'

'Ichabod said that all the Mountains were wicked. But I know Joe isn't—at least, not very. He promised me a monkey and a parrot—a green parrot, when he came back from running away. But he didn't run away, because father found him and took him home. His father gave him an awful thrashing. He often thrashes him, Joe says. Father never thrashes me. What does his father thrash him for?'

'Mr. Mountain's a harder man than your father, my dear. An' I fear as Joe's a bit wild, like his father when he was a boy, and obstinit. Theer niver was a obstinater man i' this earth than Samson Mountain, I do believe, an' Joe's got a bit on it in him.'

'She's pretty,' said Dick, returning with sudden

childish inconsequence to the subject uppermost in his thoughts. 'Joe isn't. Why is it that the girls are always prettier than the boys?'

'I used to think it was the other way about when I was a gell,' said Aunt Jenny, with perfect simplicity. 'But she is pretty, that's true. But then her mother was a likely lass, an' Samson warn't bad lookin', if he hadn't ha' been so fierce an' cussid. An' to think as it should be you, of all the lads i' Barfield, as should save a Mountain. An' a gell too. I suppose as you'll be a settin' up to fall in love wi' her now, like Romeo and Juliet?'

'What was that?' asked the boy.

'It's a play, my dear, wrote by a clever man as has been dead iver so many 'ears, William Shaakepeare.'

'Shakespeare?' said Dick. 'I know. It's a big book on one of the shelves at home, full of poetry. But what's Romeo and Juliet?'

'Romeo and Juliet was two lovers, as lived a long time ago in a place called Verona. I don't know where it is,' she added quickly, to stave off the imminent question already on the boy's lips. 'Somewhere abroad, wheer Bonyparty is. Juliet's name was Capulet, an' Romeo's was Montague, an' the Capilets and the Montagues hated each other so as they could niver meet wi'out havin' a bit of a turn-up one with another. They was as bad as the Reddys an' the Mountains, only i' them daysen folks allays wore

swords an' daggers, so's when they fowt they mostly killed each other. Well, one night old Capilet g'ien a party, an' asked all his friends, an' everybody wore masks, so's they didn't know half the time who they was a-talkin' tew, as was the fashion i' them times, an' Romeo, he goes, just for divilment, an' he puts on a mask tew, so as they didn't know him, else they'd ha' killed him, sure an' certain. An' theer he sees Juliet, an' she was beautiful, an' he falls plump in love wi' her, an' she falls in love wi' him, an' they meets o' nights, i' the moonlight, on the window-ledge outside her room, but they had to meet i' secret, 'cause the two fam'lies was like cat an' dog, an' there'd ha' been awful doin's if they'd been found out. Well, old Capilet — that was Juliet's feyther — he finds a husband for Juliet, a nice chap enough, a count, like Lord Barfield, on'y younger an' likelier. An' Juliet, she gets welly mad, because she wants to marry Romeo. And then, to mek matters wuss, Romeo meets one o' Juliet's relations, a young man named Tybalt, as hates him like pison, an' they fowt, an' Romeo killed him. Well, the Capilets was powerful wi' the king as ruled in Verona, like Joseph used to be with Pharaoh in the Holy Land, my dear, an' Romeo, he has to run away an' hide himself, else p'raps they'd ha' hung him for killin' Tybalt, though it was Tybalt as begun the fight, so poor Juliet's left all alone. An' her marriage day's a-gettin' near, and old Capilet, he's stuck on her marryin' the count, an'

the day's been named, and everything provided for the weddin'. Well, Romeo takes a thought, an' goes to a friar, a kind o' priest, as was a very book-learned man, and asks if he can help him. And at first he says no, he can't, an' Romeo gets that crazed, he's goin' to kill himself, but by an' by he thinks of a plan. He gives Juliet a bottle o' physic stuff to send her to sleep, and make her look as if she was dead. Then her relations 'll be sure to bury her i' the family vault, an' he'll write to Romeo to come back to Verona i' the night-time an' take her out o' the vault, an' goo away quiet wi' her till things have blown over, an' they can come back again. An' Juliet takes the physic, an' everybody thinks her dead, her father, an' her mother, an' her old nuss, an' Paris—that's the name of the gentleman as they wanted her to marry—an' there's such a hullabaloo an' racket as niver was. An' they buried her i' the vault, wi' all her relations, an' the old friar thinks as it's all a-comin' straight. But the letter as he'd writ to Romeo niver reaches him, an' Romeo hears as how Juliet's really dead, and he buys a bottle o' pison, an' comes to Juliet's grave i' the night-time, an' there he meets Paris, as has come to put flowers there an' pray for Juliet's soul, knowin' no better and lovin' her very dear. An' him an' Romeo fights, and Romeo kills him, an' opens the vault, an' go's in, an' theer's Juliet, lyin' stiff an' stark, because the physic ain't had time to work itself off yit. An' he kisses her, an' cries over

her, and then he teks the pison, and dies. An' just as he's done it, Juliet wakes up, and finds him dead, and she takes his knife, an' kills herself, poor thing, an' that's the hend on 'em.'

The old sentimentalist's eyes were moist, and her voice choked, as she concluded her legend. It was the first love-story Dick had ever heard, and in pity at the beautiful narrative, which no clumsiness of narration could altogether rob of its pathos, he was crying too. There is no audience like an impressionable child, and the immortal story of love and misfortune seemed very pitiful to his small and tender heart.

'Why, theer! theer! Dick! It's only a story, my dear, wrote in a book,' said Mrs Jenny. 'It most likely ain't true, an' if it is, it all happened sich a time ago as it's no good a-frettin' about it. Why, wheeriver did you get all them warts?' She took one of the hands with which Dick was rubbing his eyes. 'You should have 'em looked tew, they quite spile your hands. I must get Rufus Smith to have a look at 'em. You know who we'm agoin' to see, don't you? You've heard tell o' the Dudley Devil, Dick?'

'Yes,' said Dick. 'Ichabod goes to him for his rheumatism.'

'It's on'y a step away. That's his cottage, over there. We'll get him to charm the warts away.'

A hundred yards farther on Mrs. Jenny checked the pony, and, dismounting from the vehicle, bade Dick tie him to an elder-shoot and follow her. They

went through a gap in a ruinous hedge, and traversed a furzy field, at the farther side of which stood the wizard's hut, a wretched place of a single story, with a shuttered window and a thatched roof full of holes and overgrown with weeds. As they approached the door a mighty clatter was audible within, and Mrs. Jenny held the boy's hand in a tightened grasp, fearful of devilry. As they stood irresolute to advance or retreat, a big cat dashed out at the doorway with a feline imprecation, and the wizard appeared, revengefully waving a stick, and swearing furiously.

'Cuss the brute,' he said, 'the divil's in her, sure an' sartin'.'

It seemed not unlikely to the onlookers, the cat being the wizard's property, and therefore, by all rule and prescription, his prompter and familiar. She was not of the received colour, however, her fur being of a rusty red. But as she raised her back, and spat at her master's visitors from under her chubbed tail, she looked demoniac enough for anything. And from the fashion in which, her anathema once launched, she sat down and betook herself to the rearrangement of her ruffled coat, it might have been conjectured that it was not purely personal to them, but that they were attacked merely as types of the human race, whose society she and her master had forsworn.

'Cuss her!' reiterated the wizard. 'Where's her got tew? My soul, what's this?'

He peered with a short-sighted terror-stricken scowl

on Mrs. Jenny and her charge, as if for a moment the fancy had crossed him that his refractory familiar had taken their shapes. His gray lips muttered something, and his fingers worked oddly as he took a step or two forward, clearly outlined in the cold winter sunshine against the black void beyond his open door.

‘Why, Rufus, what’s the matter?’ asked Mrs. Jenny. ‘Don’t look like that at a body.’

‘It’s you, mum?’ said the necromancer. A look of relief came into his wizened face. ‘I didn’t know but what it might be——’ His voice trailed off into an indistinct murmur, and he smeared his hand heavily across his face, and looked at it, mistrustfully, as if he rather expected to find something else in its place. ‘Cuss her!’ he said again, looking round for the cat.

‘What’s she done?’ demanded Mrs. Jenny.

‘Done? Ate up all my brekfus, that’s what she’s done,’ rejoined the wizard. The familiar grinned with a relish of the situation so fiendishly human that Dick clung closer to Mrs. Rusker’s hand, and devoutly wished himself back in the trap. To his childish sense the incongruity of one gifted with demoniac powers being helpless to prevent the depredations of his own domestic animal did not appeal. As for Mrs. Jenny, she had piously believed in witchcraft all her life, and was quite as insensible to the absurdity as he.

‘I want you to look at this young gentleman’s

hands,' said Mrs. Rusker. 'He's got warts that bad. I suppose you can charm 'em away for him?'

Appealed to on a point of his art, the wizard's air changed altogether. He assumed an aspect of wooden majesty.

'Why, yis,' he said. 'I think I'm equal to that. Step inside, mum, and bring the young gentleman with you.'

'Couldn't you——' Mrs. Rusker hesitatingly began, 'couldn't you do it outside?'

'The forms and ceremonies,' said the necromancer, with an increase of woodenness in his manner, 'cannot be applied out o' doors. Arter you, mum.'

He ushered them into the one room of his hut, and the cat, with her tail floating above her like a banner, entered too, evading a kick, and sprang upon a rotten deal shelf, which apparently acted as both dresser and table.

Rufus closed the ruinous door, thereby intensifying the gloom which reigned within the place. The floor was of simple earth, unboarded, and the air smelt of it. Here and there a fine spear of ghostly sunlight pierced a crack in roof or wall. By the time their eyes had become accustomed to the gloom they saw that Rufus, on his knees on the floor, was scratching a circle about himself with a scrap of a broken pot, and the indistinct rhythmic murmur of the spell he muttered reached their ears.

The cat, perched upon the dresser, purred as if her

internal machinery were running down to final collapse, and her contracting and dilating eyes borrowed infernal fires from the chance ray of sunshine in which she sat. The brute's rusty red head, so lit, fascinated Dick, and the mingled rhythms of her purring and the wizard's mounted and mounted, until to his bewildered mind the whole world seemed filled with their murmur, and the demoniac head seemed to dilate as he gazed at it. Suddenly, Rufus paused in his sing-song, and the cat's purr ceased with it, as though her share of the charm was done.

'Come into the ring,' said Rufus. His voice was shaky, and if there had been light enough to see it, his face was gray with terror of his own hocus-pocus. The cat's head had dropped out of the line of sunlight, and she had coiled herself up on the dresser among a disorderly litter of crockery ware. Dick, relieved from the fascination of her too-visible presence, obeyed the summons, and Rufus, seating himself upon a broken stool, took his hand in moist and quivering fingers, and touching the warts one by one, recommenced his mumble. It had proceeded for a minute or so, when a crash, which, following as it did on the dead stillness, an earthquake could scarce have equalled, elicited a scream from Mrs. Jenny and brought the wizard to his knees with a yell of terror.

'My blessid!' he cried, with clacking jaws, 'I've done it at last! Get thee behind me, Satan!'

In terror-stricken earnest he believed that the

Great Personage he had passed all his life in trying to raise had answered to his call at last. So, though it was unquestionably a relief to him to find that the appalling clatter had merely been caused by his familiar's pursuit of a mouse among the crockery, a shade of disappointment may have followed the discovery.

'Cuss her!' he said, for the third time that morning, and with additional unction. 'Her'll be the death of me some day, I know her will!'

IV

A SUMMER sunset filled all the sky above Castle Barfield and its encircling fields. The sun had disappeared, leaving behind him a broad reflected track of glory where, here and there, a star was faintly visible. A light wind was blowing from the hollow which sheltered the town towards the higher land whereon the rival houses of Reddy and Mountain faced each other. Below, it was already almost night, and as the wind blew the shadow mounted, as if the wind carried it. The rose and gold left by the departing sun faded down the sky, and settled at the horizon into a broad band of deep-toned fire, which, to one facing it in ascending from the lower ground, seemed to bind the two houses together. Some such fancy might have been in the head of Mrs. Jenny Rusker, as she went in the warm evening air towards the little eminence on which stood the long low-built house of Samson Mountain, already a-twinkle with occasional lights in the gloom, its own bulk cast against the fast-fading band of sunset.

Mrs. Jenny, hale and vigorous yet, and still a

widow, was older by fifteen years than on the day when she unfolded to Dick Reddy the story of Romeo and Juliet. Fifteen years was a good slice out of a lifetime, even in Castle Barfield in the first half of the century, when time slipped by so quietly and left so little trace to mark his flight.

She passed the gate which opened on the public road, and entered the Mountain domain. The air was so still that the bubble of the boundary brook was clearly audible a hundred yards away, with nothing to accent it but the slow heavy flap of a late crow, winging his reluctant flight homewards, and save for him, sky and earth alike seemed empty of life, and delivered wholly to the clinging peace of evening. So that when Mrs. Jenny came to the only clump of trees in her line of progress between the gate and the house the little scream of surprise with which she found herself suddenly face to face with an unexpected human figure was justified.

‘Sh-h-h!’ said the figure’s owner. ‘Don’t you know me, Aunt Jenny?’

‘Dick!’ said Mrs. Jenny, peering at him. ‘So it is. You welly frightened the life out o’ me. What brings you here, of all placen in the world?’

‘Can’t you guess?’ asked Dick. He was tall and broad-shouldered now, an admirable fulfilment of the physical promise of his boyhood, and far overtopped Mrs. Rusker. ‘It isn’t for the first time.’

'I feared not,' said the old woman. 'You was allays main venturesome.'

'It will be for the last, for some time, Aunt Jenny. I leave Castle Barfield to-morrow.'

'Leave Barfield?' cried the old woman. 'Why, Dick, wheer are ye goin'? You ain't agoin' to do nothin' rash, that I do hope.'

'I am going to London,' said Dick, 'and I must see Julia before I go. You must help me. You are going to the house now, aren't you?'

'Going to London?' repeated Mrs. Rusker, who had no ears for the last words after that announcement. 'What's made you so hot foot to go to London all of a minute like?'

'It was decided to-day. My father suspects what is going on. I feel sure of it, though he has never said a word about it. You know he always meant to make a doctor of me—it was my own choice when I was quite a little fellow, and it has always been understood. Last month he asked me if I was of the same mind still, and to-day he told me that my seat is taken in the coach from Birmingham. You know my father, Aunt Jenny, as well as I do. He has been a very good father to me, and I would not give him pain or trouble for the world. I could not refuse. Indeed, it is my last chance of ever doing anything for myself and making a home for Julia.'

'My dear, they'll never hear on it, nayther of 'em. Samson Mountain 'd rather see his daughter in her

coffin than married to any kin of Abel Reddy's. Though he loves her, too, in a kind o' way. An' your father's jist as hard; he's on'y quieter with it, that's all. They'll niver consent. Niver, i' this world.'

'Then we must do without their consent, that's all. I must see Julia to-night, and you must help me. Tell her that I am here and must see her. Oh, Aunt Jenny, you are surely not going to desert us now, after helping us so often.'

'I'm dub'ous, my dear. I hope good may come of it, but I'm dub'ous. I'm doubtful if I did right in helping you, again your father's will, an' Mr. Mountain's, too.'

'You won't refuse to do so little, after doing so much,' pleaded the young man. 'Why, it was at your house that I used to meet her, when we were children together, and you first christened us Romeo and Juliet.'

'A naäme o' bad omen, my dear. I wish I hadn't gi'en it to you now.'

'For niver was a story o' more woe,
Than this o' Jewliet an' her Romeo.'

'I don't believe much in omens,' said Dick. 'But you will tell Julia that I am here, won't you? It's the last time, for ever so long.'

'I'll tell her,' said Mrs. Rusker. 'But don't stay here; goo down to the Five Ash. Mr. Mountain's gone to Burmungem, an' he'll come across this way when he comes back. You must tek a bit o' care, Dick, for the gell's sake.'

'I'll take care, dear. It's good-bye this time, Aunt. You've been very good to me always, and I shan't forget your kindness while I'm away. And you'll be good to Julia, too, while—while I'm away, won't you?'

Mrs. Rusker's objections had never had any heart in them, and had been merely perfunctory, and such as she conceived her age and semi-maternal authority compelled her to make. She was wholly given over to Dick and Julia, and all her simple craft was for their service. She kissed him, and cried over him, and so they parted, he bound for the Five Ash field, and she for the farmhouse.

'Why, lacsaday, Jenny, whatever is the matter?' asked Mrs. Mountain, when her visitor entered her sitting-room, and gave her tear-stained cheek to her old friend's embrace. Julia, a lithe, graceful girl, rose at the query from the other side of the little table, and came to Mrs. Rusker's side.

'Why, you're cryin',' continued the elder woman. 'What is it, my dear, as has upset you i' this wise?'

'Well, my dear,' said Mrs. Rusker, wiping her eyes and smoothing her dress, as if her grief was done with and put away, 'it ain't a trouble as I expects sympathy from you in.'

Mother and daughter exchanged glances.

'It must be a queer sort o' trouble, then,' said Mrs. Mountain; 'an' you might tell me what it is afore you say that, Mrs. Rusker, arter all these 'ears as we'n knowed each other.'

‘ Well, if you must know, I’ve jist sin young Reddy, i’ the road, jist outside the Five Ash.’ Julia’s hand was on her shoulder as she spoke, and she felt the soft touch tremble. ‘ He’s a-leavin’ Barfield, agoin’ to London, for a long time.’

‘ Oh, that’s the matter, is it? Well, I don’t know anythin’ agin the young man, barrin’ as he is a Reddy. An’ for the matter o’ that, though o’ course a woman has no ch’ice but to stand by the kin as her marries into, I niver found much harm in ’em, unless it is as they’re a bit stuck up. I know as you was allays fond on him, an’ I hope the young man ’ll do well. I’ve often said to Samson as it was all rubbidge, a-keepin’ up a old quarrel like that, as keeps two dacent fam’lys at daggers drawn. Theer, theer, let Julia get you a cup o’ tay, an’ let’s talk o’ somethin’ cheerful.’

‘ I’ll go and send it in to you,’ said Julia. She exchanged one quick glance of intelligence with the widow as she left the room. The old woman had done her errand, and Julia knew where to seek her lover. She found her hat in the hall, and slipped out by the back way, after directing the servant to take in the required refreshment to Mrs. Rusker. It was bright moonlight now, and as she ran lightly across the Five Ash field in her white summer dress, Dick, waiting in the shelter of the hedge, saw her plainly, and advanced to meet her.

‘ Oh, Dick, is it true?’

He took her in his arms and kissed her before he

answered. 'Yes, dear, it's true. I am going to London.'

'But why so suddenly, so soon?'

'I must, dear. It is my own choice. I am going to study, to fit myself to take my place in the world, and to find a home for you. Be brave, dear. It is only for a little time.'

'It is all so sudden.'

'Yes. I had hoped to stay a little longer, to see more of you, to get used to my happiness before I lost it. But my father suspects, I am sure, if he does not know, and I dared not refuse. It hurts me to go, but what can I do? You know the man he is. And there is only one thing in the world that your father would help him to do—to separate us. I must go away and make a home for you with my own hands; we can expect no help from them. If we are true to each other we shall be happy yet. Our love may end the ridiculous family squabble which has lasted all these generations. But it would be madness to speak yet.'

'It is that which makes me so unhappy, Dick. Why am I not like other girls? Why can't you come to the farm and ask my father's leave to court me, as other girls' sweethearts do, and as you would like to do? I can't help feeling that this is wrong, meeting you in secret, and being engaged to you against my father's will, without his knowledge.'

'The quarrel is not of our making, Julia. We only suffer by it. I hope we shall bring it to an

end, and teach two honest men to live at peace together, as they ought. Why, you're crying.'

Her tears had been running quietly for some minutes past, but at this she began to sob unrestrainedly. Dick comforted her in the orthodox fashion, and in that sweet employment almost succeeded in forgetting his own sorrow. He drew bright pictures of the future: youth held the palette, and hope laid on the colour. Two or three years of partial separation—so little—and he would have a livelihood in his hand, and could offer her a safe asylum from parental tyranny, and bid his own people either to accept the situation or renounce him, as they might choose. He was quite heroic internally about the whole business. He felt the promise of the coming struggle brace his nerves, and he was more than ready for the test. Young love is selfish at the best, and the heroic likeness of himself doing battle with the world of London half obliterated the pitiful figure of the poor girl, left at home, with nothing to fill her heart but dreams. For him, the delight of battle; for her, long months of weary waiting.

It was no doubt of him, but only the rooted longing for assurance of his love, that made her ask,

'You won't forget me, Dick, in London?'

Forget her! His repetition of the word, his little laugh of loving scorn, were answer enough, though he found others, and arguments unanswerable, to clinch them. How could he forget the sweetest, dearest girl

that ever drew the breath of life, the prettiest and the bravest? She spoke treason against herself in asking such a question. He could no more forget her in London than Romeo, Juliet in Mantua. She laughed a little at his recalling the old story, from which Mrs. Jenny had drawn so many illustrations of the course of their love since they were children. It recalled the old woman to their minds.

‘I shall write to you every week, and send the letters under cover to her,’ said Dick. ‘And you may be sure that I shall find—or make—plenty of opportunities to run down here from time to time. There is a coach every day to Birmingham.’

They had been walking slowly all this time. It was night now, the last gleam of sunset had faded, the stars were lustrous overhead, and a yellow moonlight flooded the surrounding country. A long distance off, faint but clear in the dead hush of the summer night, they heard, but did not mark, the beat of horses’ hoofs approaching them.

‘I must go, Dick,’ said Julia. ‘It is late, and they will wonder where I am. No, let me go now, while I have the strength.’

He took her in his arms again, and her head dropped on his shoulder, and the tears began to run afresh. He held her close, but in that last moment of parting could find no word of comfort, only dumb caresses. The hoof-beats were near at hand now, just beyond the bend of the road. They rounded the

corner, and broke on the lovers' ears with a loud and startling suddenness. The girl broke away, and ran through the gate into the field with a stifled sob. Dick turned, and walked down the road in the direction of the approaching horseman. The moon was at the full, and shone broadly upon his face and figure.

'Hullo!' cried the rider, in gruff challenge, and pulling his horse into Dick's path, reined in. The young man looked up and recognised Samson Mountain. Flight would have been as useless as ignominious, and it had never been Dick's way out of any difficulty.

'Well?' he asked curtly, and stood his ground.

'Is that my daughter?' demanded Mountain, pointing with his heavy whip after the white figure glinting across the field. 'Spake the truth for once, though you be a Reddy.'

'It's a habit we have,' said Dick quietly. His calm almost surprised himself. 'Yes.'

Mountain had always been of a heavy build, and of late years had increased enormously in girth and weight. But his wrath at this confirmation of his half guess stirred him so, that before the sound of the word had well died out on the air he had dismounted, and came at the young man with his riding-whip flourished above his head.

'Don't do that, sir.' Dick spoke in a low voice, though quickly; and there was something in his tone which brought the weapon harmlessly to the farmer's

side again. 'It is your daughter. We love each other, and she has promised to be my wife.'

Mountain staggered, as if the words had been a pistol bullet or a stab, and struck furiously. Quick as was Dick's parry, he only half saved himself, his hat spun into the road, and the whip whistled within an inch of his ear. He made a step back, and stopped a second furious stroke. The whip broke in the old man's hand, and he flung the remaining fragment from him with a curse.

'I can't strike you, sir,' said Dick. 'You're her father.' Mountain's choking breath filled in the pause, and Dick went on: 'You know well enough there's not another man in England I'd take that from.'

'You're a coward, like all your tribe,' said Mountain.

'Not at all, I assure you, sir,' said Dick calmly. 'If you like to send anybody else with that message, I'll talk to him. Let us talk sensibly. What harm have I ever done you? Or my father either? Why should two honest families keep up this ridiculous story, which ought to have been buried ages back? Why not let bygones be bygones? I love your daughter. I am a young man yet, sir, with my way to make in the world, and I am going away to London to study. I met your daughter to-night to say good-bye to her, and if you had not come I should have gone away and said nothing until I could come and claim her, with a home worthy of her to take her to.'

But since you know, I speak now. We love each other, and intend to marry.'

'Oh!' said Mountain. He had gone all on a sudden as cool as Dick, and nothing but his stertorous breathing hinted of the rage which filled him. 'That's it, is it? Then, if you're finished, hear me. I ain't got the gift o' the gab as free as you, but I can mek plain my meanin', p'raps. I'd rather see her a-layin' theer' (he pointed with a trembling hand at the ground between them); 'I'd rather lay her there, dead afore my eyes, an' screw her in her coffin a'terwards, than you or any o' your kin should as much as look at her, wi' my goodwill. And now you've got your answer, Mr. Fair an' Fine. Remember it, an' look out for yourself. For, by the Lord!' he went on, with a solemn malignity doubly terrible in a man whose passion was ordinarily so violent, 'if iver I ketch you round my house again, I'll put a bullet atween thy ribs as sure as my naäme's Samson Mountain.'

With this, he took his horse by the bridle, and passed through the gate, leaving the young man to his own reflections. He took the beast to the stable, delivered him into the care of a servant, and made straight for the parlour, where his wife and Mrs. Rusker were seated at an early supper.

'You're back early, Sam,' said the former, rising to draw an additional chair to the table. 'Wilt have some tay, or shall Liza draw you a jug o' beer?'

Samson returned no answer, either to this or to Mrs. Rusker's greeting.

'Lawk a mussy, what ails the man?' asked Mrs. Mountain, as Samson stood looking round the room. She had never seen such an expression on her husband's face before. The skin was livid under its rude bronze, and his lips twitched strangely.

'Wheer's that wench of ourn?' he asked, after a second glance round the room. Mrs. Rusker's heart jumped, and she held on tight to the arm-pieces of her chair.

'Julia?' said Mrs. Mountain. 'Her's about the house, I reckon.'

'Call her here,' said Samson; and his wife wondering, but not daring to question, went to the door of the sitting-room and screamed 'Julia!' A servant girl came running downstairs at the call, and said that Miss Julia did not feel well, and had gone to bed.

'Fatch her down,' said Samson from the sitting-room, and the girl, on receipt of a confirmatory nod from Mrs. Mountain, went upstairs again. Samson took a chair and sat with his head bent forward and his arms folded, staring at the paper ornaments in the grate.

'Samson!' said his wife appealingly, 'don't skeer a body i' thisnin. Whativer is the matter?'

'Hold thy chat,' said Samson. 'Thee'st know soon enough,' and the trio sat in silence until Julia entered the room. She was pale, and there were traces of

tears on her cheeks, and Samson, as he glanced at her askance from under his heavy eyebrows before he rose, saw that she was struggling to repress some strong emotion. She advanced to kiss him, but he repelled her—not roughly—with his heavy hand upon her shoulder.

‘ You wanted to see me, father,’ she asked, trembling.

‘ I sent for you.’

Mrs. Rusker was in a state of pitiable excitement, if anybody had had the leisure to notice her.

‘ Theer’s some’at happened to-day as it’s fit an’ right as yo’ should know. I met ode Raybould to-day i’ th’ Exchange, an’ he tode me some’at as I’d long suspected, about his son Tom. I reckon you know what it was.’

Julia knew well enough. Tom Raybould was a young farmer, a year or two older than herself. She had known him all her life, and he had been a schoolfellow and chosen chum of her brother’s. He had shown unmistakable signs of affection for her, but had never spoken. He was a good fellow, according to common report, and she had a good deal of liking and respect for him, and a little pity, being a good girl, and no coquette.

‘ I see thee understandest,’ said Samson. ‘ I told th’ ode man as he might look on it as settled, an’ Tom ’ll be here to-morrow. He’s a likely lad, an’ he’ll have all the Bush Farm when his father goes, as must be afore long, i’ the course o’ nature. The two farms ’ll

goo very well in a ring fence. Theer's no partic'lar hurry, as I know on, an' we'll ha' the weddin' next wik, or the wik after.'

The girl's breast was labouring cruelly, in spite of the hand that strove to still it.

'Father!' she said. 'You don't mean it!'

'Eh?' said Samson. 'I ginerally mean what I say, my wench. I should ha' thout as yo'd ha' known that by this time.'

He stopped there, for Julia, but for her mother's arm, would have fallen.

'You great oaf!' cried Mrs. Mountain, irritated for once into open rebellion. 'Oh, it's like a man, the stupid hulkin' creeturs as they are, to come an' frighten the life out of a poor maid i' that style.'

'Theer, theer!' said Samson, with the same heavy and threatening tranquillity he had borne throughout the interview. 'Tek her upstairs.'

He sat down again, and without another word filled and lit his churchwarden, and stared through the smoke-wreaths at the grate.

V

MRS. JENNY RUSKER, who was half dead with fear of an *exposé* of her part in this unlucky love-affair, was additionally prostrated by the dire reversal of all her hopes by Samson Mountain's ultimatum. Mrs. Mountain, with the aid of a female servant, supported Julia upstairs, and Samson smoked on stolidly, taking no note whatever of the visitor's presence. Still in doubt of what Samson might or might not know, and fearing almost to breathe, lest any reminder of her presence should call down his wrath upon her, she listened to the tramping and the muffled noises overhead until they ceased, and then, gathering courage from his continued apathy, slipped from the room and left the house.

She got home and went to bed and passed an interminable night in tossing to-and fro, and bewailing the untoward fate of the two children. Dawn came at last, though it had seemed as if it never would break again, and, for the first time for many a year, the first gleam of sunlight saw her dressed and downstairs. She felt feverous and ill, and having brewed

for herself a huge jorum of tansy tea, sat down over this inspiring beverage, and tried to pull her scattered wits together and think out some way of untangling the skein of difficulty with which she had to deal. The danger was pressing, and if she had been herself the poor lovesick girl who lay a mile away, stifling her sobs lest they should reach her father's ears, and vainly calling on her lover's name, she would scarcely have been more miserable.

One thing was clear. Dick must be warned, and his journey to London postponed by some device. He might lie hidden for a day or two in Birmingham, and Julia be smuggled there and secretly married. It was no time for half measures, and whatever was done should be done quickly and decisively. At this idea, at once romantic and practical, Mrs. Jenny's spirits revived.

'Samson 'll disown Julia, I know. Her 'll never see a penny o' his money. An' I doubt as Abel Reddy 'll do the same wi' Dick. He's just as hard and bitter as th' other, on'y quieter wi' it. Well, they shan't want while I'm alive, nor after my death neither, and Dick ud make his own way with nobody's help. I'll write to him, and find somebody to take the letter. I won't go myself, at this hour o' the day.'

She concocted a letter and sealed it, and putting on her bonnet sallied out to find a messenger. Fate was so far propitious that scarce a hundred yards from her door she met Ichabod Bubb, bound for his

morning's work at Perry Hall Farm. Ichabod was bent and gnarled and twisted now, stiff in all his joints and slow of movement, but his quaint visage bore the same look of uncertain and rather wistful humour which had marked it in earlier times.

'Morning, mum,' he said, with a stiff-necked nod at Mrs. Jenny.

'Good-mornin', Mr. Bubb,' said the old lady. Ichabod beamed at this sudden and unexpected ceremonial of title, and straightened his back.

'You 'm afoot early, mum.'

'Why, yes. But it's such a beautiful morning; it's a shaame to lie abed a time like this.'

'So many folks, so many ways o' thinkin',' said the ancient one; 'not as it's a sin as I often commits, nayther, 'cos why, I don't get the chance.'

'I've got a bit o' business as I want done, Mr. Bubb,' said Mrs. Rusker, 'if ye don't mind earnin' a shillin'.'

'Why,' returned Ichabod, 'I don't know as I've got any, not to say rewted, objection to makin' a shillin'.'

'You're goin' to the farm?' Ichabod nodded. 'Then I want you to take this note to Mr. Richard. But mind, you must get it to him private. Nobody else must know. D'you understand?'

'I'm all theer, missus,' responded Ichabod.

'Then there's the note, an' there's the shillin'. An' if you're back in two hours you shall have a pint o'

beer.' Ichabod took the note and the shilling, and clattered off with a ludicrous show of despatch, and the old lady returned to her sitting-room to await the result of his message. It came in less than the appointed time, and disappointed her terribly. Ichabod had ascertained that Dick had started half an hour before his arrival at the farm for Birmingham, and would only return to-morrow night to sleep and take away his luggage on the following morning.

'And you come to me wi' a message like that, y' ode gone-off!' said the exasperated old woman. 'You might ha' caught him up i' the time as you've wasted comin' back here.'

'Caught him up,' said Ichabod, with a glance at his legs. 'Yis, likely, like a cow might ketch a race-hoss. I'm a gay fine figure, missus, to ketch up the best walker i' the country-side.'

Mrs. Jenny was a woman, and therefore to offer her reason as an antidote to unreasoning anger was merely to heap fuel on flame.

'Ah!' she said, reasonably enraged with the whole masculine half of her species, 'you're like the rest on 'em.'

'Then I'm sorry for the rest on 'em,' said Ichabod, 'whoever they may be.' Here Mrs. Jenny shut the door upon him, leaving him in the street, and retired to her sitting-room. But with beer to be gained by boldness, Ichabod was leonine in courage. He knocked, and the summons brought the old lady to the door

again. Ichabod spoke no word, but writhed his twisted features into a grin which expressed at once humorous deprecation and expectancy, and rubbed the back of his veiny hand across his bristly lips.

‘Go round to the brewus,’ said Mrs. Jenny; ‘you’ll find the maid there. It’s all you’re fit for, ye guzzlin’ old idiot.’

Ichabod retired, elate.

‘Her tongue’s a stinger; but, Lord bless thee, Ichabod, her bark’s a long sight worse than her bite. An’ her beer’s main good.’

Mrs. Jenny, meanwhile, retired to the sitting-room, and there sat immersed in gloom. Things looked black for her young protégés, and fate was against them. With that curious interest in familiar trifles which comes with any fit of hopelessness or despondency, she sat looking at the furniture of the room and the pictures which decorated the walls. Among these latter was a work of her own hands, her masterpiece, a reproduction in coloured wool of a German engraving of the last scene of *Romeo and Juliet*. There was a pea-green Capulet paralytically embracing a sky-blue Montague in the foreground, with a dissolving view of impossibly-constructed servitors of both houses and the County Paris, with six strongly accented bridges to his nose and a worsted tear upon his cheek, in the background. Under this production was worked in white, upon a black ground, the legend which Mrs. Rusker mournfully repeated as she gazed on it—

‘For never was a story of more woe,
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo’;

and as she spoke the words an inspiration flashed into her mind. She had her plan.

The new-born idea so possessed her that she could not sit or rest. It drove her out, as the gad-fly drove Io, to devious wanderings in the neighbouring lanes, and as she walked and walked, finding some little ease in the unusual and incessant exercise, she drew nearer and nearer to the Mountain Farm. As she paused on a little eminence and looked towards it, the distant church bell struck clear across the intervening fields, proclaiming nine o’clock.

‘Thank the Lord,’ said the old woman. ‘I can go now. I dussent go too early. They might suspect.’

She made straight for the house, and found Mrs. Mountain alone. Samson was afield, and in answer to Mrs. Rusker’s inquiries regarding Julia, Mrs. Mountain tearfully informed her that the poor girl was too ill to come downstairs, and had not eaten a crumb of the tempting breakfast prepared and sent to her room for her. Mrs. Mountain was voluble in condemnation of her husband’s lack of wit in his announcement of the matrimonial scheme he had formed for the girl, and Mrs. Jenny was fluent and honest in sympathy. Might she see the girl? Julia was fond of her, and her counsels might bring some comfort. Mrs. Mountain yielded a ready assent, and the old lady went up to the girl’s room, and entering

on the languid summons which followed her knock, saw Julia seated at the window, listless, dejected, and tearful. The tears flowed even more freely at the sight of her, and the girl sobbed on her old friend's breast in full abandonment to the first great grief of her life.

'My dear,' said Mrs. Jenny, when this gush of sorrow was over, 'take a bit o' heart. Things is rarely as bad as they seem; an' there's help at hand always if we on'y know where to look for it.'

There was more meaning, to Julia's thinking, in the tone in which this commonplace condolence was delivered than in the words themselves. Mrs. Rusker's manner was big with mystery.

'Now, my darlin', I know you 'm a brave gal, and can act accordin' when there's rayson for it. I've got a plan as 'll save you yet, if on'y you've got the courage.'

Julia's clasped hands and eager look encouraged her to proceed.

'My dear, you remember *Romeo and Juliet*? You remember how Juliet got the sleepin' draught an' took it?' Julia's look was one of wonder, pure and simple, now. 'That's my plan, my dear, an' the Dudley Divil can do it for us, if on'y you'll ha' the courage to tek it. Not as I mean as you need be buried afore Dick comes to you. We shouldn't go as far as that. But I'll get the stuff, an' it'll send you to sleep, an' they'll think as you're dead, an' then I'll tell 'em how you an'

Dick loved each other so's you couldn't bear to part wi' him, an' the fear of it's killed you. That'll soften their hard hearts, my dear. Old Reddy knows all about it—that's why he's sendin' Dick away to London an' I'll get him fetched back to see the last o' you, an' I'll mek your father an' his father shaäke hands, an' then you'll come to, an' after that what can they do but marry you to Dick, an' forget all that rub-bidge about the brook, an' live in peace together, as decent folk should do.'

Julia's reception of this brilliant scheme, which Mrs. Rusker developed with a volubility which left no opportunity for detailed objection, was to fall back in her chair and begin to cry anew at the sheer hopeless absurdity of it.

'What's the matter wi' the wench?' demanded Mrs. Rusker, almost sternly. 'Come, come,' she continued, her brief anger fading at the sight of Julia's distress, 'have a bit o' sperrit. Now, will you try it? Spake the word, an' I'll goo to the Divil this minute.'

This wholesale self-abandonment in the cause of love produced no effect on Julia, except to frighten her. Mrs. Rusker argued and reasoned, but finding her fears too obdurate to be moved by any such means, left the house in dudgeon, whereat poor Julia only cried the more. But Mrs. Rusker's confidence in her plan was unshaken, and her persistency unchecked. She would save the silly girl against her will, since it must be so, and half an hour after she had crossed the

Mountain threshold she was in her trap, *en route* for the dwelling of the wizard.

She found that celebrity alone, and opened fire on him at once.

‘Rufus, I want thy help, an’ I’m willin’ to pay fur it.’ The necromancer’s fishy eye brightened. Things were going poorly with him, the rising generation followed newer lights unevident in his earlier days, and his visitors were mostly of Mrs. Rusker’s age, and were getting fewer day by day.

‘My skill’s at your service, ma’am, such as it is,’ he answered, with gravity.

‘I want some’at as ’d send a body to sleep—mek ’em sleep for a long time, wi’out hurtin’ ’em. Can you do it?’

‘Why, yis; I could do that much, I think.’ His tone and manner intimated vaguely how much more he could have done, and his disappointment at the facility of his task. ‘But,’ he added prudently, ‘it’s a job as ain’t s’ easy as you might fancy.’

Mrs. Rusker laid a sovereign on the table.

‘Wilt do it for that?’ she asked.

The wizard stole a look at her. She was obviously very much in earnest.

‘The hingredients,’ he said, ‘is hard to find, and harder to mix in doo perportions.’

‘I must have it now, and at once,’ said Mrs. Rusker.

‘That,’ said Rufus, ‘ain’t possible.’ Mrs. Jenny

laid a second piece of gold beside the first. 'It's a dangerous bisness, missus,' he went on. 'Theer's noofangled laws about. 'Twas only last wik as that young upstart, Doctor Hodges, comes an' threatens me with persecution as a rogue an' vagabond, a-obtainin' money under false pertences for practisin' my lawful an' necessary art. Why, it ain't so long since I cured his mother o' the rheumatiz, as is more nor he can dew, wi' all his drugs, an' the pestle an' mortar o'er his door.'

'You ought to know as you're safe wi' me, Rufus,' said Mrs. Rusker. 'Who should I tell? Why, I should tell o' myself tew, at that raäte; an' is that likely?'

'It's dangerous, missus,' repeated the wizard.

'Well, if yo' won't, I must try them as wull,' said Mrs. Jenny, rising and taking up the coins.

'I didn't say as I wouldn't,' returned Rufus. 'Theer's no call to be so uppish. But if I tek a chance like that I expect to be paid for it.'

'Two pound ud mek it wuth your while to do more than that.'

'I'll dew it,' said the wizard. 'Give us the money?'

'Wheer's the stuff?'

'Why, it ain't made yet. D'you think as I can percure a precious hessence like that all of a minute?'

'Then mek it, an' I'll gie you the money.'

'Gi' me a pound in advance, an' I'll bring it to

you.' And on that understanding the bargain was made, and the time fixed for the delivery of the potion. The intervening time was filled in by the astute wizard journeying to a neighbouring town and procuring from a chemist a sleeping draught, which he paid for out of Mrs. Rusker's sovereign. He turned up at Laburnum Cottage at the stipulated hour, handed over the draught (having previously washed off the chemist's label), received his second sovereign, and departed.

Mrs. Rusker, with the fateful bottle in the bosom of her dress, betook herself again to Mountain Farm. Her unfeigned interest in the patient, and the intimacy she had so long enjoyed with the whole family, made the house almost as free to her as was her own, and when she took possession of Julia in the capacity of nurse she was made welcome, and the poor girl's other attendants hoped much from her ministration. Julia was undoubtedly very ill, so ill that even Samson Mountain forbore to force her to descend to the parlour in which Mr. Tom Raybould nervously awaited her coming, and where, on Samson's return from his daughter's chamber, the pair sat and drank their beer together in miserable silence, broken by spasmodic attempts at conversation regarding crops and politics. The doctor had been called in, and, knowing nothing of the grief which was the poor girl's only ailment, had been too puzzled by the symptoms of her malady to be of any great service. She was feverish, excited, with a furred tongue and a hot skin. He had prescribed

a mild tonic and departed. Mrs. Jenny, intent on the execution of her plan, gained solitary charge of her patient by telling Mrs. Mountain that her attendance on her daughter had already told upon her, and advising a few hours' rest.

'I don't feel very well,' Mrs. Mountain confessed. 'Not a wink o' sleep have I had iver since Samson came home last night. Nor him nayther, for the matter o' that, though he tried to desave me by snorin', whinever I spoke to him; an' as for any sympathy—well, you know him aforetime, Jenny—I might as well talk to that theer poker.'

Then Jenny was fluent in condolence, and at last got the old lady out of the room.

'When did you take your medicine last, my dear?' she asked the patient. 'Ain't it time as you had another drop?'

'It doesn't do me any good,' said the patient fretfully. She knew better herself what was wrong with her than anybody else could guess, and only longed passionately to be alone and free to think and cry over her lost love and broken hopes.

'Why, my dear, you've on'y took one dose yit,' said Machiavel. 'You must give it time. I'll pour you out another.' Her back was towards the patient as she clattered about among the glasses on the table with a shaking hand. She poured out the wizard's potion, the phial clinking against the edge of the glass like a castanet, and her heart beating so that she almost

feared Julia would hear it. The girl at first pettishly refused the draught, but Mrs. Jenny, in her guilty agitation, made short work of her objections, and poured it down her throat almost by main force.

‘Maids must do as their elders bid ’em,’ she said, as she returned the glass to its place.

‘It doesn’t taste the same,’ moaned the patient.

‘You’re like all th’ other sick folk I iver nursed. As full o’ fancies as you can stick,’ said Mrs. Jenny. ‘Lie quiet, and try an’ go to sleep.’

The girl lay silent, and Mrs. Jenny, more than half wishing the whole business had never been begun, sat and listened to her breathing. She stirred and sighed once or twice, but after a while lay so utterly still that the old lady ventured to approach the bed. Julia’s face was almost as white as her pillow, and her breath was so light that it hardly stirred the coverlet above her bosom.

‘It’s a-workin,’ said Mrs. Rusker.

VI

MRS. JENNY'S simple faith in the talents of Rufus Smith underwent a severe trial during the ensuing night. She had left Julia still sleeping, and the memory of the last glance she had bestowed upon the white face in the light of the carefully-shaded candle haunted her all night, and roused a foreboding too dismal to be expressed, or even formulated in definite thought. The matchmaker lay and trembled all night at that terrible idea, and again the pale-faced dawn visited a sleepless pillow, and found her haggard with anxiety and lack of sleep. Juliet's query to the Friar had been, 'What if the potion should not work?' but Mrs. Jenny's terrified inquiry of her own soul was, 'What if it had worked too well?' What if it had killed Julia in very deed? It was too horrible to happen, Mrs. Jenny said to herself. Too horrible to think of. But, if it had happened, she would have nothing else to think of all her life, and the fancy drove her nearly mad.

She was dressed and afoot even earlier than on the preceding morning. She crept out and encircled the

Mountain Farm in a radius of a mile or thereabouts, looking anxiously towards it at every step, as if its silent walls might speak comfort or confirm her fears, even at that distance. The house looked peaceful enough amid its surrounding trees under the tranquilly broadening light of dawn, but Mrs. Rusker knew how ghastly white the face of the poor child she loved as her own might look in that roseate glow. Presently a thin line of smoke curled from a chimney on the noiseless air. The farm was waking to its daily round of life. A burly figure on horseback came towards her as she stood on a little eminence. She waited long enough to identify Samson Mountain, and hid among the ferns and bushes until the horse's hoof-beats had clattered swiftly by on the stony road below her, and faded in the distance.

Time crept on, slow but inexorable. She longed, as she had never longed before for anything, for the courage to go to the farmhouse and ask tidings of Julia. But her fear was greater than her longing, and she roamed at random in a circle, never losing sight of the house, but not daring to approach it or be seen from its windows. She dreaded what might be the news to greet her there. She feared her own face, with its haggard lines of sleeplessness and anxious watching. At last, from the very depths of her misery, she plucked the heart of despairing hope, and made for the farm. The farm labourers and country folk she met stared after her. Even their bovine

understandings were troubled by her scared face. She scarcely saw them, or anything but the farmhouse, which drew her now with an influence as strong as its repulsion had been an hour ago. She entered the house by the back door, and made straight for the sitting-room. Mrs. Mountain was there, arranging a tray, on which were tea and jam and other homely luxuries. She wore her ordinary look of placid contentment, and at the sight of her quiet face Mrs. Rusker dropped panting, with a vague unformulated feeling of relief, into a chair.

‘Sakes alive! Whativer is the matter?’ demanded Mrs. Mountain.

‘Julia!’ panted the visitor. ‘How’s Julia?’

‘Why,’ said Mrs. Mountain, ‘how should her be?’

‘Is she awake yet?’ asked Mrs. Jenny, more calmly.

‘No. Her was sleepin’ when I seed her, jist for a minute, a hour ago. I’m jist goin’ upstairs wi’ some breakfast for her. Well, I declare, yo’ look as pale as a ghost. What’s the matter with you?’

‘Oh, I’ve passed a miserable night,’ said Mrs. Jenny, in unconscious quotation from her favourite poet. ‘I couldn’t sleep a-thinkin’ o’ Julia.’

‘Well, then, you do look poorly,’ said her hostess, with all her motherly heart warmed by this solicitude for her daughter. ‘Why, theer’s no cause to fret i’ that way. To be sure, Samson might ha’ knowed better than to blunder such a thing as that right out, but, then, he’s a man, and that’d account for a’most

anything. Married life might teach 'em better, you'd think, and yet after nigh on forty year on it he knows no more about women folk than any bachelor i' Barfield. Theer, tek your bonnet off, an' I'll gi' ye a cup o' tay, an' then you can goo upstairs wi' me and see the wench.'

Mrs. Jenny gratefully accepted the proffered tea, and, having drunk it, much to her inward refreshment, accompanied Mrs. Mountain upstairs. As the latter had said, the girl was sleeping still, and Mrs. Rusker saw that her position had not changed by a hair's breadth. She lay like a carven statue, her face marble white in the clear morning light.

'I'm a'most doubtful about wakin' her,' said her mother. 'Theer's no doubt as Samson gi'en her a shock, an' sleep's good for her. But her's had welly fifteen hours of it now, if she's been asleep all the time. Julia, my love,' she said softly, almost in the sleeper's ear. 'My sakes, how pale her is. Jenny! come here!'

They both bent above her. Mrs. Rusker's heart was beating like a muffled drum, and seemed, to her own ears, to fill the house with its pulsation.

'Julia!' said Mrs. Mountain again, in a louder voice, and shook the girl with a tremulous hand, 'Julia!'

The white eyelids did not even stir.

'My blessid! Julia! Don't skeer a body i' this way!' She shook the girl again. 'Jenny! whativer's come to the silly wench?'

Mrs. Jenny was more frightened, and with better reason, than her companion. Julia's marble pallor, and the awful stillness of her form—the keenest glance could not detect a quiver in the face or a heave of the bosom—almost stilled that exigent pulse within her own breast with a sudden anguish of despair.

‘Oh, Jenny, she's a-dyin'!’

Mrs. Mountain's scream rang through the house, and startled every soul within it, except that marble figure on the bed. Hurried steps came up the stairs, the heavy tread of a man, the light patter of women's feet, and the room filled as if by magic.

‘Fetch a doctor,’ screamed Mrs. Jenny; ‘Julia's a-dyin'!’

Samson Mountain stood for one moment with his hands aloft and his eyes glaring at his daughter. Then he dropped with a sobbing groan into a chair, with his head in his hands. There was a general scream from the women. One, more serviceable than the rest, called from the window to a gaping yokel below in the yard, and bade him ride for help. Her face and voice froze him for a moment, but he caught the words ‘Miss Julia,’ and two minutes after he was astride a broad-backed plough-horse, making for the distant village.

Samson Mountain sat with his face hidden and spoke no word; at the sight of him his wife's face had turned to sudden rage, and she stood over him like a ruffled hen, and clacked commination of masculine imbecility, intermixed with wild complaints for her child.

Julia slept through the tumult as she had slept through the calm, and Mrs. Jenny, kneeling beside her with her face in the bedclothes, moaned love and penitent despair. Samson raised his head at last, and looked with a dazed stare first at his daughter and then at his wife, and left the room without a word, pursued by a hailstorm of reproach. He went into the yard and pottered aimlessly about, looking old and broken on a sudden. The sound of horses' hoofs roused him; it was the rustic messenger returning.

'Where's the doctor?' demanded Samson.

'Gone to Heydon Hey. What am I to dew?'

'Follow him an' fetch him back. Hast not gump-tion enough to know that?' asked Samson wearily. The man started again, and Samson began once more his purposeless wanderings about the yard. He had no sense of time or place, only a leaden weight on heart and limb, which in all his life he had never known before. He leaned his elbows on the fence of the fold yard, and became conscious of a running figure which neared him rapidly. He watched it stupidly, and it was within twenty yards of him before he recognised it—Dick Reddy, dust and mud to the collar, hatless, and panting.

'Julia!' he gasped. 'Tell me, is it true?'

'Julia's dyin',' said Samson. 'My God!' he cried, with sudden passion, as if his own voice had unlocked the sealed fountain of his grief, 'my little gell's a-dyin'!'

'Mr. Mountain,' said Dick, 'I love her, you know I love her. Let me see her.' His voice, broken with fatigue and emotion, his streaming eyes, his outstretched hands, all pleaded with his words.

'It's all one who sees her now,' said Samson, and leaned his elbows on the fence again. Dick took the despairing speech for a permission, and entered the house. At the bottom of the stairs, in the otherwise deserted hall, he met Mrs. Jenny, a very moving statue of terror.

'Dick,' she said, clutching the young man by the arm, 'I can't abear it any longer. Come in here wi' me.' She pulled him into a side room, and sitting down, abandoned herself to weeping, wringing her hands, and moaning.

'I can't abear it any longer,' she repeated. 'I must tell somebody, an' I'll tell you. It's all my wicked cruel fault.'

The old woman was so crazed with her secret that she would have spoken in the shadow of the gibbet. Ramblingly and incoherently, with many breaks for tears and protestations and self-accusation, she told her story.

'I've killed her, Dick. But it was for your sake and hers as I done it. I reckon they'll hang me, an' it'll serve me right.' She besought him not to betray her, and, in the same breath, announced her intention to surrender herself at once to the parish constable; and, indeed, between fear and remorse and sorrow for

the hopeless love she had striven to befriend, was nearly mad. Dick heard her with such amazement as may be best imagined, and suddenly, with a cry that rang in her ears for many a long day afterwards, ran from her and scaled the stairs to Julia's room, led thither by the sound of Mrs. Mountain's weeping. The old woman stared, as well she might, at the intrusion, with a wonder which for a moment conquered sorrow. He went straight to the bed, and leaned over the stark figure upon it.

'She's not dead yet,' he said, more to himself than to the grief-stricken mother. Mrs. Mountain heard the words, and clutched his arm. He turned to her. 'Trust me,' he said, 'and I'll save her.' The wild hope in the mother's eyes was terrible to see. 'I love her,' said Dick. 'You will trust me? Do as I bid you, and you shall have Julia back in an hour.'

Samson Mountain meanwhile wandered in the same purposeless fashion about the farm, and held dumb converse with himself. He was a rough man, something of a brute—a good deal of an animal—but animals have their affections, and he loved Julia as well as it was in his nature to love anything. It was ingrained in him by nature and by years of unquestioned domination to bully and browbeat all defenceless people; but Julia, the most defenceless of his surroundings, had been treated always with a lighter hand. Childlike, she had taken advantage of

her immunity in many little ways, and though Samson had never forborne to bluster at her girlish insubordination, he rather liked it than not, and relished his daughter's independence and spirit. Julia was the only creature in the household who dared to hold her own against him. He was proud of her beauty and what he called her 'lurning,' and, more or less grumbly, petted her a good deal, and would have spoiled her had she been of spoilable material. But till this heavy blow fell he had never sounded the depths of his own affection for her. The suddenness of the blow stunned and bewildered him. He remembered his words to Dick during their stormy interview in the road, when he had said that he would rather see Julia dead than married to him. Had Providence taken him at his word? He did not say it, he did not even think it consciously, but he would have submitted to almost any conceivable indignity at the hands of Abel Reddy himself, to have felt his daughter's arms about his neck again. Little incidents of Julia's past life were fresh and vivid in his memory. He had forgotten many of them, years ago, but they sprang up in his mind now, like things of yesterday.

He had wandered back to the front of the house, and sat upon the rustic bench beside the porch, with his elbows propped upon his knees, and his eyes hidden in his shaking hands, when a voice fell on his ear.

'Neighbour!'

He raised his head. Abel Reddy stood before him.

With something of the old instinct of hatred he had believed to be unconquerable he rose and straightened himself before the hereditary enemy.

‘Neighbour,’ said Reddy again. The word was pacific, but Mountain’s blurred eyes, dim with pain and dazzled by the sunlight, could not see the pity in his old enemy’s face, and he waited doggedly. ‘It’s come to my ears as you’re i’ sore trouble. So am I. Your trouble’s mine, though not so great for me as it is for you. I was wi’ Dick when he heard o’ your daughter’s danger, an’ what I’d suspected a long time I know now to be the truth. I did my best to keep ’em apart—it was that as Dick was going to London for. It seemed to behove me to come to you and offer you my hand i’ your affliction. I take shame to myself that I didn’t mek an effort to end our quarrel long ago. We’re gettin’ on in life, Mr. Mountain, and we’ve got th’ excuse o’ hot blood no longer.’

Therewith he held out his hand, and Samson, with hanging head, took it with a growl, which might have been anathema or blessing. And as the life-long enemies stood so linked, a window was suddenly opened above, and Mrs. Mountain’s voice screamed to her husband,

‘Samson! Her’s alive! Her’s awake!’ Both men looked up, and beheld an unexpected picture framed by the open window, Dick violently embraced by Mrs. Mountain, and submitting to the furious assault with obvious goodwill.

‘When the liquor’s out, why clink the cannikin?’ The story of Julia and her Romeo, like all other stories, had found its end, and merged a little later into the history of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Reddy. The family feud was buried, and Samson and Abel made very passable grandfathers and dwelt in peace one with another. Dick never told a living soul, not even Julia herself, of the stratagem by which Mrs. Jenny had succeeded in uniting them, and Mrs. Jenny, by complete reticence on the subject, disproved the time-worn calumny which declares woman’s inability to keep a secret.

THE END

