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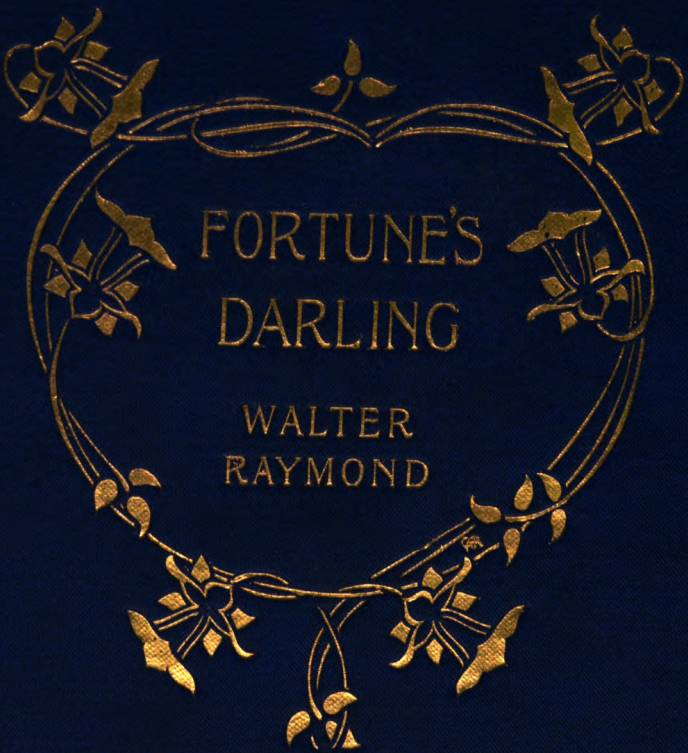
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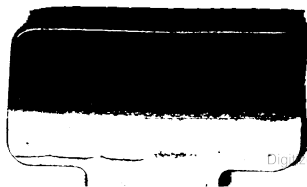
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FORTUNE'S
DARLING

WALTER
RAYMOND

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FORTUNE'S DARLING

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

TRYPHENA IN LOVE

TWO MEN O' MENDIP

GOOD SOULS OF CIDERLAND

FORTUNE'S DARLING

BY

WALTER RAYMOND

METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON
1901



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BOOK I

OAKLEIGH AND BRISTLINGTON

B

FORTUNE'S DARLING

CHAPTER I

A GLANCE AT OAKLEIGH

IT was in the last of the days when rail and steam were still regarded in remoter parts of the West of England with mingled curiosity and apprehension, whilst coaches still ran and rural wisdom was still a home-made article, that those incidents befell which laid the foundation and were the beginning of this true story.

At that time, journeying being slow and fraught with great discomfort, country people lived at home. None but the very rich or the wildly adventurous desired to travel far afield. Thus undistracted attention was directed upon things around; observation became more and more neighbourly and minute, exercising itself chiefly with the meanderings towards matrimony of such as were single, the immediate expectation of offspring on the part of others who were wed, the redistribution of riches when death in a wealthy family necessitated a fresh deal, and similar considerations, so homely, so invigorating and health-giving for the brain, that even the strongest mind did not wander.

And people in those days were frank. You might have learnt the whole private life and inner history of everybody in Oakleigh whilst buying a bootlace of Miss Keziah Crane. Yet of all her virtues—and she was full of them—there was one in particular of which Miss Keziah Crane was justly proud.

She was “no gad-about”—no, nor never had been from the days of her growing up. Although a buxom spinster, weighing sixteen stone two, eight years ago, when slung in an armchair from Butcher Helyar's beam and scales, not one ounce of flightiness entered into her constitution. Not one drop of frivolity tempered her blood, although she carried a complexion which many people considered too fresh-coloured for health.

No, day after day for more than a quarter of a century she had sat in her shop in all the dignity of wealth. Red herrings in boxes, bladders of lard, stay-laces, bootlaces, fitches of bacon, and triangular cuts of cheese, were ranged around. There were long, lean rushlights on the shelf close to her hand, and tallow dips of every degree of corpulence suspended from the beam above her head. Upon the counter by her side she kept in summer a quart cup of garden flowers, to make the air sweet and keep the place fresh. For a long, though not altogether silent, contemplation of the wisdom of Providence had brought Miss Keziah Crane to the conclusion that flowers were sent in plenty during the hot weather to yield a cool smell and take off the heat, but only a few in winter, when they were not so much wanted, and, except to please the eye, could be done without. She affirmed that the scent of evening, after a sultry day, proved this—a belief which some people may be inclined to doubt; but then, Miss Keziah Crane was a natural philosopher, and really subtle

argument can never be followed by an unreasoning world at large.

But to-day, although it was not Sunday, the shop was shut.

The half-hatch doors, opening top and under one without the other, were both closed and bolted fast; the shutters were left up. It was a day of leisure in Oakleigh—of leisure and suppressed excitement.

A little before noon a strange rumour fluttered about the village. It was reported, on the testimony of a credible eyewitness—no other than Mrs. William Cotching, from the little farm on the hillside, who had been to the back door to beg the favour of a pennyworth of snuff—that Miss Keziah Crane was “all a-zot in her chintz-covered armchair in the parlour, in the black bought five years ago, when her poor sister Rachel were a-put underground, and never put on since, and no need to, thank God!—for all the world like the Queen of Sheba on her throne in the Scriptures, her very own self.”

This striking description so fired the imagination of Oakleigh, that every woman and girl in the parish within half an hour independently came by the idea of calling upon Miss Keziah Crane to beg the kindness of some useful but inexpensive commodity. There was a wonderful unanimity in favour of snuff.

“Walk straight in, please,” shouted Miss Keziah Crane from within. Her eye had just caught sight of a head flitting quickly by the parlour window, between the clematis and honeysuckle that hung around like a thick bower.

“Why, ’tis Sally Hallett! So ’tis!” she cried aloud, in that tone of unreal astonishment which conveys the very warmest of welcomes.

Selina Hallett was tall and lean, with a long jaw and thin cheeks that sunk into hollows below her rather prominent cheekbones. She was the daughter of old John Hallett up at the Whorbury Mill. But Selina, although possessed of graces all her own, was by no means the miller's daughter of poetry. She was a strong, hard-working girl of five-and-twenty, who could move about sacks like a man; and to-day, as she ran into Miss Keziah Crane's parlour in a white sun-bonnet and cotton frock, the light of midday shining on her face revealed a thin covering of wheaten flour, which had settled on her sandy hair, on her brows, and the long lashes above her light blue eyes, and gave to her complexion a quality as delicate as Dresden china. But the characteristic that endeared Selina to her friends was mental. Meet her where you would, she could always find something to say for herself—so she could.

"Aunt Keziah!" panted the girl, "I just ran up to beg o' ee if you could let father have half a ounce o' scented just to go on wi'—but la!—"

Selina stopped suddenly. The grandeur of Aunt Keziah Crane took away her breath more effectually than the haste at which she had come in. Mrs. William Cotching had spoken no more than the truth. Aunt Keziah was enthroned in full funereal splendour, just as had been described, with her ample black skirt spreading out around half over the parlour floor.

"Why, Aunt Keziah!" gasped Selina. "Why, you've a-put on your black glassy silk with the fringe trimming all in v's, both skirt and body. Well! who but you would ha' thought o' it?"

Miss Keziah Crane was so pleased with this admiration that she was forced to adopt a tone of severity to conceal her pride.

"I put it on as a mark of respect," she said, with a solemn nod of the head; "but also to take out the creases. For a crease left long enough is a crack, Sally Hallett, and you mind that."

"But you do mean to go to the church, Aunt Keziah, for certain—or not a soul'll see or know what you've a-done," argued Selina with warmth.

Miss Keziah Crane only smoothed out her lap with both fat hands, and replied with complacency—

"I ben't no gad-about."

Then she heard steps, and looked round all alert.

"Whose head is that, Sally Hallett, popped past window?" she asked in an excited whisper. "Walk straight in, please. Why, 'tis Dorothy Chick! So 'tis. Dear! dear!"

And so it was—a little plump, black-eyed, black-haired wife of about five-and-thirty, and the merriest talker within the sound of Oakleigh bells. And close upon her heels followed Mary Jane Baker, and Hannah Jones, and others too numerous to mention, until it really appeared that all Oakleigh had come to see Miss Keziah Crane; for there were more customers dropping in, in this informal way that morning, than on the busiest day in the shop.

"Now do ee let I, aunt," implored Sally Hallett considerately, "for fear you should spot yourself."

And so Aunt Keziah sat up as if holding a reception, and Selina carried the brown jar back to the little round oak table in the corner, and weighed out the snuff.

Well, they chattered, generally all together, but at intervals not more than two at a time. And when the first flush of their admiration for the "glassy silk" was past, and everybody had felt it critically between finger

and thumb, they fell to talking of the one person who was uppermost in their hearts that day, Miss Margaret Lane.

"I be glad o' my life," cried little Mrs. Chick, her black eyes sparkling as she spoke, "when I do think that 'tis she that is to be lady of Oakleigh from this day on. I said to Chick, I did, on the very morning that the thing of a fox came over from Whorbury Wood the night before and bit off the heads of fourteen of Sally Hallett's pullets—for she told me so herself, didn't ee, Sally?—I said, 'Chick,' I said, 'thank the Almighty that ull be one a body can speak to.'"

"An' so you did, Dorothy Chick," replied Selina Hallett, turning round with the snuff-shovel raised in her hand. "For we stood a minute out of the sun where the churchyard yew do overhang the path."

"An' so we did! so we did!" cried little Dorothy Chick, growing excited at this testimony to her truthfulness. "An' you had a dozen, or maybe a dozen to a score, o' green stubbard apples in your apron——"

"An' so I had! so I had!" shouted Selina.

But Miss Keziah Crane, to command silence, raised both her hands. She had something to impart—something really appertaining to the subject of their conversation.

"Now, talking of apples," she began very slowly, and nodding mysteriously to each phrase, "a party came into my shop—it was a female, though I mention no names, but a party well to do—come then, two years ago last apple-blowing—and she said to me, she said: 'Now there's Miss Margaret Lane,' she said, 'whether a-walking or a-riding or a-zot up to drive, she do look, to my mind,' she said, 'wherever 'tis or when, so sweet as blossom in the month o' May. And I don't believe

there's a harsh thought in her whole 'atomy.' So there, and that was a scholar, too!"

There followed a chorus of praise and goodwill.

"I do believe," cried Dorothy Chick, shrill with enthusiasm and determined to be heard, "she's the very best heart—that ever wore shoe-leather."

"She do wear her soles to a hole right in the very middle," said Hannah Jones instructively, for she was the cobbler's wife, and knew. "And that's a sure sign o' luck and an even disposition."

And then there was a chorus: "An' so 'tis"; "Never known to fail"; "And that's a proof, you see, for she've a-got both."

"Well, I must be getting on," said Dorothy Chick reflectively. "Thank ee kindly, Miss Keziah Crane. You'll be stepping across to the church, I suppose?"

But again Keziah shook her head, and from a consciousness of strict sobriety of behaviour extending over nearly three-score years, her answer sounded a little lofty.

"I do keep my parish church o' Sunday," she said, "but I ben't no gad-about."

Then her visitors, who could lay no claim to such unwavering virtue, one by one took their departure, and the good woman was left alone.

But as she sat in the solitude of her parlour a longing for change slowly crept over her, a sort of yearning to go where she knew for a certainty all Oakleigh had already gone. She half wished she had not spoken so decidedly about the church. There are ceremonies which appeal to the human heart, and she felt herself drawn by an irresistible attraction. A quarter of a century of duty, taking the form of devotion to her little shop, had admitted no holiday, and upon this

occasion of enforced idleness she found herself wasting her time. To be sitting out creases was not enough, and there was no longer any full contentment in being "no gad-about." She never had been a gad-about, and never would; but she got up and went out into the sunlight behind the back door. The fact is, Miss Keziah Crane, demoralised by the excitement of Oakleigh, was suffering a restless desire to "gad."

She loitered, trifling with temptation. She strolled slowly down her garden path between the rank of broad beans in pod and the green peas still in flower, and stood by a small gate opening upon a narrow lane. All Oakleigh would be at the church by this time, or at least standing in the street to watch. There would be nobody to find her out. She would just walk to the bend, half-way up the hill, and there, unseen and unsuspected, look down upon the village. There could be no better place to see.

It was early afternoon, the hour in summer when the air is still and the singing birds rest from song. Everywhere the sky was blue, clear and bright above the tree-tops, but melting into a pale atmospheric haze in the distance between the hills. Everywhere the full sunlight came pouring down in all its glory. It gleamed upon the level meads, covered thick with burnished gold-cups, along the river side. It shone upon the water and lit up the woods in masses of glowing light and mysterious shade. It rested upon two sides of the little belfry of Oakleigh church, throwing its square quaintness into bold relief against the sombre darkness of the churchyard yew; and it slept upon the broad front of Oakleigh Court.

But to-day the mansion, the gardens, lawns, and richly-timbered park were left in solitude. A peacock

was standing upon the stone balustrade; but no one strolled at leisure upon the terrace, and no one was anywhere at work. All the borders and flower-beds glowed with a vivid wealth of mingled colour, that told with how much pride and love the place was cared for. The doors within the great porch were standing wide open.

But this loneliness, which might appear so strange, did indeed for the moment add to the stately dignity and enchanting beauty of the ancient walls. This hour of early afternoon was fortunate. The slanting golden light shone across the square projecting bay windows, gilding each edge of every fluted mullion, and discovering the subtle mystery of the narrow arches resting above. All the art of him who built so long ago stood there in its perfect symmetry and completeness. There was no battlement, no cusp or moulding, no coin or jutting stone, from the rounded chimney-caps to the level flooring of the porch, that did not stand out a miracle of light and shade. And everything was glorified with the spirit of antiquity and romance, except that upon the eastern wing, great patches of new, unmellowed masonry, grafted and dovetailed into the weather-beaten old, shone with a brighter-coloured, sharp-edged actuality of the present upon a mouldering past.

To the mind of Miss Keziah Crane all this magnificence represented only the future lot of Miss Margaret Lane.

"Ah! Fortune's darling!" she said softly beneath her breath. "An' so she is."

Upon the causeway opposite the gates stood groups of village folk, and an old-fashioned coach, with a row of lesser carriages behind, was drawn up in the street.

The coach was from the Hall at Whorbury, and sure enough, there sat the coachman on the box. There were village people also in the graveyard and waiting near to the church door.

The little church stood so close to the mansion that it seemed to belong to it. A short path, ornamented with holly bushes that glistened to-day like silver, led from the front entrance to an arched gateway in the churchyard wall.

There was a slight commotion amongst the people standing outside. They stood back, and presently a short procession came slowly out of the church, passed into the garden, and took its way between the lawns towards the house. Miss Keziah Crane looked intently. She could recognise everybody there, and she ran them all over by name, talking to herself in a whisper. First, of course, was Miss Margaret, so tall and straight—taller, even to-day with her head bent, than Dr. Podymore who walked by her side. Then came Mrs. Oswin with Lawyer Kinton, of Bristlington; and little Miss Henrietta Oswin with Mr. John Pudsey, the Mayor; and Mr. Job Oswin, whose name was always in the paper; and Ebenezer Platt. Yes, to be sure, they were both kin, though distant, and would go back to the house.

Then a fine, handsome man—still hale, though elderly and grey-haired—stepped briskly from the door under the belfry. He stopped, looked around somewhat impatiently, but was quickly joined by a sunburnt youth of three or four-and-twenty, with a frank-looking face. They walked together through the churchyard to the carriage waiting in the road.

“The old Squire Rumblelow, of Whorbury,” muttered Miss Keziah Crane reverentially. “And the young squire so well.”

She was already greatly impressed, for it was the funeral of her late landlord, Mr. Josiah Oswin, that had just taken place, but the knowledge that both squires of Whorbury had attended the church seemed both to increase the respect due to Miss Margaret Lane and to deepen the solemnity of death.

But lo! in half a minute the people would be hurrying all ways, down street and up, talking of whatever had taken place.

Miss Keziah Crane turned about and bustled quickly home to her parlour, so as to cool and be ready if any neighbours should chance to look in to give her full particulars about the coffin and the vault.

CHAPTER II

UNCLE JOSIAH'S WILL

THE procession of mourners had not entirely passed through the porch into the great hall of Oakleigh Court, when Margaret Lane silently withdrew her hand from the arm of old Dr. Podymore, and hastily ascended the broad oak staircase. Out of sight of the guests—some of whom, although they were relatives, she only slightly knew—she was free to give way to her pent-up emotion. The tears she had with difficulty withheld fell fast, and as she hurried down the long passage leading to her own room she sobbed aloud. There she threw herself upon the bed and cried.

It was over, and poor Uncle Jos was gone for ever.

She had known this before. Ever since the night when they sat waiting in silent expectation, knowing the end so close at hand, until at last old Dr. Podymore came in with noiseless steps to whisper that he had passed away, her brain had accepted the unalterable fact. She had seen it everywhere around her—in the increased respect of the servants, some of whom had known her from childhood; in the obsequious deference of the tradespeople who came from Bristlington to wait upon her. And every little matter had been brought for her sanction and approval, so that to all intents and purposes she was already mistress of Oakleigh Court.

And yet, though each moment came thus laden with some fresh significance, those last few days had passed like a dream. She was too benumbed with sorrow to give way to grief. But when the crumbling dust rattled upon the coffin-lid there came to her a full sense of her deep loss, and her heart understood.

She was alone, and poor Uncle Jos was gone for ever.

They had not once been parted since she was brought to Oakleigh, a little child. He had given her everything she possessed, everything she ever had. He had been everything to her, even more than father—companion, and of late years confidential friend.

“Uncle Jos! Oh, Uncle Jos!”

She kept moaning his name out of a gratitude never more to be uttered in his hearing, out of a dumb love that was never again to be told.

“Poor Uncle Jos!” It was impossible to think of Oakleigh without him. She was there nearly twenty years ago, when he restored the place. She had ridden with him wherever he went, carried his net and basket by the river-side in spring, tramped over the stubble after the partridges in September. How proud he was of Oakleigh and all that was his! how angry once when Juno, the pointer bitch, ran in and flushed the birds! And he had left it all. Nothing would be ever the same without him. His very vanities and follies, as they now arose unbidden in her memory, endeared him all the more. They were so weak and human that her heart melted at the thought of them.

“Poor Uncle Jos! Dear Uncle Jos!”

But time was passing, and at last she made an effort to control her sobs. She might presently be wanted. She rose hastily from the bed, walked across the room and drew up one of the long, narrow blinds between the

mullions of a lattice-window which still retained many panes of green and ancient glass. The room was in the oldest portion of the house. Two deep beams of oak, axe-hewn and dark with age, ran across the ceiling, and above the fireplace was a mantling and shield with armorial bearings carved in stone. The furniture was all of oak. She had always loved whatever was old, and Uncle Jos, to please her, sometimes bought a piece secretly and conveyed it there when she was out. He was so full of surprises—Uncle Jos. She went to the basin standing in the recess formed by the great chimney, poured out water, and tried to bathe away the traces of her tears.

There came a hurried, nervous rap upon the door, which at the same time, however, partly opened without waiting for response or permission. Then the head of a young woman of about her own age—she was not quite three-and-twenty—was thrust inside.

“Maggie! Maggie!” it called in a whisper hoarse with awe, yet quivering with excitement.

The face was dark and thin, expressive of a passionate energy so uncommon amongst English people that it could not fail to attract attention anywhere. Yet it possessed a striking beauty all its own. The complexion was not sallow exactly, but of a dusky pallor, often spoken of as olive, which, wherever you may chance to find it, belongs of good right to the South. The lips were thin, and so pale in colour that now, being compressed with nervous excitement, they could scarcely be seen. The chin was deep and sharp and strong. The eyes were very dark and large. They were so searching and full of restless eagerness that it would be trivial merely to speak of them as bright. The brows were almost straight and very low, and over

the forehead, which narrowed a little towards the top, fell a wealth of wavy jet-black hair. Ribbons could not bind it, coils could not keep it in, and pins were powerless to hold in place the rare abundance that hung across the brow, half hiding the ear in its rich dark curves.

"Are you ready, Maggie? They are waiting. We ought not to be long. We must go down."

These sentences were spoken in the same rapid, eager whisper, but with marked pauses between them. Then Henrietta Oswin—Hetty she was generally called—came into the room.

Her step was nervous, and her breathing short and quick. She was deeply agitated, that was clearly to be seen, for her hands trembled, and now and again her fingers twitched; but there were no tears in her eyes, and she had not lost her self-control. She was extremely small and slight, with rather narrow shoulders, and a bust that looked flat, as if by some mistake it had been meant for a boy. With all her energy and apparent force of will, most likely because of them, it was quite plain that she was very frail.

The splashing of water ceased. Margaret Lane, who had been bending over the basin, raised her head and stood upright, but did not turn round. She was still weeping, and at intervals gave way to a sudden, uncontrollable sob.

"I can't go down," she wailed in great distress, "I can't. I really cannot. You go down, Hetty, to be company for aunt. They must excuse me. That will do very well."

"It is impossible," replied the other girl imperatively, and then with a tinge of envy she added, "We are only visitors. You are the mistress."

"I can't picture it—or—or realise it—or—or bear to think of it at all. Poor Uncle Jos! Dear Uncle Jos!"

Henrietta Oswin laid her hand upon her cousin's arm. They were both in the deepest mourning, but as they stood close together the contrast between them was very marked, Margaret Lane was so much taller, and her hair was of a ruddy gold.

"You must calm yourself," urged Hetty, not unkindly, but still with some nervous irritability. She reached a towel from the horse close by, and then her voice sank into a low tone that sounded almost coaxing. "There, dry your cheeks. Sit down a minute, and calm yourself. You had better go. They are to read the will. It would be disrespectful to stay away."

No argument could have been more effectual.

"Who is down there?" asked Margaret Lane very quietly. It was a complete surrender of all her opposition; for as she spoke she crossed to the looking-glass before the window, glanced at herself, took up a brush and smoothed back her hair, which was wet.

"Oh, His Worship—old Job Oswin and that man Platt," replied Hetty in a tone of contempt. "I suppose they hope for some small remembrance. But did you see? Squire Rumblelow, of Whorbury, and the young Squire both came to the church."

"I think that was nice of them," replied Maggie Lane, with a sigh. "Come."

She passed out first and went down the long passage, Hetty following close behind. Upon the landing she stopped, with her hand upon the oak balustrade. Then Hetty took her arm, and they slowly descended the broad staircase together. Bracher, the old butler, was shuffling across the hall, noiseless, yet very busy, a decanter in each hand. He set them down upon the table

beside a row of tall hats covered with long silk hat-bands, to go back and open the dining-room door. There was quite a hum of conversation within, which ceased at once as the girls entered.

Old Dr. Podymore, with grave dignity, advanced to meet them. There followed a little shuffling of places, as with great solemnity the old gentleman offered his arm to Margaret Lane and led her across the room to a chair made vacant by a large open fireplace, that she might sit by her Aunt Oswin, an extremely emotional little body, for the present obscure in crape and pocket-handkerchief.

Old Dr. Podymore was an important figure in the neighbourhood of Oakleigh and Bristlington.

He was quite one of the old school, so people said, with his grave courtesies to "the ladies" and his genial good-fellowship with the men. He went in black breeches and silk hose and shoes with buckles on them. The front of his white shirt was goffered most beautifully, and his coat was "flop-tailed" and cut away, so that it showed the black-watered ribbon and heavy gold seal hanging from his fob.

He looked, in fact, a most wonderful specimen of the genial "old boy." For he was short in stature and clean-shaven, and had kept his youth in a way that was quite astonishing. Not by taking his own physic, you may be sure. He had never in his life felt the need of physic, except for other people, and for them he prescribed with a liberal jollity belonging to bygone days. And his face was a picture. A snowy neck-cloth threw up the colour, which was fresh and ruddy, and his features were such as are generally described as "good." A Roman nose, a mouth well-formed and small, and turning up at the corners in a manner distinctly humorous, two

chins, and a head quite bald down the middle, with locks of white hair that projected over the ears, and turned up as if they had taken the shape of the wonderful curly-brimmed hat in which he was usually seen. Such was the inventory of his personal charms.

Of late years, alas! he had become rather stout; but nothing, of course, to interfere with his activity; just a creditable roundness and no more. And the man must have sadly neglected his opportunities indeed, who at his time of life—some threescore years and ten—can, without bending, look at his shoes. Anyway, he tripped across the room to his seat as sprightly as a cock-robin. And where in nature can you find a creature wearing his waistcoat fuller in front than that bright-eyed, delightful little bird?

A hush of expectation fell upon the company as he sat down by the side of Lawyer Kinton, in whose hand was the will.

Lawyer Kinton, a very precise gentleman, also shaven, but with a very lean face, took out his handkerchief, selected a corner, breathed upon the glasses of his gold spectacles, and, whilst carefully polishing them between finger and thumb, glanced around.

Each of the guests had assumed his own especial attitude of grace and attention. His Worship John Pudsey, Esquire, Mayor of Bristlington, was leaning back in his armchair, his head lifted to that exact angle which combines dignity with repose. Alderman Job Oswin, a common-looking man, as his opponents in Bristlington affirmed, with a bare upper lip of enormous length, and a brown, grizzly beard which covered the lower part of his face, being a little hard of hearing, leaned forward, his head slightly turned, and his left hand raised to his ear. "That man Platt"—Ebenezer was his name—was

fair-haired and of a timid disposition. His blue eyes kept wandering from one to another as if he almost feared people might suspect him of hoping for something that he was not likely to get.

Lawyer Kinton looked at old Dr. Podymore, raised his brows, and moved his lips in inaudible inquiry. The Doctor nodded quickly two or three times. Lawyer Kinton coughed and two or three times cleared his throat.

Was he never going to begin?

Henrietta Oswin fixed upon him her dark, eager eyes. She could scarcely breathe for excitement; and with her anxiety came a fear as if her heart would stop. There was only herself besides Maggie, and she knew that from this moment she was rich. But how much would it be? Would it be fairly divided? There was all the Australian property, but could that be equal to Oakleigh?

Only Margaret Lane had no thought of what she was to get. She had lost poor Uncle Jos, and it was hateful to be hearing and thinking of property at such a time. Indeed, for the while her mind grasped nothing clearly, except that Lawyer Kinton, his head erect and a document held close to his eyes, had commenced to read rapidly and in a low tone about something with no meaning that seemed far away.

Suddenly he raised his voice and the words caught her attention:

"I appoint Warren Podymore, Esq., Surgeon, of Bristlington in the County of Somesuchshire, and Percival Kinton, Esq., Solicitor, of Bristlington in the County of Somesuchshire—hereinafter called my trustees—to be the executors and trustees of this my will."

Then dear old Dr. Podymore would have to do with

it. That was nice. She had known him all her life, and they had been friends from the beginning. And again the reading sank almost to a murmur, of which her ear caught only detached words, "*Sell, call in, and convert into money*"—"funeral and testamentary expenses and debts," and so it went on until presently she heard her own name, "*My niece Margaret, daughter of my sister Margaret, wife of Peter Lane, ten thousand pounds.*"

It sounded a large sum, but all her notions of money and property were vague. She had never wanted. Everything was always there. But the relatives began to open their eyes and look alert. If from such an estate there were small legacies such as that for those near to him, how was all the property to be disposed of? Even the most distant might hope for some small remembrance. His Worship John Pudsey, Esquire, sat up.

Still the reading went monotonously on, growing in richness as it proceeded.

"I give and devise my capital messuage or mansion-house called Oakleigh Court, situate in the parish of Oakleigh in the County of Somesuchshire, and all my freehold manors, lordships, reputed manors or lordships, messuages, farms, lands, tithes, rents, advowsons, tenements and hereditaments, situate, arising and being, and in the several parishes or places of Oakleigh and Bristlington in the aforesaid County of Somesuchshire or elsewhere, with their and every of their rights, royalties, members and appurtenances to the uses following—that is to say—To the use of my trustees for the term of five hundred years upon the trusts hereinafter declared—to the use of my niece Henrietta Oswin during her life with remainder to the use of the first and other sons of the said Henrietta Oswin successively according to seniority in tail male with remainder to the use of my niece Margaret Lane,

with remainder to the use of the first and other sons of the said Margaret Lane successively according to seniority in tail male with remainder to the use of my own right heirs for ever."

Lawyer Kinton paused to draw breath, as well he might. He knew that this must be a surprise, and he waited a little to observe the effect.

Mr. Ebenezer Platt took this opportunity to ask for explanation. By nature shy, in the confusion of the moment he stammered more than usual.

"I—I beg pardon, sir; but—eh—five hundred years——"

Alderman Job Oswin, deceived by the presence of His Worship and the surrounding assemblage—in many respects so like a meeting of the Bristlington Corporation in its ancient Council Chamber—for a moment forgetful of the occasion, inadvertently shouted—

"Chair!"

Then Lawyer Kinton, like the prudent man he was, readjusted his gold spectacles in a trice, and went on reading faster than ever.

"Provided always and I declare that the husband of my said niece Henrietta Oswin or the husband of any person who shall become entitled under this my will—not being a peer or the eldest or only son of a peer—shall within one year after his marriage assume the surname of Oswin and apply for a proper licence to bear the arms of Oswin either alone or quarterly and shall forthwith assume such arms."

Then, in due course, "*My service of plate marked with the Oswin crest, my collection of oil paintings,*" and "*my brooch set with the great diamond,*" together with many other objects of interest and value, were left to be enjoyed as heirlooms by the future occupants of the

said capital message or mansion-house. And so the reading came to an end.

There was silence for a moment or two, the situation being but imperfectly grasped. Mr. Kinton walked across to the table and poured himself out a glass of wine.

Mr. Alderman Oswin, with the determined air of a man who always speaks his mind, and will never be put down, rose slowly to his feet.

"I rise, sir, if I shall be in order, to put a question," he began.

"Certainly, certainly," affably replied Mr. Kinton; and he pleasantly sipped his wine and set down the glass upon the table.

"Do I understand," asked the Alderman with great deliberation, and a pause at every other word, "that Miss—Margaret Lane—has nothing—beyond the ten thousand pounds?"

"That is so—so far as we can say at present."

A murmur of surprise and disapproval was heard in different parts of the room.

To provide against unseemly interruptions on the part of minds less clear than his own, the Alderman raised his finger to denote that he was in possession of the meeting, and went on.

"And—do I gather—sir—that Miss Henrietta Oswin—has all?"

"Certainly, for her life. Should she die unmarried, or have no son, the whole estate will then fall to Miss Margaret Lane upon the conditions of the trust."

The lawyer's manner was a little crisp, a little final, as though it would say, "There is the will; that is the meaning of it, and no amount of talking can make it different." He was the Town Clerk of Bristlington,

and had heard the Alderman speak a great number of times.

The hum of muttered discontent waxed louder.

“Order! Order!” cried the Alderman quickly, for he was still upon his legs. He glared around, defiant of imaginary opposition, and nodded out his opinion with a sententious dogmatism only to be acquired after years of experience in municipal business. “Then I say—that a will—which gives so little to Margaret Lane—is a disgraceful and unjust will!” With this he plumped down. In his opinion, Alderman Oswin having spoken, there was nothing more to be said.

This startling surprise, which awakened so much disapproval amongst distant relatives unaffected by it, quite took away the breath of those directly concerned.

Mrs. Oswin had dried her tears. Her handkerchief, rolled together tight as a ball, she held upon her lap, clutched in her right hand. Now that her face was no longer hidden, her likeness to the daughter by her side was very marked. She had the same swarthy cheek and large dark eyes; but her hair, also very thick, although short and crisp, had turned white, not from age, for she was not more than five-and-forty, but prematurely.

Certainly she had suffered much trouble. Of many children, all weaklings, only this one remained, and Henrietta they had scarcely hoped to save. But the white hair was all a matter of temperament. Born in the West Indies, and brought to England when a child, she was not English by her mother's side. She at times spoke proudly of her mother as a Spanish lady, but many in Bristlington were ready to declare that an African beauty was remotely numbered amongst her ancestors. A suggestion of thickness in the lips favoured the idea. Her face was stronger and squarer

than her daughter's, and, in this moment of eager triumph mingled with doubt, looked almost fierce.

She could scarcely believe in such good fortune for her Henrietta. They had never dreamt that Uncle Jos would leave Oakleigh in this way. It had rankled in her mind for years that Margaret Lane should be so near to him, but her envy had always been tempered by the expectation that the girl would some day be a rich lady with whom they might stay. She stretched out her left hand, a podgy hand with short, thick fingers, and in joy and congratulation caught hold of Henrietta by the arm.

Then old Dr. Podymore had something to say. He placed one thumb within his waistcoat just below the goffered front. There was a large signet ring of plain gold upon his little finger.

"I think——" He spoke very slowly and very softly. His voice had a soothing quality, just as if he were standing by a bedside and wished to assure anxious friends that the case, though serious, need give no cause for immediate alarm. "I think, in considering this matter, we should take into account the obvious intention of the poor dear friend whom we have lost. It was his wish to found a family. Perhaps it was natural"—the old gentleman nodded his head complacently, for such old-fashioned notions agreed very well with his old-fashioned clothes—"considering his remarkable history, only natural. And if so, the late Mr. Oswin only proceeded according to the custom of strict settlement."

Margaret Lane could bear it no longer. Weeping bitterly, and trembling from head to foot, she rose hastily to make her escape. To the guests it seemed only natural that she should be overcome by her great

disappointment, and one and all felt pity for her. But to her it was horrible, all this thought and talk about property, with poor Uncle Jos only an hour ago laid in his grave. She was burning with resentment that any one should dare to criticise one who had been so good to her. She was filled with shame, to hear all this, and yet to find no word to speak for him. Surely it was his to do as he would with. She tried to say this, but although her lips moved they could utter no sound. Yet she was wounded and deeply hurt. After all his kindness he had been disappointed in her. There must have been something wanting—something always wanting in her—just as now, when she could not speak.

But before she could reach the door her cousin sprang towards her and threw her arm round Maggie's waist.

"I shall share everything with you, Maggie," she cried with sudden enthusiasm. The words were spontaneous, and rang with the warmth of a quick, generous impulse; yet, conscious of unpopularity, and alive to her own munificence, she cast a hasty glance upon the Alderman as if to note the effect. "Let Mr. Kinton give you half. I shall instruct him to give you half."

"Ah-h!" breathed Mrs. Oswin, raising her eyes to heaven and throwing up both her arms in admiration. It was a long and somewhat guttural ejaculation with which she was wont to introduce her remarks, and behind it came a rush of ideas too quick to be consequent.

"Ah! It is an angel. Nobody knows. My child is an angel. But she is the daughter of a brother—an elder brother. And besides, it is impossible to go against the wishes of the dead."

By this time old Dr. Podymore had opened the door, and the two girls, with their arms around each other, passed out together.

CHAPTER III

THE "GREEN DRAGON" AT BRISTLINGTON

ALTHOUGH the high-road from the village of Oakleigh to the municipal town of Bristlington was long and winding, the distance, as the crow flies, measured no more than a mile and a quarter, and there was a most delightful footpath across the fields. Thus the veriest loiterer could arrive there in half an hour without fatigue, and long before evening everybody who attended the funeral was safely home.

The town stood upon an ancient coach-road between London and the most celebrated city in the west. Even in those days it could not be considered large; but it was most important, and its dignity so nicely adjusted to its dimensions that it was just brimful of its own importance. For Bristlington was a municipal borough with a charter as old as the hills, a mayor, a town clerk, six aldermen, twelve capital burgesses, and two sergeants-at-mace. It had also the privilege of electing a coroner all to itself. Therefore never was any town in a position to be more self-contained and self-respecting. And, added to these advantages, it was a manufacturing centre with a small but thriving trade in shirt-buttons, although its chief industry was talk. For this reason conversation was so plentiful and cheap, that a stranger

might learn all there was to know about Bristlington without ever once opening his mouth to question.

The town consisted of only one main street, but that was very broad and picturesque.

The houses were all old, since for at least half a century the most enterprising inhabitant had lacked temerity to build. Therefore the walls were very thick, and the roofs thatched or of large stone tiles, purple and brown with age, but lichen-stained and covered in places with green moss. Even the most humble building was irregular and quaint, with an individuality and character of its own; for in all Bristlington were no two of the same pattern. One asserted a noble independence by jutting out upon the causeway with projecting doorsteps and foot-scrapers to trip up the unwary. Another affected a subtle exclusiveness by drawing back and placing a narrow garden and an iron palisade between its gentility and the road. The next had a bulge and a buttress, and stood aslant, whilst at the angle formed by the Oakleigh road a ground floor had been rounded off to give an easier corner to the street. But the richest charm of Bristlington was a wealth of unexpected gable upon which the eye rested wherever it looked.

Yet, after all, the most striking feature of the street was the "Green Dragon," an ancient hostelry at which the coaches stopped.

It was situated a little beyond the municipal hall and just opposite the corporation pump, in the very middle of the town, and possessed a fine old archway opening into the inn yard. The front, although more modern, was liberally provided with those old-fashioned sash windows of which the panes were small and the wood-work very substantial. These were painted white,

but the lower range gloried in bright red blinds, indicative of a comfortable hospitality to be found within; and in the centre, with four narrow windows upon each side, stood a splendid portico, with pillars raised upon a flight of three shallow steps, and bearing upon the top a life-size representation of a fabulous but truly ferocious beast, whose mouth was always open and whose tongue appeared never to rest. Within the parlour, upon the left as you entered, much of the chief industry of Bristlington was carried on; and there—since it is essential to know something of the late Josiah Oswin—the reader must await the funeral guests.

The shops having been closed at midday, to enable leading tradesmen to pay one last mark of respect to a gentleman who had spent so much money in the town, an appearance of Sunday rested upon the street, and everybody had leisure to look about.

Happily, houses of refreshment were open, and thus Bristlington was not thrown into a condition of compulsory idleness. Unofficial mourners, who, like the squire of Whorbury, had only attended the church, began to drop into the parlour of the "Green Dragon" quite early in the afternoon. There was Mr. Harry Crickshaw, the sporting tailor, whose shop was over the way, in a new frock-coat, so tight at the waist and so expansive in the skirt that it might well be considered a masterpiece. There was old Mr. Jennings, a retired auctioneer and estate agent, in his suit of rusty black, that looked so eminently respectable in spite of its age. There were others also, not of less note, but of no importance in this story, and they all stood at the windows awaiting the return of Mr. John Pudsey, to hear, as old Mr. Jennings beautifully expressed it, "what may have transpired."

At such moments of inaction very inconsiderable trifles become of interest, and they all leaned forward with their faces close against the panes as the London coach came rattling up. They watched the rapid changing of the horses, and even scanned with attention the one threadworn traveller who alighted and stood upon the pavement whilst his two travelling-bags were being dragged out of the boot. He was tall and gaunt, with a tanned, weather-beaten face.

"Port of Bristol, for a shilling," cried Mr. Harry Crickshaw, with a knowing wink.

"Ay, bound for Bristol," nodded old Mr. Jennings. He wore long whiskers, now white with years, and he had a way of pulling one of them whenever he spoke.

Then everybody laughed. Such a subtle sense of humour pervaded Bristlington, and wrapped it about like an atmosphere, that they all saw at once how funny it was that this sunburnt traveller should be changing coaches on his way to Bristol.

Away rattled the coach. Two dreary, thirsty hours must pass before the other would arrive, and presently the stranger came lounging into the parlour. Mr. Harry Crickshaw, always courteous and polite, greeted him with "Good afternoon." Old Mr. Jennings, with irritating geniality, suggested that it must be very hot on the road. But the man only responded with a grunt and assented with a growl, and flung himself down in the armchair in the corner. He was dusty, cramped, and exceedingly dry, for he moistened his lips with his parched tongue, called at once for a brandy and cold water, and stretched out his long legs for rest.

Then public attention was at once diverted to more serious considerations.

"Ah! Here approaches His Worship. Here comes

John Pudsey, then, at last," burst out old Mr. Jennings, his ancient face puckering with excitement.

"And Alderman Oswin and Councillor Platt just behind. Bless my heart! They're coming in here, by George!" cried Mr. Harry Crickshaw, in indignant surprise.

So astonishing the contempt with which he gave their titles, it might have been thought that Mr. Harry Crickshaw cherished no respect for time-honoured institutions. But it must be understood that in Bristlington, as everywhere else, there are two sides to every question, and therefore two parties in municipal life, and the "Green Dragon" was the headquarters of Mr. John Pudsey's party, to which Alderman Oswin did not belong.

But to-day all ordinary custom was thrown aside. Complete unanimity reigned, and the dispute about the new handle to the town pump was for the moment forgotten.

"Come along, Alderman Oswin! This way, Mr. Councillor Platt!" shouted His Worship hospitably, as with great importance he bustled into the parlour of the "Green Dragon." The others willingly followed, talking altogether, it is true, but without intentional interruption, so that before taking their seats they had recounted at length those details an hour ago familiar to all who were privileged to be present at the reading of the will.

"It's a scandalous shame," cried Mr. Harry Crickshaw with chivalrous warmth; "for a prettier figure in a riding-habit than Miss Margaret Lane I never cut for. But the little nigger may drop off, that's one thing."

"She is not a good life," said old Mr. Jennings, shaking his ancient head and pulling his long whisker. "I should not estimate her a good life—myself."

The habit of more than half a century gave him an air of appraising everything, yet he glanced around with condescension, and, in deference to lesser experience, conceded in a tone of inquiry, "I may be wrong?"

Oh, dear, no! Old Mr. Jennings was never wrong.

But His Worship, now seated in the large armchair that summer and winter stood close beside the fireplace, raised his hand for silence.

"What will you take, Mr. Alderman Oswin? Mr. Councillor Platt, what will you drink?"

It must be noted that the style of the Council Chamber was carried into the parlour of the "Green Dragon," and thus did the courtesy so requisite in public business refine and elevate the manners of private life. Here "the man Platt," as he was irreverently called elsewhere, or even the plain, familiar Ebenezer Platt, received due respect as a capital burgess of Bristlington, and could be no less than "Mr. Councillor Platt." However, each being supplied with his chosen refreshment, conversation was resumed.

"Well, gentlemen," reflected old Mr. Jennings thoughtfully, "he was a remarkable man—a man in a thousand—what am I talking about?—a man in ten millions, and if I am wrong, correct me, sir."

The old gentleman fixed his eye firmly on Mr. John Pudsey and waited.

His Worship, not without emotion, shook his head and responded—

"Hear, hear!"

"I speak in the presence of relatives," continued the patriarch impressively, "who may be in a position to contradict me."

The mere suggestion raised a chorus of "No, no!"

"Yet I will venture to assert, born in straitened

circumstances, absent for years under the stigma of opprobrium; at middle-age the possessor by purchase of a fine landed estate; and to-day consigned to rest in the silent vault within the peaceful chancel of his native church;—I affirm, gentlemen, and let such as choose think otherwise, that the late Josiah Oswin, Esquire, now no more, was the most remarkable man that ever, in a long and varied experience, it has been my honour to—to——”

It sounded as if old Mr. Jennings, under the force of habit, might be about to say, “to submit to public competition,” but he merely hesitated for a word and then made a lame finish with “meet.”

“I think you said once that he was apprenticed to you,” observed Mr. Harry Crickshaw doubtfully. He was a young humourist, who loved to note the weaknesses of his fellow-townsmen. On appropriate occasions he played upon them, and called it “trotting ’em out.”

Old Mr. Jennings rose to the bait at once.

“He was articed in my office,” he replied with dignity.

“Then for certain you know all about it,” suggested Mr. Harry Crickshaw gravely.

Old Mr. Jennings cleared his throat and gave his long whisker an exceptionally affectionate caress. “I suppose no gentleman can be more intimately acquainted with the remarkable and devious intricacies of the whole course of this matter than myself,” he said, and looking around, he smiled complacently.

He had told the story of the late Josiah Oswin’s life hundreds of times before—all the same details, in the same polished phrases, and in the same tone of voice. But now the ancient auctioneer and estate-agent turned out as fresh as a three-year-old. Trotted? He cur-

vetted—he pranced. Both language and style were truly beautiful; and, for all his fourscore years, there was no holding old Mr. Jennings in.

Even the traveller sat up to listen, and caused a brief interruption by calling to have his glass replenished.

"Yes, gentlemen," began old Mr. Jennings impressively, "On his natal day Josiah Oswin first witnessed the light in the very domicile, or residence, from which he has been reverently carried this afternoon to return no more."

He paused, as if to catch the eye of the next bidder, and His Worship, arresting his glass half-way to his lips, again murmured "Hear, hear!"

"But Oakleigh Court stood then, gentlemen, in a very different category to the palatial mansion we all observe and admire to-day. I ought to be able to efficiently convey to you, gentlemen, if any man can, what Oakleigh Court then was; for as you are all conversant, during a professional career extending over more than half a century, and terminating only with retirement—and, although I say it myself, well-merited repose——" Here the speaker was interrupted for at least a minute by an outburst of applause—"I enjoyed the complete confidence of the respected Squire of Whorbury Hall. A rare man, gentleman—a good man—a sportsman—a man of a hundred—a—a——"

Old Mr. Jennings raised his hand as if with the hammer poised and just ready to descend.

"An—an English gentleman," interposed Mr. John Pudsey, with so much feeling that his voice quavered and he almost sobbed.

In response, old Mr. Jennings bowed to His Worship with a deference very beautiful in a man of his years.

"I thank you, sir. I thank my worthy and esteemed

friend His Worship the Mayor of Bristlington for that word. The old Squire Rumblelow *is* an English gentleman, proud, legitimately proud, yet not narrowly proud—I am credibly informed he attended the funeral to-day, and I honour and respect him for it”—(Hear, hear! Hear, hear!)—“but, gentlemen, at that time tight for money, and although he reposed implicitly on myself, devilish difficult in the matter of repairs.”

Here they all roared with laughter. It *is* funny when there is a difficulty for somebody else in the matter of repairs.

“At that time, gentlemen, the ancient mansion of Oakleigh Court was falling into dilapidation and decay, with the exception of a small wing used as a home-stead, in which the Oswins resided. The lordly hall was a cider vault. The buildings to the right of the porch were empty; the massive walls were overgrown with ivy; the windows—— But I will enumerate no further. I know what it was, gentlemen, for it was in my own hands.”

Here old Mr. Jennings paused to sip refreshment.

His Worship and Mr. Harry Crickshaw agreed that he ought to know, if anybody did.

“I do know,” replied old Mr. Jennings with decision, and went on with his story.

“William Oswin the elder was a most respectable man. He brought up to maturity three children. There was William, who lived some years in the West Indies, the husband of the widow, and father of Miss Henrietta Oswin; there was Josiah; and there was Margaret, a daughter several years younger, whom they used to call Peggy for short.”

“Ah, yes!” sighed His Worship. “Peggy Oswin, my first cousin first remove. I was very fond of Peggy.

Poor Peggy!" And he gazed sentimentally at the ceiling in a way that did the greatest credit to his heart.

"Gentlemen," continued the estate agent, "this lady married unfortunately and deceased young. She joined in matrimony with a man of superior station, but inferior character, called Lane—Peter Lane, Petticoat Lane, such were his sobriquets—and left one child. Josiah Oswin adopted the little girl, then no more than knee-high; and that is the Miss Margaret Lane whom we used to call 'Fortune's Darling,' confidently anticipating to find her the future owner of Oakleigh Court."

"As she ought to be," put in Mr. Harry Crickshaw, with a discontented shake of the head.

"Family money ought to be left fair. Money made a man is free to do what he likes with. That's my opinion," cried Mr. Councillor Platt dogmatically. But nobody took any notice. Although the mildest of men in public business, Ebenezer Platt was suspected of being secretly revolutionary, and, indeed, admitted to having privately read Tom Paine.

"How *did* Josiah Oswin make his money?" inquired one who was new to Bristlington.

"Ah!" ejaculated old Mr. Jennings, leaning back in his chair and beaming with all the delight of self-importance, "if any man can narrate the veritable history of those remarkable proceedings, I am that individual. I think, gentlemen, I can affirm, without fear of contradiction, that I followed the ins-and-outs of all that matter. Josiah Oswin was a quick lad. His ability for figures surprised even myself. I took him into my office, being then engaged for all the gentlemen of standing in this neighbourhood, without premium. But he ran wild. There was some talk, gentlemen—you know what Bristlington is—of taverns and card-playing.

My remonstrances were passed unheeded, and so the upshot was"—here old Mr. Jennings, becoming excited, punctuated every word with his forefinger—"that—one—fine—spring—morning Josiah was found missing. Upon the following day I detected a defalcation—a very serious defalcation—in the cash. I was angry. I may say, considering the remission of premium, I was pained. I caused a warrant to be issued; but it was too late. Josiah had gone, and not a trace of him was left."

Old Mr. Jennings glanced around with pride to enjoy the sensation always caused by this striking incident in his oft-told story, and resumed.

"Well, gentlemen, to make a long matter short, two-and-twenty years had elapsed when I received a letter bearing an Australian mark; it contained a remittance in full, with interest added, and it begged that the theft might be considered as a loan. He was tempted to purloin the money, so Josiah Oswin wrote, to get out of the country and make a fresh start. He had become very rich by means of sheep-farming and a wonderful speculation in land. All he now desired was to acquire by purchase an eligible estate in Somesuchshire, and return to his native land and county. Gentlemen, I corresponded with him. Being in the complete confidence of the Squire of Whorbury, to whom all Oakleigh then belonged—and I wish to say it with all humility" (here the Mayor muttered "Hear, hear!"), "I believe there have been few men whom Squire Rumblelow respected more—I was enabled to offer by private treaty the rich and beautiful estate of Oakleigh with the old Manor House, known as Oakleigh Court. Oswin bought it, with the aid of my humble advice and assistance, restored it and laid it out as you have seen. Again a beautiful early sixteenth-century man-

sion stands where the ruins stood. It possesses grottoes, lawns, lakes, and everything, in fact, that heart can desire. With him, gentlemen, to wish was to have." Old Mr. Jennings appeared to become deeply affected as he reflected on this. "There remained only one desire ungratified; that, gentlemen, he could not obtain. How often have I heard him say, 'I fail to see, Jennings, the principle upon which the Lord Lieutenant makes appointments to the county Bench—not that I should care two pins to be a J.P.,' he would add with a laugh, 'but I fail to see the principle, that's all.' Gentlemen, he never lived to solve that problem; but now he is gone where, doubtless, many things are clear."

As he brought the history to this touching conclusion, old Mr. Jennings reverently bowed his head, and the conversation became general.

His Worship considered, in fact, that having committed a felony, no man had a right to expect to be put on the Bench. As chief magistrate of Bristlington he felt strongly upon that point. "You *must* keep up the Bench," he said, with emphatic earnestness.

But Mr. Harry Crickshaw, whilst admitting this to be so, was clearly of opinion that the man who falls, but makes amends, was better than the man who would fall if he wasn't afraid. At this the discussion began to warm, and a very difficult ethical question would probably have been settled for ever, had not the imagination of His Worship, wandering back upon an old romance, pictured the image of the Peggy Oswin of five-and-twenty years ago.

"Ay! Peggy Oswin! Peggy Oswin! She was worthy of a better lot. I wanted her myself," he murmured in a kind of reverie.

"Now I can tell you, gentlemen," he cried, suddenly

awakening to the present, "why Josiah Oswin has left Margaret Lane only ten thousand pounds."

"Why? Why?" they eagerly inquired all at once.

"Poor Peggy Oswin," explained the Mayor, speaking very slowly, and with a sort of sadness, "made a runaway match with this worthless fellow called Peter Lane. He was a gentleman born—but useless, not brought up to anything—and his friends objected, and old Oswin wouldn't hear of it. He went wild and drank, and Peggy died. She was one of those open, trusting natures, like her daughter, that never can believe any harm. It broke her heart, so they said at the time. When Josiah adopted the little girl he made Lane an allowance to stay abroad. Now, is it likely that a shrewd man like Josiah Oswin was going to put his magnificent property within reach of a dissolute, drunken waster, who——"

A sudden commotion so startled old Mr. Jennings that he stopped pulling his whisker, and dropped his tumbler into his lap. The tall stranger had sprung to his feet, and in so doing overturned the table by which he sat. The water-bottle upon it fell with a crash, and the floor glistened with fragments of glass.

He strode into the middle of the room, and began slowly to turn up his shirt-sleeves, leaving bare his lean, sinewy arms.

"Who is the mongrel fool that was speaking of Peter Lane? I'm Peter Lane—Mr. Peter Lane to such fellows as you!" And to the consternation of the choicest spirits of Bristlington he bore down upon their chief civic officer as if to annihilate him.

He did not strike, but held his clenched fist close to the Mayor's nose. His Worship backed, a foot at a time, until he got fixed in a corner, and could retreat

no more. Then Peter Lane clutched him by the collar, and dragged him into the middle of the room.

"Now, then, what have you got to say of Peggy Oswin? She was my wife—Mrs. Peter Lane. Do you hear?—Mrs. Peter Lane. I'll never tolerate disrespect towards my wife. I'll twist the neck of any man who calls her Peggy Lane, or who insults my daughter. Do you hear? I have come home to take my proper position. I demand respect towards the ladies of my house. Do you hear?"

As every question was accompanied with a shake which rendered His Worship breathless and paralysed his tongue, it is doubtful how this would have ended had not old Mr. Jennings persistently called, "Run for the constable! run for the constable!" and Mr. Harry Crickshaw loudly asserted that this was "not the conduct of a gentleman."

At the word "gentleman," with an effort of will the stranger steadied himself. "I regret my hasty behaviour," he stammered, drawing himself up and bowing to the Mayor with that lofty dignity which nature has denied to persons of strict sobriety. "Suf—suf—suffered from the sun," he explained, tapping his forehead; "sub—subject to fits of excitability. I hope your Worship will excuse—dis—distant connection by marriage—and—and—sit down again."

Suiting his action to the word, Mr. Lane resumed his seat, and the Mayor, a little crumpled but mollified by so complete an apology, slowly followed his example.

"Much wiser—sit down," said the traveller, smiling pleasantly upon everybody in turn. "Come back on purpose—sit down. Knocked about these twenty years—very rough company. Come back to civ—civ—lisa—tion, and take care of my little girl. Never mind Josiah

Oswin—old rogue. Live together now. Very happy and comfortable, without ostentation, on ten thousand, under a father's care."

This vision of quiet domestic life so fascinated his imagination that he leaned back in his chair, and taking no further interest in those around him, kept up a continuous muttered soliloquy, in which, however, many phrases were recurrently audible—"in quite genteel style"—"no pride or fuss"—"strict economy and a master's eye."

His Worship, with a silent nod around, took the occasion to modestly depart. Mr. Harry Crickshaw decided to step home to tea. Alderman Oswin and Councillor Platt presently strolled arm in arm down the street and turned into the "White Hart." Then Tom Fowler, host of the "Green Dragon," noting on the part of his guests this tendency to dwindle, came forward with infinite tact to inquire whether the gentleman would wish to see his room.

"Room?" yelled Mr. Lane, awakened from his reverie. "What the devil should I want with a room? I've come down to visit my daughter at Oakleigh Court. I'm a gentleman come to stay at Oakleigh Court." His eyes, which were bloodshot, seemed to bulge out with indignation. Yet, after a pause, just as suddenly as before, he calmed himself, and, in a manner intended to be conciliatory, went on, "Room? Yes, to be sure. Certainly. I'll have a wash-up and walk over at once."

In due course, greatly refreshed, loudly asserting that he knew every inch of the way, and that his luggage should be sent for, he set out upon this last stage of his journey. Several townsmen of Bristlington watched him with interest, as with head erect, although his gait was unsteady, he strode down the pavement to the

corner of the Oakleigh road and passed out of sight. They helplessly shook their heads. All this was very painful at such a time. Yet what could be done?

But for that night at least poor Margaret Lane was happily spared the knowledge of her impending trouble. A wayside inn offered irresistible allurements to the vagrant, and it was after midnight before Mr. Peter Lane was at last turned out upon the world. His wanderings thereupon no one will ever know, or by what chance he found a devious way back to the town.

This only is certain. In the clear, cool light of summer daybreak Mr. Harry Crickshaw was strolling homewards from a hand of cards, when his attention was attracted by a strange phenomenon in Bristlington Street. He stopped and gazed intently. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Yes—there certainly stood—no doubt of it—on the third step of the portico of the "Green Dragon," neatly placed together, heel and toe, a pair of boots. Mr. Crickshaw stepped forward to investigate. The boots were by no means old. They had attained, it is true, to that advanced condition of phrenological development indicative of a love of travel, but were still eminently serviceable. For a moment Mr. Harry Crickshaw was perplexed.

Further exploration, however, revealed a gentleman disrobed to that garment which bears the closest resemblance to a *chemise de nuit*, enjoying a sleep so undisturbed by dreams that it might have set a pattern to innocence. Mr. Peter Lane, possibly mistaking the portico for the marble halls of Oakleigh, or beguiled by a fancied resemblance between the pillars and a four-post bed, with his head pillowed upon the doorstep, had comfortably retired to rest.

His coat and trousers were respectably folded in deference to a supposed return to civilisation.

It appeared that under the same impression he had placed his boots out to clean.

Mr. Harry Crickshaw, with promptitude, rang the bell, and was fortunate in arousing only Tom Fowler himself. Together they succeeded in persuading Mr. Lane to change his present quarters for the green chamber at the head of the stairs. With noble chivalry and great delicacy of feeling they then agreed that out of respect for the ladies of Oakleigh, and in particular for Miss Margaret Lane, not a word, not a syllable, of this fresh disgrace should be breathed to any living soul.

Thus for a while the matter remained a profound secret. Nor could this story ever have been told but for the perfidy of some untrustworthy spirits to whom it was afterwards imparted in the strictest confidence.

CHAPTER IV

MR. HARRY CRICKSHAW

NOW, lest the reader should too hastily infer from these hurried glimpses that Mr. Harry Crickshaw was a person of frivolous manners, habitually turning night into day to the neglect of his business, it is necessary still to linger in Bristlington for an hour or so, to observe him in the broad noontide of a working day. By the fathers of Bristlington—although old Mr. Jennings had more than once spoken of him as “no fool”—he was pronounced with condescension to be “good company” and a “capital fellow.” They did not regard him seriously as a public man. And yet, all unsuspected, he was a more active power in the town than the Mayor and all the Corporation put together.

Upon the morning after the funeral he was standing upon the step in the shop doorway. No longer in complimentary mourning, his legs, encased in trousers of a most delicate lavender shade, stood slightly apart, but he had changed his black for an equally tight-waisted frock of a beautiful puce colour. He was, without doubt, a man of the finest presence, tall and straight and square; and his countenance bore an extremely lively and alert expression, although his cheeks were inclined to be round and fat. His hair was black and glossy, and no man on earth could look physically

better to do than Mr. Harry Crickshaw. He was wont to stand thus, and all the life of Bristlington passed under his eye.

Mr. Harry Crickshaw possessed one great gift. He was a beautiful letter-writer; and having devoted an hour this morning to literary composition, he now awaited the result.

"Sir,—It having been brought to my knowledge that you arrived in this town on the afternoon of yesterday unaware of the recent decease of your near and respected relative the late Josiah Oswin, Esquire, and that you are for the present residing at the Green Dragon Hotel, it has occurred to me that your delay in proceeding to Oakleigh Court may have been occasioned by a necessity so essential to the moment of bereavement, viz., mourning.

"In soliciting your esteemed commands, I would add that I have cut for the late lamented Josiah Oswin, Esquire, for many years, both liveries and personal attire, also habits for Miss Margaret Lane. Also do. in all respects for John Rumblelow, Esquire, of Whorbury Hall. All orders favoured will always be despatched with taste and expediency, by

"Your obedient servant,

"Henry Crickshaw."

It must from this be recognised at once that Mr. Harry Crickshaw was deserving of the rest and recreation which a front door step so liberally affords. He crossed his hands reposefully behind his back, expanded his manly chest, and looked down the street.

From the house next to his own, but standing far back out of sight, stumped the short, thick figure of Job Oswin. The Alderman lived retired. That is to say, he was once a currier, but had given up business and become a public man, devoting all his time and energy to the best interests of his native town. The

neighbours stared at each other, but did not speak. A slight altercation between them, arising out of an ancient light, had brought about such a coldness that they had not spoken for five years. Yet nothing petty, such as may so often be noticed in meaner places and amongst littler minds, disfigured their strife. When they approached one another, each held his head erect and looked his neighbour straight in the face. Momentarily annoyed at the insolence of Job Oswin's stare as they passed, Mr. Harry Crickshaw would at once comfort himself with the reflection: "*That man no longer exists for me.*" Then they departed, mutually muttering private opinions respecting each other's personal appearance.

This morning the Alderman stalked up to the town pump, expressed his suspicion of the drain in two solemn sniffs, and thrust his walking-stick between the bars of the gutter grating. It was the delight of his life to ferret out something that was a disgrace to the town. Then he proceeded to "ventilate the subject," as he called it, at the next meeting of the Municipal Council.

Mr. Harry Crickshaw smiled, then chuckled, then almost laughed outright. It is to be feared that he was wanting in high moral elevation, since the public-spirited behaviour of his fellow-townsmen awakened in his breast at first only a sense of the ridiculous and afterwards contempt.

"Flat-footed ass!" he hissed between his teeth. "Thick-headed, meddling idiot!" he added, after a pause.

Having thus relieved his mind, and reassuring himself that the fellow did not exist for him, Mr. Harry Crickshaw turned his head and carefully occupied

his attention with something in the contrary direction.

From the narrow road between high walls by which the shorter cut from Oakleigh joins the Bristlington street emerged a figure, a man attired in black, who walked briskly down the Mall. Mr. Harry Crickshaw brightened up, knit his brows, and fixed upon this approaching individual the closest scrutiny. He was tall and elderly—in fact, a little round-shouldered and inclined to stoop. His progress was a kind of hurried shuffle, which gave the impression of noiseless haste yet did not make any very great speed. But the countenance was of a very striking character. The nose was strong, the mouth chiselled and the chin deep and sharp. You never saw a brow loftier or more broad, or white hair that made a bolder bidding for respect. The face was quite clean-shaven, and below the chin was a white neckcloth, brought twice round the neck and tied in a plain knot. Upon the crown was a thin silk cap, which looked like a skull-cap when seen at a distance down the street.

It was clear at a glance that this could be no common man. It might be a professor, for there was a look of intellectuality about the lean cheek; or a church dignitary, though the absence of apron and gaiters seemed to preclude that possibility and dismiss the suggestion at once. It might be, and this seemed more likely by far, that splendid being who precedes a bishop and carries the pastoral staff.

But Mr. Harry Crickshaw made none of these reflections. He knew the man well enough, and had taken his measure only the week before. His admiration was intent only upon the mourning, a black flop-tailed coat and small clothes, new and fresh from his own hands.

"Good morning, Mr. Bracher," he cried in his most genial manner, as the Oakleigh butler came opposite his shop door.

"Good morning to you, sir," said Mr. Bracher with much deference.

"Just step inside and let's have a look at you."

"Certainly, sir," said Mr. Bracher in his most obliging tone.

And then to see with what care the tailor placed him in position, stood back to look, stepped forward again, turned him lightly "a leetle more to the right, please—not too much, not too much—so"; then became rapt in wonder at his own handicraft; and finally, with an air of determination calculated to leave the customer no room for doubt, affirmed: "A capital fit! A downright good fit!"

Mr. Bracher complacently nodded his classic head—he had removed the cap, and long locks carefully arranged partially concealed a glistening central baldness—and said—

"Tip-top."

"Any changes?"

Mr. Harry Crickshaw drew himself up, and pointed his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of Oakleigh as he threw out this question, quite in a casual way, not from mere curiosity, but with an ulterior consideration of liveries no doubt. Yet there was a mystery in his lowered voice which invited confidence. More plainly than words it said, "Repose in me. No secret dropped into this manly bosom goes one inch further, you may rely."

"Well, it's herly days," replied the butler in a tentative sort of way—"herly days as yet."

"Step in and take something," cried the tailor with sudden warmth.

"Not at this hour of the morning," replied Mr. Bracher, holding up both hands and averting his head at the mere suggestion.

"Yes, yes, you will. Step inside," coaxed Mr. Harry Crickshaw, and at once turned the little brass handle of a little old-fashioned door with a window in it, through which, from a little parlour within, Mr. Crickshaw could give to his shop an attention quite as efficient as when framed in the doorway.

"Come along. Take care!—two steps down."

Mr. Bracher hesitated, bowed his head, and followed. Candour compels the admission that a reluctance to refuse to take something had been the bane of that great man's career.

"Sit down," cried Mr. Harry Crickshaw, hospitably taking a bottle and glasses from a three-cornered cupboard between the fireplace and a small square window looking out upon a garden. "That villain Job Oswin won't be peeping and prying at us to-day, for I watched him out. I don't know what you think, Bracher, but I hold that the privacy of a man's domestic life should be sacred—sacred." Here Mr. Harry Crickshaw raised his voice, and held out the bottle point-blank at a goose-berry bush on the other side of the pane. "Yet that unmitigated rascal overlooks me daily. He sees what I eat and drink. He watches my customers when they try their breeches on. And if I do but sit down to pen a line he stands like a cider-butt, with his great broad carcass blocking out the light. There are things, Bracher," sighed Mr. Harry Crickshaw pathetically, "which the law does not touch." And then, as the man's loftiness of soul triumphed over his private

animosity, with a wave of the bottle he added: "But he is nothing. That class of man does not exist for me. Sit down, Bracher, sit down."

Mr. Bracher, whom a lifelong discipline had trained to habits of obedience, sat down at once.

"Who was there yesterday?" put in the tailor quickly.

"You never see sich a lot. Mr. Job Oswin, he did speak up! He called the will scandalous——"

"Ass—donkey!" interrupted Mr. Crickshaw, for he detested even to hear the name.

"My own opinion, sir," the butler readily continued, though he had intended to uphold the Alderman's contention. "It was not the occasion for any such remarks. Pore Mr. Oswin, pore man, 'ad a perfick right to do as he liked with his own. And there must be families, as Dr. Podymore as good as said. Or what would 'appen to the country? Why, there'd be no circulation in the country—no backbone, Mr. Crickshaw. And families wear out; for look at the Rumblelows, sir, and so many of the old names hereabout. Why, they do say, sir, there isn't a stick on Whorbury that's free, and the keeping up the mortgages takes more than the rent. He! he! Though it's really orful to contemplate, sir, by any thoughtful mind." And Mr. Bracher stroked his chin and suddenly became grave.

"What sort of a girl *is* this Miss Henrietta Oswin?" asked the tailor inquisitively.

"Why, bless your 'art, Mr. Crickshaw, sir, she don't mean any 'arm at all. But she's only half English, that's all is the matter with 'er. She's eat out with all them excited foreign ways that'll put her into her grave some fine morning. She'll never be a long-lived woman in my opinion. Miss Lane'll have it all one of these

days, and they do say the Australian property is more than Oakleigh. But she ain't common, mind, like her mother. The Squire had her educated, an' all that. Paint—very nice, very nice indeed; play, and sing very pleasing—pretty little voice, but weak. But it ain't that, Mr. Crickshaw. She ain't got no repose to sit still, an' she ain't got no English stamina to keep on, an' that's the beginning and end of it."

With an air of finality Mr. Bracher raised his glass, and explaining that he "must be 'urrying on about his errants," drank to the last drop.

"Have another," urged the tailor hospitably.

"Not a teaspoonful," cried the butler with determination; and, as if retreating from temptation, he backed into the shop and hurried into the street, closely followed by Mr. Harry Crickshaw.

"Well, good morning, Mr. Crickshaw, and much obliged," said Bracher, with a bow that just hit the mark between deference and personal dignity.

"You are welcome, Bracher, at any time. Ta-ta," responded the tailor with an easy wave of the hand, for it is well to be affable with a man who may some day put in a word in the matter of liveries.

But before the butler had shuffled half a dozen paces he heard himself recalled in a loud but confidential whisper.

"Bracher! Here, half a minute—I say, Bracher!"

He turned to find Mr. Harry Crickshaw's gaze stolidly fixed upon the "Green Dragon" opposite, as though he had just detected that rampant animal in some new gymnastic.

"Bracher," the tailor continued, scarcely moving his lips, and in the tone of a stage conspirator, "don't look round. Don't turn your head so much as a hair's-

breadth. That insufferable puppy and rascal Job Oswin is standing at the corner, looking in this direction. He is waiting to interrogate you, Bracher—hoping to worm his way into your confidence with impertinent questions respecting the ladies of Oakleigh Court. Refuse to gratify such low-bred inquisitiveness, or—tell him lies. Ask him the reason of the *affluvia* by the bridge in Connegar Lane. Tell him the stench was something awful as you came by. Do it well, and then, Bracher, I lay you ten to one you see a lunatic stride down the street five miles an hour in order to sniff.”

The butler winked, and started upon his way. Mr. Harry Crickshaw retired casually to his doorstep and innocently watched.

But then to note the expression of Mr. Bracher as he pinched his classic nose and pronounced the word “*affluvia*.” His face assumed the pained look of one who has suffered, and the Alderman became sympathetic at once. He even pressed half a crown into the unexpected palm of Bracher, and explained that he had been intending to do so for some time.

“He will discover that *affluvia*,” chuckled Mr. Harry Crickshaw to himself, “and it is to be hoped it will do him good.”

Then with the inward satisfaction which is the highest of all rewards to him who performs in secret a benevolent action, Mr. Harry Crickshaw retired within his shop, and there, behind the counter, with tape and pipeclay and a conscience free from care, devoted his great intellect to the careful fashioning of a lighter puce-coloured coat.

CHAPTER V

A MEETING BY CHANCE

LITTLE more than three weeks had passed, and still the summer shone upon Oakleigh as on the day when Josiah Oswin was buried. But now it was evening. The tall trees in the park cast long shadows across the grass, and in the shade below the terrace a gardener in shirt-sleeves was already watering the flowers. The fragrance of moist earth, mingled with the scent of grateful roses, filling the warm air, came wafting across the lawns.

The doors were wide open as formerly, but upon the drive, a few steps in front of the porch, the three ladies of Oakleigh were standing in a group. The rumble of carriage wheels and the trotting of a pair of horses, growing fainter with distance, could still be heard from the village street beyond the gates. They had evidently only just bidden farewell to a parting guest.

The two girls stood silent, but Mrs. Oswin was talking as if she would never stop.

Any kind of occasion, however small, was a joy to this good woman, and whether she laughed or cried, a matter of no great consequence, since she did either quite readily, and thoroughly enjoyed both. All that she asked to make her happiness complete was to be in everything, so that she might seize and afterwards

recount the unimportant details. This she did with a foreign manner, very slight and quaint—merely a stress upon an unexpected syllable and an articulation unusually distinct.

She had put on a broad straw garden hat, meaning to spend the evening sitting in the shade with "the young ladies," as she persisted in calling them. It hid her frizzy grey hair, and cast by contrast a deeper hue upon her swarthy face. When standing, her shortness of stature was more apparent; and now, in the complacency of riches and assured position, she looked stouter than at the funeral, during those moments of eager apprehension and unexpected joy. She had accepted the new situation with the frankness of an imaginative child playing a game. With the mansion of Oakleigh at her back, she stood unconscious that anything could be wanting in herself. She was a great lady now, and had already forgotten William and the farm and all those years when it had been so difficult to make things meet. In her hand she brought a light shawl, and her finger was so thickly ornamented with rings that the gems seemed to be jostling one another over the joints.

"Ah—h, Maggie!" she sighed softly, and at once proceeded to pour forth genial ineptitude in a ringing voice. "And so your father, who came upon us out of the clouds, has just as quickly departed to another hem—is—phere. Well, this I can say, without fear of contradiction, that—but for his one frailty—a handsomer man or one with pole—lie—tare manners to ladies I have never seen. I con—sid—dare him the perfection of a gentleman, myself, except for his one fault. And when he sat down to dinner, in his new suit that Crickshaw the tailor made to fit him so beauti-

fully, he was an acquisition—quite. Perhaps the coat was a leetle—leetle full in the back——” Here she half closed her eyes and pondered gravely. “However, intemperance is an evil, a great evil—perhaps the greatest of evils.” And upon this reflection Mrs. Oswin shook her head and looked a great deal wiser than she really was.

Margaret Lane did not reply. The events of the last three weeks had been so startling, and awakened so many strange emotions, that at this moment her heart was too full and her mind too confused to follow her aunt's trivialities. Yet her great eyes cast an imploring glance upon Hetty Oswin, as if asking for assistance to escape. But the stout little lady, unconscious that she could ever offend, held herself erect, and clutching her shawl more tightly, began to walk across the lawn.

“What are you going to do, mother?” asked Hetty sharply. It was one of the penalties of the education bestowed by Uncle Jos that her mother's tattle, of which formerly she took no heed, could now drive her almost to distraction.

“I thought we should sit under the trees and be comfortable,” replied the elder lady, smiling pleasantly at the thought of hours to spare. “It will be quite a rest to have a long talk.” She had a way of often making sentences all of monosyllables, which she spoke with an even staccato emphasis upon every word. Then with quick steps she started again for a seat beneath an ancient chestnut tree, of which here and there the edges of the broad leaves were already turning yellow.

“Maggie means to take her rod and go down by the river,” said her daughter with cold decision; “and I think of going with her.”

Mrs. Oswin continued her march for a few paces, then suddenly stopped and faced round.

"Of course, whatever your cousin wishes, that you will do," she cried with a sudden fierce rapidity that was quite astonishing. "A parent counts for nothing in these days, I see," and quivering with an anger which was all the while on the verge of tears, she tossed her head, and with great dignity went on again.

And thus of late did the poor woman often suffer the pangs of jealousy. She could scarcely bear to trust this one beloved daughter out of her sight; and the close affection which had suddenly grown up between the girls seemed to exclude her and push her upon one side.

Had it been possible, she would have kept Hetty all to herself; but Hetty long ago broke away from all restraint. Even the three weeks since the death of Uncle Jos had made a difference. In the old days, when they were poor and had to contrive, there were so many things to discuss; now there was nothing. Then Hetty was dependent upon her mother for all small expenses; now she was the mistress of Oakleigh Court, and fully alive to the position.

"Poor mother means very little—that is one thing," she whispered carelessly, as she laid her hand upon Maggie's waist to draw her away. "Come along. Her misery only lasts a moment. Go down to the summer-house, and I will be there in a minute."

But to Maggie Lane the parting words of Mrs. Oswin bore a deeper significance.

Was it certain that nothing could be done? Something within her heart, yet apart from all effort or will, kept asking this question; and she answered it out of her own consciousness aloud, and in words:—

"If I should find hereafter that I could have been of real use to him, I—I shall never forgive myself."

Her face had grown thinner during the last fortnight, and she looked worn and pale. She had been brought to Oakleigh so young, and her adoption by Uncle Jos was so complete, that she had heard little of her father beyond the fact that he had long ago gone abroad and would not return. Then, without a word of warning, just in the bitterness of her first solitude, he came, not as he appeared to the cronies of the "Green Dragon," but apparently in perfect health, gentle and subdued in manner, and clad in faultless attire. Mr. Harry Crickshaw's letter had helped him to a perception of the situation. He reflected that a daughter whom he had never seen since she began to run, and who could not possibly remember him, might form an impression, hasty and false, from the shabbiness of his appearance, and determined to "lay low," as he expressed it, until the new clothes were delivered. A certain sporting instinct impelled Mr. Harry Crickshaw to haste. No mourning was ever so quickly fashioned. After two more days, spent abstemiously in bed, Mr. Lane was enabled to present himself at Oakleigh Court in a condition which Mrs. Oswin shortly afterwards described as "the very pink of perfection."

And for a week all went well. He was not only full of really astounding anecdote, but he appeared to know everything, and took a most intelligent interest in even the smallest detail appertaining to the mansion and the estate. Hetty declared him to be charming, and addressed him as "Uncle Peter" on the second day. In the secrecy of her heart Mrs. Oswin began to ponder upon the disadvantages of prolonged widowhood. To

Margaret herself it seemed providential, this sudden return of her father at such a time.

She had been brought up with such simplicity, finding her chief joys in the open air, that she knew nothing of the world, and was as free from suspicion or doubt as the flowers in the wood. And Peter Lane, in times of enforced sobriety, absolutely overflowed with the most beautiful sentiment. Poetic visions of filial affection, of paternal love rewarded with the tenderest attention, of simple rural life in a clear, soft atmosphere of strict propriety, flitted across that disordered brain, now excited by abstinence. Not a word did he utter to jar upon the sensibilities of the girl, except an occasional outburst of contemptuous anger against poor Uncle Jos, who had kept him in Australia all these years—"upon a miserable allowance, a disgraceful pittance from a man of his wealth." But he instantly calmed his indignation at sight of her tears, and became evidently moved with reverence for the dead.

"You are right, Margaret," he conceded in a voice low with conviction—"quite right. *De mortis*: what is it?—*mortuis*. Besides, I forget even his last injustice in your regard for his memory," he added impressively.

Unconsciously he took on some of the habits of Uncle Jos. He walked with her daily to the keeper's lodge below the copse, and twice of an evening they had strolled quietly down a ride of the wood, and listened to the pheasants going up to roost. It was delightful, they all agreed, with September coming on, that there would be somebody to go out with dear old Dr. Podymore.

Then came the terrible awakening.

On the quiet Sunday afternoon, when Mrs. Oswin was but just aroused, yawning, from her customary nap,

when Hetty had come downstairs refreshed from "lying down," and Maggie had finished her correspondence and placed her letters for the post, a graver look than usual might have been observed upon the countenance of Bracher as he brought in the tea. No matter how humble the duty, that great man could invest it with importance and dignity; but there was something confidential, something mysteriously sympathetic, in the way he set down the tea-tray that afternoon, and arranged the bread and butter and cakes upon the round table at Mrs. Oswin's right hand.

"Where is Mr. Lane?" inquired Mrs. Oswin, in her deep, reedy note, so much like an oboe.

"I don't think Mr. Lane is feeling very well, ma'am," whispered Bracher so softly that he was obliged to repeat the information before it could be properly understood.

"Poor Uncle Peter!" cried Hetty in great alarm. "What can be the matter?"

Maggie hastily sprang up to run in search of him and ascertain what was wrong.

"I daresay it's only the great 'eat, ma'am," ventured Bracher, in anxiety to prevent inquiry and soothe the general alarm.

"It—must—be—a—sunstroke!" gasped Mrs. Oswin, rising from her chair.

But at that moment Mr. Lane stalked into the room. If anything, his tread was firmer, his eye brighter, and his bearing more bold than usual as, without a word, he strode forward, and with unnatural solemnity seated himself upon the settee.

Then he merely stared. The ladies plied him with questions: Was he ill? What would he have? What could be done for him? But still he only stared.

Maggie felt she could never forget it. Again it all passed vividly before her mind, even to the useless prattle of her aunt, who kept talking all the while.

"I knew a man before who had a sunstroke—ap—pop—plect—tic sunstroke. He had a red-haired daughter too, afterwards married to a young miller about a mile and a half or two miles away. They put a mustard plaster on the nape of his neck, and another on his chest. He had been a sandy-haired man himself some years before, but at that time he was bald, and so they put a blister on his scalp. You could see the marks afterwards in conversation, whenever he nodded forward with his head. But it saved him—oh! it saved him. Everybody said the blister saved his life."

As she spoke Mrs. Oswin bustled forward the more closely to examine the patient. The two girls glanced helplessly at each other, quite astounded to learn how serious a misfortune had befallen.

But the mere enumeration of these perfectly safe and simple remedies acted like magic upon the sufferer. He glared insolently at his benefactress, and staggered to his feet. He could still stand, but he swayed backwards and forwards, and balanced himself with his arms. Then, realising that he was in the presence of ladies, he smiled on each in turn, and although articulation was difficult, and far from clear, endeavoured with a reassuring "All right" to set their minds at rest.

"A—ah! It is the effect upon the brain that makes the voice so husky," gasped Mrs. Oswin, touched by the thoughtfulness and fine feeling of their guest. "Send for Dr. Podymore at once, Bracher," she implored of the butler, with tears in her eyes.

"Yes, let somebody ride for Dr. Podymore at once," echoed Hetty, assuming a tone of command.

At this point Bracher decided to advise his three mistresses from the wealth of his vast experience.

"I've seen gentlemen took like this many times before," he said quietly, wagging his head, and at the same time venturing two steps forward—"mostly such as 'ad come home from foreign climates. It's the 'ead"—he tapped instructively upon his own glistening cranium—"the 'ead and the 'eat. If Mr. Lane would but lie down for an hour or two, it would all pass over, and 'e would be right by the cool of the hevening."

Thus did Bracher, with the best intentions in the world, interfere on behalf of the general good. But, alas! his kindly offices were mistaken, and most ungratefully received.

"That man drinks. *I* know. That man drinks," boasted Peter Lane hoarsely, endeavouring to point in the direction of the butler.

Bracher drink! Bracher, who had lived two-and-twenty years with Uncle Jos, and before that with the Marquis of Saintsbury! The three ladies looked astounded at each other in the face of such an impossible accusation, and the same suspicion flashed simultaneously upon the minds of all.

Bracher solemnly raised his eyes, as if to appeal to heaven for justice.

"*Me* drink!" he cried, lifting his hands in holy horror at the thought. This was too much. As he afterwards declared to friends in Bristlington, when recounting his own behaviour upon this lamentable occasion, at that he "hup and spoke hout."

"*Me* drink! when Mr. Lane have 'elped himself and swallowed every drop in the house that was hup. *Me* drink! after what took place at the 'Dragon' when——"

Arguments which must have established beyond question the sobriety of Bracher were suddenly cut short. Mr. Peter Lane advanced with that furious stride which once so terrified Mr. John Pudsey. There was a sudden blow; the butler staggered backwards, fell heavily, and measured his length upon the floor.

Mrs. Oswin wrung her hands. She screamed and wept, alternately and both at once. Pale and gasping, Hetty ran into the hall. Margaret Lane sprang forward and caught her father by the arm. And amidst all this consternation Bracher lay, wisely motionless, with his eyes shut, and his nose bleeding upon the velvet pile.

"He is stunned! He is insensible! Send for Dr. Podymore," shrieked Mrs. Oswin, as she rushed out of the room.

Then a wave of paternal tenderness swept over the heart of Peter Lane. It made Maggie shudder to remember how he became maudlin, and wanted to kiss her there and then. A misapprehension of what had taken place seemed to have arisen in his mind, for he kept assuring her unceasingly that he would always protect her—always, as long as she lived. But he permitted her to lead him into the open air, only stopping upon the way at intervals to stipulate that he should to-morrow enter an action to set aside the nefarious will of Uncle Jos, whose memory he did not cease to attack with the direst maledictions.

She left him and ran back in alarm for Bracher.

But all being quiet, the butler had discreetly lifted his head, raised himself upon his elbow, and looked cautiously around. Finding no one present, he rose with dignity, and, with one hand pressed upon his left eye, hurriedly made for the seclusion of his pantry, meditating all the way upon the folly of trying to do

good. His conscience was clear. He had done his best "to 'ush everythink hup, if only that feller 'ad 'ad sense to take the 'int."

Then came the hasty visit from old Dr. Podymore, and the excitement of helpless women asking what they were to do—how should they act? Could he, having now fallen asleep, be taken back to the "Green Dragon" forthwith?

The genial old trustee smiled upon his wards in turn over his frilled shirt and gave advice: "No, no. Keep him quiet. And then get him away without any fuss. Get him away as soon as you can, my dear ladies." And he nodded his head as cheerfully as if recommending a convalescent to the seaside.

But how was that to be done?

Then old Dr. Podymore became very serious indeed as he gave a full account of all that had happened in Bristlington—how Mr. Peter Lane had absolutely publicly threatened the Mayor, John Pudsey, as good a fellow as ever stepped, sound churchman, true blue Tory—"and without a touch of Whiggery in his whole constitution, my dear ladies"; and how there were other mysterious doings which had been hushed up. Then he urged again, "Get him away of his own accord. Poor dear Oswin knew what he was, and kept him for years. No hope—no hope at all in such cases. You must make it worth his while—worth his while to go back."

"Anything—anything!" cried Hetty eagerly.

"Let Kineton do it. I'll see Kineton. Kineton shall run over and manage it," nodded the old gentleman with an air of confidential secrecy, at the same time airily rising to go, as if the thing, being thus put upon Kineton, were as good as done.

But so it proved. On the following morning, after a

brief interview with the lawyer, the details of which were still unknown to Maggie, Mr. Lane expressed deep contrition for his behaviour.

It was a fault, he explained, in his case extremely rare, and, indeed, partly accidental. He was subject at times to a sort of ague—Mrs. Oswin might have noticed it—the result of fever caused by chill, and then— But he must get back to Australia. Indeed, he had never intended to settle in England—only to assure himself of the welfare of his daughter and return.

To Maggie in their walks he now confided his hopes for the future. Hopes? To a dead certainty he would make a fortune—an astounding fortune. Uncle Jos was not the only man who could make money. Though he breathed this confidentially, Josiah Oswin had done more by luck than talent. “A man of narrow views,” affirmed Peter Lane, shaking his head, “who upon many occasions refused a paltry sum to further the most magnificent enterprises—safe as the bank, every one.” But now an offer had been made by Hetty—“who cannot in justice be blamed for your Uncle Oswin’s infamous will,” he threw in with parenthetic seriousness—leaving a margin with which to work. And this had been done with such delicacy that he had no hesitation, none whatever, in accepting it—only as a loan, of course, for it would be repaid, every penny. Never before had he possessed capital; but now, by an admirable arrangement, a sum, not large, but sufficient, awaited him beyond the seas. Duty called him, he said affectionately, and then became mysteriously sententious: “For in some parts of the world, my dear Maggie, there is gold. In other parts there are opals. And in the country of England are estates quite as fine as Oakleigh Court.”

And so to-day, with an emotion momentary rather

than unreal, and fantastic visions of duty, success and wealth so clear before his imagination that the girl, although unconvinced, hesitated to disbelieve, he had left her in bewilderment.

She walked quickly along the terrace, descended the broad flight of stone steps, and took the path to a summer-house half hidden behind trees.

It was a square building covered with flowering creepers, and consisting only of one room, with a paved floor and a great trellised window high in the wall upon each side. It was larger than many a cottage, and furnished with a long table and several old chairs of carved oak. The doorstep had been worn hollow by summer revellers of long ago; but Uncle Jos used the place only for his fishing things, and his creels were still hanging beside the door. She had not been there since his death.

A wave of deeper unrest swept over her. When poor Uncle Jos found means for her father, there was nothing else, and the act was kind and generous. But now she possessed money upon which they might live together, it was but natural and right for them to do so. She might change him; her presence might be his salvation. It was cowardice, this paying money to be rid of him, even though he was so willing—moral cowardice. In her agitation she paced to and fro across the room. "Hetty did it in kindness," she cried aloud, "but I ought to have gone with him—to have gone with him," she kept repeating.

A hand was laid upon her arm. Hetty had followed in such haste that she was out of breath. She tried to speak, but her voice faltered and then sank into a whisper. Close by her side stood an old-fashioned arm-chair, and she sat down to rest.

"You take things too much to heart, Maggie; you do, indeed," she gasped presently. "You heard what Dr. Podymore said—that you could do no good—that nothing *can* be done——"

"But how can one be sure?" interrupted Maggie eagerly. "There is so much that is good in him. There is always a chance for everybody," she cried with conviction.

"There are generally sound places in the incurable," cried Hetty, her excitement growing with each fresh argument. "But everything is in principle the same as Uncle Jos arranged it. And your father wished you to stay here. And you would be miserable. And, besides, I want you. I should be left alone—with mother—without a soul to speak to. I should die in a month of vexation."

Her manner had become very peremptory, but only from that irritability of fatigue which does not mean ill-will. At once, in a tone of coaxing affection, as one tells a child to be good, she added—

"Make haste. I am longing for the cool river and the air. I have something that I want to say to you."

Above the doorway a narrow shelf ran the whole length of the wall. Below was a wooden chest, and by standing upon it Maggie could just reach to take down a small spliced rod that she kept there always tied up ready for use. It had been a gift from Uncle Jos, who years ago had taught her the unusual accomplishment of angling, that she might go out with him. From a peg below the shelf hung a creel, smaller than the others. As she lifted the strap over her shoulder she turned round.

Her cousin had sunk low into the chair, and her head, bent forward, was pressed firmly against the carving at

the back. Both her arms were stretched out straight and rigid at the elbows, with the fingers tightly clutched upon the scrolls with which the arms of the chair terminated. Her face was deadly pale, and there were beads of sweat upon her forehead. In her eyes was an unspeakable terror, and she stared as if imploring help for which she was unable to ask.

As Maggie sprang towards her, she drew a deep breath like a sigh from the bottom of her heart.

"What is it, Hetty?"

"I am better. It is over," she gasped, seizing Maggie's hand. "But I felt as if—as if I were going to die." And with the agony of this recollection still upon her she looked full into Maggie's face.

"Let me go one moment. I will call somebody."

"No, no!" she cried quickly, raising her voice with sudden emphasis, and holding Maggie fast. "I don't want anybody to know. I don't want mother to know. She tells everybody, and there is so much talk. She—she worried me just now, and—and—I ran—and——"

"Let us go back to the house."

"No. That would invite too many questions. We will go to the river. I—I was only out of breath. It will be quiet there, and do me good. We will just rest a minute, and then go on."

She had by this time almost recovered. Her breathing was natural, and the colour had returned to her cheek. "It was nothing—nothing after all but a great fright," she said, slowly rising from the chair. Then she drew Maggie towards her. "But you must never go away—promise me—never."

"It seems to have been decided so," replied Maggie.

"Well, don't look so grave." Her cousin laughed, with a sprightliness half reckless although half affected.

"You are not going to be mistress of Oakleigh yet. Come along."

She was determined, and then no argument could prevail with Hetty Oswin. Even in the most trivial matter she must have her way—not from a mere vulgar selfishness, but from an egoism which in the face of contradiction could find no rest. She had none of that vanity which craves for a shallow sympathy, and exaggerates its ills to be made much of. She was impatient with her own frailty, and hated above all to think that people should say that she was weak.

They went out upon the lawn, and then sauntered by a broad path through a shrubbery, by the brink of the artificial lake that Uncle Jos had made, and across the park until they came to a fence with a gate opening into the meadows. There, without a word, Hetty turned towards the house; and leaning upon the bar, as if by mutual consent, they stopped to talk.

They were standing on a spot upon which the whole mansion shone down through a vista between trees. The park was studded with ancient timber—tall elms, stately yet, though in the storms and chances of two centuries they had lost many a limb; and sturdy oaks with gnarled branches, already old long ago, when the Court was falling into decay. The house, bright in the light, was surrounded with cool, dark verdure; for upon a slope behind, intervening between roof and sky, rose a wood of beech and pine, sombre in dense foliage that had lost the brilliancy of spring but acknowledged yet no trace of coming fall.

As Hetty looked, her face, always quick and eager, became more animated than ever. During the last three weeks she had become used to the idea, at first so startling, of immense wealth. All the possibilities of

her new position kept crowding upon her mind, but for ever jostled by recollections of the disadvantages with which she was beset. Education had lifted her above a mere vulgar delight in riches; but at the high-class establishment selected by Uncle Jos for the turning out of a real lady much consideration had been given to minute social differences. Even there she had learnt the bitterness of being looked down upon. She was not popular, and just a whisper of her humble origin sufficed. And with her darker blood, whether it was of Spain or somewhere else, she had inherited a pride that could not rest under neglect.

This evening she saw only the magnificence of her fortune. Her eyes sparkled as she looked. In imagination Oakleigh became a kingdom, and she a queen.

"I can understand Uncle Jos," she cried with enthusiasm. "I do not say it was just, but I feel it myself. I should like Oakleigh to belong for ever to the Oswins."

"Yes, I see that too—Oakleigh for the Oswins!" laughed Maggie Lane; and she lifted the strap further back upon her shoulder, and waved her hand with an affectation of martial ardour.

But Hetty's eyes were still fixed with passionate admiration upon the great mansion. It was like a beautiful vision, and yet also like a living thing with rights and claims.

"I shall have everything just as it has always been," she went on with increasing ardour. "I shall tell Dr. Podymore that the shooting is to be better than ever, and the fishing; and everything all over the estate shall be kept perfect. And, Maggie"—she hesitated a moment, glanced quickly at her cousin, and, in

a lower voice, added significantly—"I want it all to go on just as when Uncle Jos was alive."

"You mean you would not like to make changes," nodded Maggie, in approval of this reverence for the dead.

"Nothing of the sort. I shall demolish some absurdities," replied the mistress of Oakleigh with impatience. To make amends for such irritability, she grasped Maggie's hand, and explained in quick sentences full of warmth and enthusiasm: "Hitherto we have done just what we liked. Whatever we wanted we took. If it was not here we sent for it. We never saw the bills, we never asked who paid them, or bothered about money in the least. Now it shall go on just the same. I don't want it ever to seem to be my money. Don't you understand?"

"Yes, I know what you mean, Hetty, dear, but——"

Without waiting to listen, but in her excitement even unaware that she had asked a question, Hetty Oswin hurried on:—

"We can never use it all. There is such a lot. There must be. See what Uncle Jos used to fool away in things that you and I should laugh at. Everything shall be equal. A perfect equality, that is my idea. I shall see Mr. Kinton to-morrow, and find out whether something cannot be set aside, or something of that sort, to always ensure that allowance to Mr. Lane. After that, let all be in common between us."

"Don't let us talk about it to-night, Hetty," pleaded Maggie earnestly, for the mention of her father recalled her restless doubts. "Wherever I may be, Oakleigh will always be to me like home. I never remember another; and I feel the generosity of what you wish—I do, indeed. Only one thing could make me want to

go—well, I don't mean want to go—but—you know what I mean, Hetty, dear——”

She faltered, and broke down, then looked Hetty in the face with eyes imploring not to be misunderstood.

Overcome with delight, Hetty threw her arms around her cousin's neck, kissed her upon both cheeks, and drew her away from the gate to the path leading to the river.

“Come, I consider it all settled,” she cried warmly. “There is only one word more. They say nothing uncle did can be altered, but anything that accumulates is my own. That must all be for you. I shall speak to Dr. Podymore, and have it made over, either at the time, or if you should marry, or whenever is convenient, just as he advises.”

This vagueness as to how and when the business was to be done only made the liberality more delightfully expansive. Maggie Lane could find no words to express the happiness she felt in these assurances of her cousin's affection. It was a necessity of her nature to love and be loved. She had worshipped Uncle Jos. The father, who so readily left her to another, had only to return and show himself to touch her heart at once, and win her confidence and affection. When they presently came to the river and peered over the tall green rushes upon the shining water, running low and clear, all the while she was secretly chiding herself that she had sometimes misunderstood Hetty and done her wrong, thinking her selfish and envious. The thought of this now filled her with remorse.

It was an injustice to Margaret Lane that our first glance at the opening of this story should have found her in tears. But the occasion was exceptional. Her life had known only one sorrow, and until then her

eyes can hardly be said to have wept. From early childhood she had lived in the open air, riding or tramping with Uncle Jos over the estate from morn till night ; and it was with the grass beneath her feet and the sky above her head that she ought, in justice to herself, first to have been seen.

She was clad this evening in a simple frock of black bombazine, held at the waist with a long sash tied in a bow. It crossed her shoulders like an ancient kerchief, leaving open her white throat and neck, and the sleeves were bell-shaped and fell back almost to the elbow when she raised her arm. She wore a broad Leghorn hat with a plain black ribbon ; and her rich golden hair, in curls above her ears, and raised into a coil at the back of her well-shaped head, caught a brighter, warmer hue in contrast with the severity of the mourning. Her fair complexion shone the purer and the clearer, her tall figure revealed a more slender elegance, in this sombre attire. It heightened also her greatest charm, the frank expression of her countenance.

Yet Maggie had not the striking features of Hetty Oswin. Her forehead was broad, her grey eyes were large ; but it was the straightforward candour almost of wonder which looked out from them that made them beautiful. Her nose was of no type whatever that can be called by a name, but it was straight and not insignificant ; and when one reflects upon the wild variety of hopeless noses any of which, through no fault of his own, a human being may be called upon to carry through life, that is sufficient praise. Her mouth was well formed, and smiled unconsciously, as if from a certainty of universal happiness. How could it do otherwise ? for Maggie had grown up in health and plenty, with no glimpse into the outer world, or any knowledge of un-

comfortable things, until the sudden return of her father brought her face to face with human weakness. In her simplicity she thought it must be easy to reform.

Rod in hand, she walked slowly up the river, Hetty following a few yards behind. Now and again they stopped and watched. It was late in the season after a dry summer, and below the banks, and sometimes in the middle of the stream, long strips of yellow gravel were left bare beside still water that mirrored the blue sky. In the shallows they could watch great fish moving to and fro, leaving behind them long lines of widening ripples as they darted away. Floating mid-stream, upon a bed of weed, they saw a dabchick's nest, and once a kingfisher rose before them, and sped away with a flash of sapphire upon its wing.

The turf of the meadow under foot was soft. Sometimes, as they trod, the air was filled with a scent of mint, and the fragrant meadow-sweet, rising tall above clumps of blue forget-me-not, gave off its full-blown sweetness everywhere.

But nowhere did they find a rising trout.

Yet they loitered until the glowing eventide made the straight reach before them a broad path of gold.

They came to the last meadow, and upon one side of it ran a high road, the road to Bristlington, which a stone bridge, with three arches and heavy buttresses, carried across the stream. This was the end of Oakleigh, the boundary between it and Whorbury.

"How beautiful it is!" cried Maggie with enthusiasm. "No one will see us if we go up."

They went into the road, and stood upon the further side of the bridge to look at the sunset. Above the centre buttress was a niche in the low wall, and they sat down. Everything was still and quiet except the

whisper and the hum of shallow water babbling over the pebbles underneath. Beyond there stood a clump of alders, dark and purple-hued against the yellow sky, and above that a row of hatches casting their shadows, sharp-cut and black, across a quiet pool.

Maggie glanced up and down the empty road.

"How solitary it all feels!" she said.

"One would think there was no living being within ten miles. It makes me feel melancholy," responded Hetty Oswin with a sigh. "What's that?"

Whilst she was speaking there had come a splash from the foot of the pool, and the still surface was broken into widening circles.

"That is a big one," said Maggie Lane respectfully, as again the trout rose with a sucking noise a little further away from the bank.

"Couldn't you catch him?" asked the lady of Oakleigh with reprehensible eagerness.

"I dare not take such a liberty. It's a Whorbury trout. Old Squire Jack would exterminate us if he knew."

Then they both laughed.

"I suppose he *is* out of reach," reflected Hetty rather sadly.

"I really believe from this height I could get to him," replied Maggie doubtfully, but yielding to temptation.

"Just try, and see what he does."

"But it's poaching."

There followed a pause, for as Maggie Lane pronounced a word so appalling her voice sank into a whisper. Certainly she did not underrate the enormity of such a proceeding, but all the while the trout went on rising greedily.

"Nobody could possibly find us out," argued Hetty excitedly, glancing across the fields in every direction.

"Yet even if I should happen to hook him, he would be certain to get off again," mused Maggie Lane.

"That won't matter. We must do something. Try him," said Hetty with decision. "If anybody comes in sight you can easily break off the line."

It was almost dusk, and they must presently be returning home. The temptation was too great. In that frame of mind which people sometimes indicate by the phrase "just for fun," Maggie took one cast. In a moment there was a splash, a plunge—and the trout was on.

To describe the struggle which ensued is superfluous.

How the fish bored for the weeds—made for the bushes—how he leapt and tried to strike off the line with his tail has been told before, not only with the most convincing truth, but in the finest fiction. It is enough that just before the final gasp, when that trout was about to lie upon his silvery side and show his crimson spots, Maggie's attention was suddenly distracted.

"Break it off!" excitedly cried Hetty. "There are people coming down the road."

It was too late. Maggie was holding the rod with both hands, and in the exigency of the moment had raised the butt level with the wide-brimmed hat. The rod was bent into a perfect arch, the line was as straight as a fiddle-string.

"Break it off!" cried Hetty, louder still. "There is Crickshaw the tailor—and John Hallett's lean girl too. He will put it all over Bristlington, and she'll tell Keziah Crane. All Whorbury and Squire Jack will hear of it, as sure as the light. Break it off!"

"But I'm pulling with all my might and it won't break," wailed Maggie in despair.

"Cut it! Snap it! It will look so bad," shrieked the new mistress of Oakleigh in despair; for to be trout-fishing at all was scarcely considered feminine in those days, and to be poaching—

"But I haven't any scissors, and I can't."

Then from behind the buttress on the right-hand side, with a landing net in his hand, a tall man stepped out and waded into the shallow.

"Draw him a little further down," shouted the stranger.

"O—o—oh!" gasped Hetty Oswin in Maggie's ear. "It is Mr. Rumblelow himself."

"A little nearer, please."

"He must have heard every word we said."

And as the young Squire of Whorbury, bringing the fish in his net, presently stepped up into the road, Mr. Harry Crickshaw, in his puce-coloured coat, arm and crook with Miss Selina Hallett, whose blue eyes stared their very hardest as she passed, came slowly strolling by.

CHAPTER VI
IN THE GLOW OF SUNSET

TO the two girls who stood detected in the awful crime of poaching the young Squire represented all that social grace and advantage which had been beyond the means of Uncle Jos to purchase with the Manor of Oakleigh. Even in their everyday conversation they were wont to whisper the name of Rumblelow with bated breath. It was, moreover, impossible to offer any excuse whatsoever for their conduct, since he must have overheard every word they had said. They felt ashamed; it looked as if they did not honour those refinements of behaviour which are as the law to well-bred folk. Yet, in spite of her confusion, Hetty Oswin found herself taking note of every little detail about him.

He was taller than she had thought from seeing him—usually upon horseback—upon the road or in Bristlington streets. His hat was thickly ornamented with artificial flies, and some of them upon the top shone red, and some were blue against the light. His hair was sandy and cut rather short, and his neck was sunburnt above his white collar. He had light-grey eyes, Hetty noticed, and they seemed to have a humorous twinkle when he spoke; no doubt he was laughing at them about the trout. But the curl of his moustache was

superb; and how smooth his face was where he shaved!—"a fair-haired man does look like that," thought Hetty, "with a cheek almost like a girl"—yet he was a very picture of robust activity and strength, and his complexion hard and ruddy from being much in the open air.

Net in hand, he advanced towards Maggie, whom he knew, raised his hat, and then shook hands with her.

She understood enough of angling to be sure that he had been waiting for that very trout, and that added to her discomfort.

"I am so sorry," she stammered, and her face blushed crimson. "I—I feel quite sure I have spoiled your sport."

"Not at all," he laughed. "I was delighted to see you hook him," and then he glanced at Hetty Oswin.

"My cousin, Miss Oswin—Mr. Rumblelow," said Maggie, and they bowed to each other.

But Hetty had by this time somewhat regained her composure.

"I am afraid we have no defence whatever, Mr. Rumblelow," she cried with forced gaiety; for seeing his good-humour, she instinctively took her stand upon the indulgence due to her sex. "Our crime was premeditated. But this is the first offence. At any rate, we are not confirmed poachers."

"I hope not indeed," he told her with mock gravity which did not conceal his amusement. And then, as they all laughed together, he turned again to Maggie Lane, and added, quite seriously, "But I trust Miss Lane will always know she is welcome to extend her walk as far as she may feel inclined."

As the girl looked up to thank him there was still

a glow upon her cheek, not altogether due to the brightness of the sunset.

He pointed up the stream with the net.

"There is some pretty water just beyond the hatches," he said—"in fact, all the way to Whorbury. Will you come and look at it?"

"I am afraid we must be turning back," interposed Hetty Oswin, so quickly that she gave her cousin no time to answer for herself. "It is very good of you. And please fish on Oakleigh as often as you like; it will be left very quiet now. *Do* take a trout of ours as soon as you can to make all fair."

She had spoken these sentences rapidly. Then, after hastily consulting her watch, she stepped towards him, and held out her hand to say good-bye.

"May I come at once?" he asked, glancing with good-humour from one to the other.

What could they say? They were delighted and, indeed, complimented by the suggestion.

"*Do*," cried Maggie Lane cordially.

"Do, please," repeated Hetty, with warmer emphasis.

So he jumped down to fetch his rod, which he had left leaning against the buttress; and they walked along the river-side towards Oakleigh.

The path was narrow, and Hetty was in front. The others loitered a moment to watch by a broad pool. Hetty sauntered on, and by a stile in a hedgerow stopped and turned round to wait for them. They were standing still, very busily discussing artificial flies, for she could overhear scraps of their conversation: "Oh, yes, at dusk nothing beats a coachman," "Or earlier in the evening a small black gnat." And presently their thoughts had turned to spring, for she caught the words "early in April," and then he was affirming most posi-

tively that "the hackle when held in the sun should be a decided blue."

He took off his cap to show a pattern worthy of the fullest confidence, and their heads were close together as they bent to look.

"If *she* had been rich, he would have married her," muttered Hetty to herself, and, in spite of her affection for Maggie, the thought stirred a restless feeling in her heart. She could not help watching with an unconscious keenness of observation which nothing could escape. He turned and held a fly up to the light, and the glow of the yellow sunset fell upon them, as if touching both alike with a mysterious sentiment of romance. It drew his lifted arm and the form of his uncovered head in bold relief upon the calm of the evening sky. It shone on the girl's hair and lighted her upturned face. It came like a revelation of new beauty in her cousin, hitherto unseen and unsuspected. Then he said something in a voice too low to reach Hetty's ear. They laughed, and the merriment jarred upon her. The impulse to walk quickly back and break in upon their conference became irresistible.

"It will presently be dark, Maggie," she said, with an impatience scarcely to be accounted for by the desire to get home. "We ought to be getting on."

They walked quickly forward together until they came opposite the entrance to the lawn, where Mr. Rumblelow insisted upon putting the trout in Maggie's creel. This gave rise to a little humorous altercation, and again he repeated his invitation to her to fish the Whorbury water as often as she liked.

Hetty placed her hand upon the latch of the gate.

He stepped forward to open it.

"You will become an angler next season, I expect,

Miss Oswin," he said airily, in the manner suited to such predictions. "You will be tempted by your beautiful stream."

"I do not think I should care for it," she answered without much encouragement.

"You have an expert to teach you," he laughed.

And so they shook hands and parted, just as the last bright colour faded out of the sky and the shadow of coming night was falling upon stream and mead.

They hurried back to the summer-house. The mansion was lost by this time in the dark wood behind; but in an upper story a dim light appeared, flitting from one window to another, until presently the stout figure of Mrs. Oswin could be distinguished passing down the staircase into the hall.

"He was very nice about it. I don't think he minded in the least," cried Maggie. She was excited; yet although she spoke with enthusiasm, her words put on also a tone of inquiry, as if eager to obtain an assurance that she was right.

"I don't like him at all," returned the other shortly.

"Not like him?" It was inconceivable.

"Not at all," repeated Hetty with greater determination than ever. "Of course he could not make a fuss. But his manner was patronising—abominably."

"Oh, no, Hetty dear; he seemed to me quite natural," remonstrated Maggie Lane with some warmth.

"Natural, perhaps — but objectionable," retorted Hetty savagely. Without waiting for an answer, in angry excitement too fierce to be controlled she burst out: "But we are nobodies. Everybody knows that. How can it be otherwise with these Pudseys and Oswins, within two miles, always attracting the attention of the whole neighbourhood, with their Bristlington

Corporation and their foolery? All the world knows where we came from, and is not likely to forget it. Oh, yes, 'Job Oswin's cousin'; 'a relative of John Pudsey, the Mayor.' That's what they say, and tell of Uncle Jos and his fortune in the same breath. The tailor-man is already in the 'Dragon' at Bristlington, saying that we—we were talking with Mr. Rumblelow on the bridge; as if it were a wonder and a matter of importance. And Hallett's girl will be running down to Keziah Crane's shop the first thing in the morning to say that we were fishing with the young squire. And the beginning and end of it all is—that we are nobodies."

A few paces she strode on in silence, and then with affectation of fairness more irritating even than her anger, she added—

"Though, of course, I may be wrong about young Rumblelow; for I scarcely spoke to him, and you have met him several times before."

By this time they had come to the summer-house, and checking the reply that came hastily to her tongue, Maggie Lane went in to put up her rod.

She was burning with indignation at this injustice to one whom she had found so unaffected in his manner and altogether pleasant. It was unnatural to her simple inexperience to suspect mean thoughts in anyone. She cherished none herself, and therefore she found none. Already this straightforward honesty had begun to argue away her anger. After all, she had witnessed these sudden outbursts of passion many times before, and the contrition which often followed quick upon them. And it was said to be unwise to thwart Hetty. Her excitability was entirely due to weakness, so old Dr. Podymore had affirmed when he prescribed plenty

of amusement and port wine. It would be better to make no reply.

And it proved to be the greatest nonsense after all, for as they presently walked together towards the house, Hetty broke the silence with a laugh.

"However, it is of the very smallest consequence whether he is nice or not," she said, in a tone quite conciliatory and even gay. "We are neither of us likely to see him again for a blue moon."

BOOK II
WHORBURY

CHAPTER I

OLD SQUIRE JACK

THE house in which Dr. Podymore resided was an old-fashioned, handsome edifice standing close against Bristlington Street. There were three or four projecting steps, and above them an old oak door studded with nails and ornamented with a knocker and door-plate, both of brass. The windows were Tudor, with a moulded dripstone running from one to the other and inclosing the stone slab above the doorway. At one end of the building was a modern door, across which, in attractive letters, the word "SURGERY" had been painted.

Early one afternoon towards the middle of August, upon the very day when Mr. Harry Crickshaw chanced to see the young Squire in company with the ladies of Oakleigh upon the bridge, the doctor's boy was leading a steady-looking cob backwards and forwards before the house. From the windows of the "Green Dragon" that horse and youth in buttons were very noticeable, for no other living thing was to be seen in the street. A quarter of an hour, half an hour, forty minutes "by the clock," as old Mr. Jennings affirmed in a tone that made any such forty worth at least any other forty-five, did the worthies of Bristlington stand and watch. Yet there was no mystery in the matter at all. The cob was an

old acquaintance of nearly twenty years' standing; and, more than that, they had every one of them, some time before, observed Lawyer Kinton alight and stretch the reins across the pavement whilst he ascended to ring the bell. After that he waited whilst the parlourmaid ran for the boy to hold secure that most respectable steed. In fact, they knew everything except the subject of the consultation, and this, being strictly confidential, cannot be repeated even here.

At last, closely followed by old Dr. Podymore, without his hat, the lawyer popped out in a great hurry, to depart at once; yet upon the bottom step but one they stopped again and laid their heads together for full five minutes, nodding, recapitulating, and asserting, and punctuating, as it were, their agreement with upraised fingers. Even when Lawyer Kinton stepped off the pavement to remount, and had, in fact, one foot in the stirrup, old Dr. Podymore called him back and tapping, almost professionally, upon his chest just below the collar-bone, whispered in his ear. The face of the lawyer appeared more than usually grave as he slowly rode up the street.

"Ah!" reflected old Mr. Jennings, for once clutching both whiskers together under his chin, as if determined to display no favouritism in the caress; "the work and responsibility involved in a trust nobody knows."

"Except a trustee," flippantly responded Mr. Harry Crickshaw.

"That," replied the ancient estate-agent, with a slow dignity heavy laden with rebuke, "is clearly a *sine quâ non*. He's going to Oakleigh now."

"Oh, yes," chimed in Mr. Harry Crickshaw, "that's for certain. He's going to Oakleigh now."

But such trivial conversation should have no place in

this history, except to prove that, although Bristlington was gifted with an observation most wonderfully minute, its inferences were scarcely worth the breath that uttered them; for, having jogged along no more than half a mile, the lawyer came to a cross-road, with a patch of dusty sward in the middle and a white finger-post bearing upon its left arm the words, "To Whorbury." There he turned off and, drawing rein, proceeded at a pace even more leisurely than before.

To tell truth, Mr. Kinton was ill at ease. He did not like his errand at all; and when at last he reached Whorbury village, he rode so slowly by its old homesteads and low cottages that once his nag, becoming drowsy from the heat of the summer day, or mistaking his rider's intention, stopped.

Yet the lawyer's mind was never more alert. His spectacles he used only for reading; but, being near-sighted, out of doors he had a way of poking his head forward and appearing to pry in all directions. And what he saw to-day filled him with regret. It was most pathetic. Upon all sides was disrepair, and everything bore the sign of impending ruin. There were farm-buildings with roofs tumbling in and walls bulging out so much that they had been shored up with sticks of timber to prevent them from falling. The place abounded with these temporary expedients to put off expense. It made Mr. Kinton groan aloud to see such waste. He was a man of deep feeling whenever property was concerned, and although in his time he had witnessed a fair share of human sorrow without a pang, to see the condition of the weir and hatches above Whorbury Mill gave him absolute pain.

He aroused his steed and came quickly to the entrance to Whorbury House—a pair of handsome iron gates

between stone pillars, from one of which the coping-stone, bearing an heraldic ornament, had fallen and lay on the ground below, half hidden among high nettles. A girl in a sun bonnet ran out from the lodge and opened the gate for him to pass in.

"Have you seen the Squire go away to-day?" he asked, half inclined to turn back and write after all.

"He has this minute gone home, sir," replied the girl, and so Mr. Kinton trotted forward under the shade of a long avenue of oaks.

"Hullo, Kinton, is that you?"

The voice was very clear and musical. It came from below the branches, and, as the lawyer pulled up, the old Squire Rumblelow of Whorbury, followed by two red Irish setters, stepped out into the road before him.

"Very glad to see you, Kinton," he cried heartily, coming up upon the near side of the cob and shaking hands across the pommel. "The very man I wanted. I was going to ride in for a word with you."

As he spoke, Squire Rumblelow looked up at the lawyer, and the shadows from the leaves overhead dappled his face. There were lines upon his forehead below his beaver hat, which he wore a little on the back of his head, and humorous lines running from the corners of his eyes above his cheek-bones. But these were not the marks of age, though the Squire was getting up in years. They stood, as it were, for the seal of the weather, the sign-manual of the open sky under whose free dominion he had spent his days. And the influence of the fresh air was upon everything he said and did. It had given him a breezy manner, that in one not so well-bred might easily have degenerated into bluster—though with him it never did—and a sunny good-humour, not without condescension, that

made him very popular. Yet old Squire Rumblelow could storm at times with a suddenness which was quite astonishing.

Mr. Kinton bent his head, but with a certain quiet reserve, in response to Squire Rumblelow's greeting. Certainly, if the matter in hand were already known to him, let the Squire speak first.

"The cob wears well. You've never hurried him," laughed the old gentleman, as they moved forward towards the house; and then, without waiting for a reply, he looked up again, and with a singularly frank expression, although now there was a passing cloud upon his face, he added in the same breath—

"The fact is, Kinton, I want money."

"Are you thinking of the interest of the mortgage?" inquired the lawyer warily after a moment's silence.

"Mortgage, no! Damn the mortgage!" exploded the Squire with sudden heat at the intrusion of so objectionable a subject. He took off his beaver, wiped his forehead with a large red silk handkerchief, and, hat in hand, walked on in the shade.

His hair, of which he still had plenty, was of an iron grey, and fell in careless waves upon his forehead. A whisker almost white and clipped quite short ran half-way down his cheek, and was shaved square with the corner of a stiff collar that arose from behind the folds of his stock, like a sharp peak. He wore a green coat with tails and brass buttons. It looked none the worse because it was faded and grown rusty with wear, for the Squire was altogether so fine and handsome a man that he would have given dignity to any apparel. In his hands he carried the hunting-whip without which, except on Sunday on his way to church, he was never seen.

To be sure, three centuries of Rumblelows had not lived in Whorbury Hall for nothing—in more senses than one—and the Squire's face was worthy of his ancient race. His chin was deep but well formed, his mouth firm, and his nose strong and aquiline. Doubtless he might have made a soldier but for a passion for hounds so overpowering that he would do nothing but hunt. A hundred and eight seasons he had hunted hounds without a break. That was his proudest boast, for when the fox was over the otter began, and he never left his county for fifty-four years. It is true that early in life he once aspired to become a senator; but had he won that election, which cost him so much, alas! the neighbourhood of Oakleigh must have lost a most excellent sportsman.

"No, no. That can wait," he went on, lowering his voice to a confidential tone and drawing nearer to the cob. "I want—what is it the play says?—'to raise a present sum.' I want it at once, Kinton. There are several things pressing, and one or two things I want to do."

"I do not know what to advise," said the lawyer, thoughtfully stroking his chin.

"And I do not know what the devil to do."

"It would be impossible to raise more on Whorbury."

"Eh? What?" cried the Squire sharply, for that was what he had in his mind.

"I mean at the present time. In fact, you would not get so much. I am sorry to say the mortgagee is getting very restless. I got a nasty letter this morning. I came over to speak to you about it. I will show you presently."

But the Squire could not wait. He must hear at

once. "What is it, Kinton? Don't potter over your fences. Out with it, man."

They had turned a bend, and were now in sight of the Hall, a large mansion with a classic portico standing at the end of a straight drive between the trees.

"They point out, of course, that the interest is in arrears. They ask whether we are prepared to redeem. If not, they must take the estate into their own hands and receive the rents. I thought it better to come than write."

Mr. Kinton spoke very quickly, in a tone indeed almost apologetic. The Squire stopped, and set his beaver hat firmly on the back of his head with grave deliberation. Then his face flushed crimson. He set his teeth with rage, and for a moment was so angry that he could not speak.

"What do the rogues mean?" he cried in a fury. "If they expect to frighten old Jack Rumblelow, they make a mistake. I'll fight 'em. They'll go a step too far, Kinton. They can't do it. I know they can't. I'll oppose them every step."

"They would be within their right. They might bring an ejectment and take the estate into their own hands," said Mr. Kinton mournfully.

"But what the devil do they think? Isn't the security sufficient? Isn't Whorbury enough for 'em? Bring an ejectment? By George! I'd barricade the house and stand a siege."

As he spoke, the Squire raised his hunting-whip with such sudden, emphatic vigour, that the quiet cob swerved, to the imminent peril of his owner, who, taken unawares, seized hold of the pommel with both hands in alarm. This movement so delighted the Squire that he laughed outright, and for the moment his excitement was allayed.

"I think I will dismount," remonstrated Mr. Kineton mildly. "It will be more convenient for conversation."

He did so with alacrity, and throwing the rein over his arm, walked on by Squire Rumblelow's side.

"Then what the deuce am I to do?" burst out the old gentleman angrily. Then he glanced at Whorbury Hall, to which they were now drawing very near, and suddenly became grave.

Still Mr. Kineton paused—reflected—hesitated—and after all plunged into the matter head first.

"There is only one way," he said, speaking with quick decision, and giving a nod at the end of each short sentence. "To sell the establishment. To meet all present demands. To let the house. To go away, leaving everything in the hands of some reliable man of business. It would take years, but I would guarantee myself that, with careful management, the estate shall in time become free and the Rumblelows return to their own once more."

The lawyer's manner had become very low and earnest, though he finished with this flourish of trumpets at the end, and for the first time in his life Squire Rumblelow fully realised his position. There had been difficulties before, but always an expedient to carry him safely on, and with him an obstacle overridden was forgotten at once. But now it was late in the afternoon, and they had come to the end of the run.

"So it's all over with old Squire Jack. There is nothing for him but to kick off his boots," he reflected quietly. He knew what the people around called him, and had a humorous way in serious moments of adopting the nickname. "Come across the grass to the stables, Kineton, and afterwards we'll go indoors."

He was too proud to utter a word of complaint, and

they passed between the trees and across a corner of the park in silence. The setters went galloping forward, turned to look, and came back again.

“How long will it take, Kinton,” he asked abruptly without looking up, “if we leave it to you?”

“The young Squire should go abroad and do something, if possible. Then, say—say twenty years—unless, of course, he should marry well, or meet with some good fortune.”

“And what about these fellows? They must not come in—and they must not be allowed to foreclose.”

“An idea occurred to me,” replied the lawyer, with the hesitation which implies doubt. “But you may not like it—and—and I don’t know that it is possible——”

“What’s that?” asked the Squire impatiently. “Out with it, and let me hear.”

But Mr. Kinton became more than ever deliberate and uncertain.

“No doubt it would be a good thing to have everything under one control. But then, of course, Podymore might not consent. I was thinking the Oswin trustees might consent to take over the mortgage. We shall have large sums from Australia to invest, and these people would be paid out. Of course—of course, Podymore may object that there is not sufficient margin. But I think—I think I could meet that, by the consideration that we should be glad to buy at a higher price. Now, how does that appear to you?”

The old gentleman bent his head and sighed. The parting with Oakleigh was still a sore point with him.

“Ay! Whorbury will go where the rest has gone. That will be the end of it,” he reflected gloomily.

For once in his life little lawyer Kinton indulged in a mild pleasantry.

"The best thing the young Squire can do is to fall in love with the heiress. There is enough to buy twice over," he nodded gaily. "Then the estate will be whole again in strict settlement."

In what humour Squire Rumblelow would have received this suggestion cannot be divined; for at that moment a little old man in shirt-sleeves, and with thin legs crooked with rheumatism, came running out of the gateway leading into the stable-yard. He had a crooked little shaven face, too, and grey eyes that fairly danced with excitement. This was John Baker, the husband of Mary Jane.

"He's a'comed, sir. Sir Peter Wilkins, sir, have a-bin there, up's quarter of an hour," shouted John in a little cracked tin voice; and always at the word "sir" his forefinger rose and touched the rim of his hat as if it were worked by machinery.

"Eh? Bless my heart! For the moment I forgot!" cried the Squire of Whorbury, jerking back his head with regret. "Come along, Kineton—take the horse, John—I'll talk to you again, Kineton—are they all right, John?—when Wilkins has gone, Kineton."

Speaking thus—first to one, then to the other—Squire Rumblelow strode forward towards the gates. This fresh excitement had for the time being dispelled his sadder thoughts, whilst his haste and the serious expression upon his face proved the occasion to be none of minor importance.

John Baker, dragging at the rein and bustling his stiff limbs to keep up, kept talking all the while: "Right as rain, sir, a'ter vine weather, sir. Never zeed none better not in all my life, sir. Vive o' 'em, sir. Pirty as picters, sir. Every one better 'an t'other—in a manner o' speaking."

And now, whenever John saluted he also winked, a large, simultaneous, automatic wink involving one half of his face. Yet there was nothing familiar about it. It was merely an assurance of cleverness, and so far from involving disrespect expressed unqualified respect—for John Baker.

“How do ye do, Wilkins!” cried Squire Rumblelow now quite himself again, as he hurried through the gates into the courtyard.

“Late—late,” remonstrated the baronet, a short, consequential sportsman, who, being very stout, stood with his legs apart.

“I thought you’d come in that way. Come along, then. Let’s waste no time. Here’s Kinton waiting to see sport.”

“Come along, then,” echoed Sir Peter, holding out his hand to the lawyer without looking at him. “He shall tell the law, Rumblelow. Ha! ha! What can ee have better than a lawyer to tell law?”

The baronet had a round, red face, and he roared with laughter to an extent that was quite dangerous.

At once there was bustle everywhere. Sir Peter had driven his four-in-hand straight into the stable-yard, and half a dozen helpers were busy unbuckling harness, and leading away the horses. Unostentatiously drawn up behind the gate stood John Baker’s donkey-cart, and away under the shadow of the further wall was a similar equipage.

A spirit of aloofness had hitherto marked the demeanour of the donkey-carts. Even the donkeys were standing with their tails towards each other, as if in denial of previous acquaintanceship. And keeping solemn guard over the distant cart, motionless as a sentinel, stood a man in grey hose, cord

breeches, and a sleeve waistcoat of ample length. He was very little taller than John Baker, but his body was prodigiously long and in front round as a pumpkin. His gaitered legs were short and straight like pegs. Being free from rheumatism, however, he stood upright, thrust his fists into the capacious pockets of his waistcoat, and gazed at the sky. An expectation of some apparition from the clouds seemed to hold him oblivious to the world around. His name was Abraham Symes, and, conscious of merit, he did not care one straw who knew it.

"Come along, then," shouted Sir Peter, in a still louder voice.

Sir Peter ran. His coachman ran, and so did the footman too. They clustered around Abraham Symes, whilst every helper in Squire Rumblelow's stables hurried to lend a hand to John Baker. At once from each cart five bags of finest linen were carefully lifted as if they held something that would break. Squire Rumblelow himself took two, and so did Sir Peter.

"Catch hold of a couple, Kinton," cried the Squire excitedly, "and come along into the library."

At once a procession was formed, Squire Rumblelow leading the way with Lawyer Kinton, who held his bags far off as if they might bite, and John Baker, who in one hand carried a pair of scales. Next came Sir Peter's coachman in stately solitude—Sir Peter having stepped back to confer with Abraham Symes—and a bottle-green livery faced with red. It was altogether an imposing pageant, for the linen bags of the Rumblelow party were of the richest claret colour, whereas Sir Peter had chosen a delicate sky blue.

Thus they crossed a lawn and reached a side entrance to Whorbury Hall. Then, as the first foot stepped upon

the threshold, a cock crew. At this from the whole of the bags came such a crowing that upon the staircase Sir Peter paused to listen. An expression akin to spiritual exaltation illumined his countenance.

"Harky to that, then!" he cried, and added with feeling that he had never heard prettier music in all his life.

The library at Whorbury was a handsome room, from which both books and furniture had some time ago been removed, excepting one small case containing works on farriery and some volumes of the *Sporting Magazine*. A square of matting was spread upon the floor, and in the centre of it had been drawn a circle in white chalk with a short line in the centre. Into the beam above a fine old open fireplace a large nail had been driven, and to this, with crooked angular alacrity, John Baker hung up his scales. And still the excitement grew; for the birds were all to be weighed. None might weigh above 4 lbs. 10 ozs., and the lightest were matched to fight first.

"I'll lay fifty guineas on the first birds matched," cried Sir Peter, too impatient to wait.

Old Squire Jack only nodded. He had never refused a challenge in his life.

John Baker and Abraham Symes knelt down upon the edge of the matting, and with a solemnity almost devotional untied the strings. Abraham's bird was of a bright ginger colour, but the strain that John Baker fed for Squire Jack was the celebrated black-breasted red. The birds were trimmed ready for the fray—their tails docked, their wings clipped to a point. Nothing now remained but to arm their heels with long silver spurs.

This carefully done, they were brought to the chalk

circle and held up towards each other. At sight of a foe each eye sparkled, each snake-like neck was thrust forward with a crow of defiance. For a minute their fierceness grew with their impatience, and then they were quietly set down on opposite sides of the circle.

At once they darted at each other, but stopped short, with necks outstretched and beak to beak. For a while they waited, fencing as warily as experienced swordsmen. The light shone down upon their smooth backs—one bright like gold, and the other of a deep red as rich as blood. Suddenly they dashed together. A confused mass of mingled colour leapt into the air with a noise of beating wings and vicious striking heels. But the battle was brief. The red bird fell under, staggered free, and dropped, whilst Sir Peter's ginger, with blood dripping from his spur, strutted and swaggered and crowed.

And so did Sir Peter too.

"Ginger for ever!" he cried lustily. "A hundred guineas, a hundred guineas on the next set-to!"

"Done!" replied old Squire Jack.

John Baker and Abraham Symes were ready in a trice; but again the same thing happened. In shorter time than it would take to tell, Squire Rumblelow's black-red lay on his back, legs up, upon the matting.

"They can't stand against 'em," roared the delighted baronet. "That's a hundred and fifty to me. They're no good, Rumblelow. I'll lay you double or quits on the next."

But now the luck changed. Both this time and the following the black-red triumphed; and it so happened that at the fifth and final set-to Squire Rumblelow stood a hundred guineas to the good, with a bet of two hundred upon this last battle.

But now the contest, though fought with no less courage and determination, was long and doubtful. Even Lawyer Kinton, who hated cock-fighting, and still more that want of reverence for property displayed in betting, became as excited as the rest. He was eager for Squire Rumblelow to win. "How is he going to pay?" he kept asking himself. "How the deuce is he going to pay?" But even this consideration was forgotten as the fight went on; for the birds fought like demons. Both red and golden feathers floated in the air, and upon both sides blood dropped upon the matting. There was no longer wariness and stratagem. The warriors rushed furiously at each other, seized with their beaks, leapt, struck again and again. But every time they fell apart the onset was less fierce, until at last, worn out and faint from loss of blood, quivering and panting, they dropped together, a heap of broken blood-stained plumage.

"Law!" cried the baronet wildly. "Count short law."

Abraham Symes slowly counted, "Woone, two, dree" up to ten.

Then the birds were taken apart and gently stroked and smoothed into some shape; yet each lay senseless in his feeder's hands.

"Put 'em down to scratch," yelled the baronet louder still, and dropping into dialect in his excitement. "Let lawyer count. Count, I tell ee, up to forty."

So the birds, to all appearance lifeless, were laid down upon their breasts, their necks extended and beaks almost touching at the white mark, and little Mr. Kinton solemnly counted what was called "long law." For if an umpire could tell forty and neither cock show signs of fight, it was a drawn battle, and all bets were off. But such was the courage of a true cock of a game

that if he had but strength to do it, he would strike or crow.

"Not so fast! Not so fast!" shouted the baronet, for the lawyer quickened as he counted, in haste to be done.

The lawyer slackened his pace—"thirty-eight, thirty-nine."

Everyone was bending forward watching in breathless anxiety. A slight shiver passed over the ginger from beak to heel, but that was nothing. For a second his glassy eye half opened; he lifted his head an inch, drew a gasp very like a sigh, gave one vicious peck that sounded sharp and clear upon the matting like the stroke of a woodpecker upon a hollow tree, rolled over upon his side, and died.

So it was all over. Abraham Symes and John Baker quickly snatched up their dead birds and bags and went hurrying back to their donkey-carts. It was of no account that the black-red recovered under the attention of John Baker, and lived to fight another day. Sir Peter had won, as his boisterous laughter very clearly testified.

"He! he! Squire Rumblelow. Then you owe me a hundred guineas," he cried.

"All right. Kineton shall send you the money," replied Squire Jack, as if it were a matter of no consequence.

"I'll back my gingers against any colour or breed 'pon earth. I'll back Abraham Symes against any feeder living. I'll back——"

An altercation, sudden, but loud, broke in upon this whirlwind of sporting proposals. Professional rivalry being too strong to keep silence until they were out of hearing, John Baker and Abraham Symes had paused upon the stairs to exchange a few words. But in ten

seconds the few words multiplied into a terrible quarrel. For John said that no man, gentle or simple, had any right to speak to an umpire. And Abraham replied: "Umpire be damned!" and added that no umpire ever listened to any word let drop. And John affirmed that but for that Abraham's bird would never in this world ha' pecked in time. And Abraham retorted that John's was "a dam-fool bird that didn' peck at all." And with that all close argument came to an end.

"Come outsize an' pull off thy cwoat," cried John.

"Come outsize I will," yelled Abraham; "but no need to pull off my cwoat."

"No need to what?" inquired John. "A pot-bellied cider-butt!"

"Mus' I hear that," panted Abraham, in astonishment dropping his birds to steady himself, with his fists jammed tight against his ribs, "from a feller whose limbs be all hind-lags!"

And then, John wriggling under his rheumatism and Abraham perspiring under his weight of flesh, they set off with such speed that they were already in the stable-yard before gentility, disturbed by the noise, could catch them up.

"I'll back Abraham Symes to fight John Baker for a ten-poun' note. I'll back Abraham Symes to give en enough in three rounds. For twenty poun' I'll back——"

But Squire Rumblelow interposed with decision that he would have no such tomfoolery at Whorbury.

"If the fools want to fight, let them drive at once to the devil in their donkey-carts and fight there. If not, let them go inside and drown ill-will in a quart cup."

The alternative offered attractions, and amity was quickly restored; for very brief explanation proved

Abraham and John to agree in this, that neither believed the other to intend any harm.

"Then I'll back Abraham Symes's donkey to race John Baker's from the front entrance to the park gates," cried the irrepressible baronet, "for fifty poun'."

Both John and Abraham began to look up. They could each smell a crown for the winner in that. But Squire Rumblelow only laughed and shook that beaver hat.

"And I'll back myself to drive en, too, against any man," urged Sir Peter. "I'll race you, Squire, double or quits—double or quits—from here to the park gates."

Now, John Baker's donkey was both young and elegant, and had often been noticed on the high-road, going—going like a little horse; whereas Abraham's, though older, and a good reliable creature beyond question, had not as yet earned any reputation for talent whatever. And as to driving—anything that went on legs—well——

Old Squire Jack cried "Done!"

So the match was made at once, and with greater nimbleness than might have been expected of one so elderly, Mr. Rumblelow climbed into the cart and poised himself upon the movable board that served for a seat.

"There's a stick and a little tin can in the bottom o' the cart," whispered John Baker, as he handed up the reins; "rattle up he."

"Kinton shall start us," cried Sir Peter, as he scrambled into his chariot.

The prim little lawyer, with the sickly smile of one who bears a nightmare of unexpressed disapproval within his bosom, consented to count.

"One—two—three—OFF!"

Away went the donkey-carts, neck and neck, at a

most deliberate trot, out of the yard, along the roadway, and round the corner into the avenue; but no sooner had they, as it were, weathered the cape, than the Squire picked up the little tin can.

At the first sound of it John Baker's donkey broke into a gallop. The harness jingled, the cart rattled and bumped as it rocked up and down above its axle-tree like a cock-boat in a choppy sea. The pace was so great that the Squire's beaver assumed a rakish angle, and appeared in imminent peril of going by the board. By the time the cart reached the last bend before the park gates it was a good thirty yards in front.

But at this moment, attracted by the sound of strange music and the rattle of approaching wheels, the children at the lodge rushed out to ascertain what was coming, and, if need be, to throw open the gates. There were eight of them besides the girl in the sun-bonnet, and in open-mouthed astonishment they stood aghast.

"Heart alive!" cried the girl in astonishment. "Why, 'tis John Baker's donkey-cart a-running away wi' old Squire Jack."

With the utmost presence of mind they all rushed out into the road, held out their arms, and shouted with all their might.

The effect was instantaneous. The donkey, thrusting out both legs in front, stopped short. And such the tenacity of purpose and fortitude of mind of that humble animal that neither verbal admonition nor application of the stick produced any effect whatever. As to the little tin can, that was worse than useless. At the mere tinkle of it he laid back his ears and jibbed.

So there was a sorry finish, and Sir Peter won at a walk.

Yet, under these reverses, Squire Rumblelow well

sustained that character of fine old English gentleman so unanimously bestowed upon him at the "Green Dragon." He did not utter one word of complaint, but smiled upon ill-fortune as a sportsman should. And when Sir Peter drove away in his coach he waved his hand cordially and shouted that he would be even with him yet.

But at once his thoughts picked up the broken thread of his interrupted conversation with the lawyer. He knew that he was face to face with the inevitable, and a moment of sadness came over him as deep and silent as these years had been shallow and boisterous. Not that he accused himself of folly, or wished he had done otherwise; but he saw that everything was at an end. Whorbury shut up—or let! And Jack abroad! It was a devil of a pity. And he loved his grandson, too, in his way—though John was not the thorough, neck-or-nothing sportsman that a true Rumblelow should be. Full of care, he walked in silence into the house, and then he and Kinton shut themselves in together and talked until dark.

Doubtless during the conference they arrived at some determination, and the Squire in some measure regained his light-heartedness. This was the conclusion of it as expressed in his parting words:—

"Very well, Kinton. Send Wilkins his money. Arrange about the mortgage as you say, if Podymore will agree. But one more season I will have, if I die for it. One season more—and then, if nothing should happen, I'll come into heel like a whipped spaniel, and—listen to reason, and do what I'm told. Not another word, Kinton; not a word to me or anybody else."

CHAPTER II

THE YOUNG SQUIRE

THESE misfortunes, imminent to the house of Rumblelow, although not altogether unforeseen in the neighbourhood, were entirely unsuspected by the young Squire.

Upon the death of his father, which happened before he could remember, the widow and her child, for reasons of economy, had been brought to live at Whorbury. But she, being young and attractive, after a short but quite sufficient interval, contracted a second marriage, to the great satisfaction of her father-in-law, who readily undertook the bringing up and education of his little heir. Thus "Master John," as he was still called, had lived from infancy with his grandparents at Whorbury, until the death of his grandmother, a very proud and stately dame, which happened about five years ago. Since then there had been no one but the old Squire and himself.

From the first, Squire Rumblelow devoted himself to the instruction of the boy with the keenest interest. He was proud of pointing out the size and sturdiness of the child's limbs, and whilst the little fellow was still in petticoats could recount a dozen marvels of his pluck and activity. He provided a diminutive pony before the urchin's knees could well clip a saddle, and

announced to the neighbourhood that he meant to make a man of him. By this Squire Jack intended a sportsman of the first water; for in his estimation a country gentleman must be one thing or the other—a sound sportsman or a born fool.

Happily, the breeding of the heir of Whorbury was left largely to his grandmother, a potentate who admitted none superior to herself in sway. She early taught him to read, and awakened in his mind some interest in books, and during the many years that he attended the Grammar School at Bristlington sternly refused any holiday for hunting, even when the meet was at Whorbury Hall itself. She had signified her intention that he should go to the University, and old Squire Jack did not dream of questioning the decision, even though the old lady was no longer there to enforce it. And she filled the boy's mind with the quality and importance of the Rumblelow race. The sale of Oakleigh to her dying day she never forgot, and poor Josiah Oswin had been her greatest aversion; for it seemed an unholy interference with the intention of Providence that a man of such origin should have money to buy when the Rumblelows were forced by poverty to sell. It was a thing too unnatural to be final. Oakleigh would certainly come into the market one of these days; and John—who “in all human probability” would succeed his grandfather at an early age—must commit no imprudence, and then, “should it please the Almighty to grant a long life,” he might be prepared to repurchase should opportunity arise.

So John Rumblelow had grown to manhood without a doubt about the future. As to the disrepair of the estate, he saw the pity of it and felt the shame, yet to be sure it was useless to hope that anything could be

done about that. He could only dream of a golden future when, under his care and nursing, Whorbury should be the admiration of every passing traveller. Not a stone was to be missing then, not a tile out of place. He had already settled upon many improvements to be made as soon as matters came into his own hands. He would plant and drain and rebuild, until the place was a paradise. To be sure, he also, like a true Rumblelow, had incurred a few debts. But these would have been reasonable indeed, for a man of his position, if only he had not, in easy good nature and as a mere formality, lent his name to a friend on the back of a bill, and been driven to borrow to meet the liability. It was a nuisance, and worried him. He was fastidious, and so guilelessly good-natured that he had not believed it possible for a gentleman to take advantage of his friend. However, he should soon get over that. So long as the lender left him in peace for the present, that could offer no difficulty in the end.

Thus, on the evening when he surprised Margaret Lane wrestling with the Whorbury trout, John Rumblelow was as light-hearted and free from care as any man of four-and-twenty, with abundant health and brilliant prospects, could well be. His heart was overflowing with spontaneous generosity as a bird in springtime with unpremeditated song. The story of Josiah Oswin's will was fresh in his mind, for the neighbourhood could talk of nothing else but the enormous unexpected wealth of Hetty Oswin and the supposed disappointment of the girl who had been so long called "Fortune's darling." He had not seen Maggie since, veiled in black, she stood weeping in the chancel on the day of the funeral. Then he, like the rest, regarded her as the future mistress of Oakleigh, and found some comfort too in

the reflection, universally expressed at that time, that the Lanes, at any rate, were people of distinction in Midlandshire. There was a fitness about that ; and she looked a lady, as everybody said. He had always admired her, though he had not spoken to her half a dozen times in his life. As he walked home that evening in the twilight through the fields along the lonely riverside the beauty of Margaret Lane haunted him like a dream.

He could not get the thought of her out of his mind. Full of generous impulses, he recollected the injustice done and burned with indignation. What a pity that any but a gentleman should ever amass money and buy land ! And how the man's underbred assurance came out in his abominable will ! His name and arms ! Great heavens ! John Rumblelow was so fresh and healthy-minded that merely to think of this brought a flush of shame to his cheeks as if he recalled some folly committed by himself.

"Ass ! Fool ! Confounded idiot !" he suddenly burst out aloud.

"Is that you, Master John ?"

"Eh ? What ?" he answered sharply.

It was almost dark, and the voice was so close that it made him start. He had followed the stream up to Whorbury village, and was now at the back of the mill.

"Is that you, sir ? I wanted a word wi' ee, Master John."

John Hallett, the miller, stepped towards him. He had been sitting on a rail in the gloom under a leaning willow tree.

"I said to Selina I'd speak to Master John. I did, sure," he said, lowering his voice to a confidential whisper, after the manner of a tenant who speaks only

for his landlord's good. "About the weir, sir—it did really ought to have something a-done. For the wall's carried away, an' the hatch do leak like a sieve. An' now's the time, Master John, now's the time to do it. 'T'ull all be washed down come winter flood, an' then a pretty penny to spend——"

"It is too late to look to-night," interrupted John Rumblelow, speaking very rapidly, but unconsciously assuming an air of good-humoured condescension. "But—but, eh—I'll remind my grandfather. I can't promise anything myself, you know. Good-night, Hallett, good-night."

With a feeling of impatience he hurried on before more could be said. It was very irritating—this frequent reference to obvious disrepair. He was proud and felt ashamed that he could do nothing but answer with hasty evasion, and then run away. It hurt his dignity, and shamed his sense of right. He would have liked to be liberal, with a "Certainly, Hallett; it shall be ordered to-morrow." Yet he felt angry with Hallett, too, since the complaint was so altogether reasonable. He would have to avoid passing the mill in future to prevent expressing an opinion about the weir. This also was galling to his pride. Then his thoughts at once wandered back to Oakleigh, where every stick and stone was sound. "But that would be worse than this, I suppose, if it were ours," he sighed gloomily. Then the hopelessness of his promised appeal to his grandfather struck him as so humorous that he laughed, and so the matter passed out of his mind.

The old Squire was crossing the hall as his grandson came indoors. He had only just parted from Kineton.

"Well, did you get anything?"

Squire Rumblelow was no angler. To him at the best fishing appeared but a tame pastime. Still, regarded as a match between a man and a trout, the result could not fail to awaken a mild interest.

"Yes, sir."

"Any size?"

"Yes, sir. I caught a poacher."

"What? The devil you did! Where was he? Where is he? Did you collar him? What did you do with him? Who is it? If it's that rascal Butt again he shall go to jail. I know it's Butt. Had he got anything on him?"

Old Squire Jack was beside himself with excitement. He almost danced for joy as he rattled off this string of questions, which only ceased for want of breath.

"No, sir. It was not Butt——"

"Well, anyway, it will be an example," interrupted the Squire in a tone somewhat sobered, but full of consolation.

"I don't know about that. It was a lady."

"A what?"

So John Rumblelow recounted the whole story from the beginning; and as the old gentleman chuckled and laughed with every evidence of delight, the tale did not lose colour in the telling:

"Ha-ha! Called me 'old Squire Jack,' did she? Said I should exterminate her? Ha-ha! A sort of monster, eh?"

"A perfect ogre, sir," replied the young man calmly, whereat his grandfather enjoyed himself more than ever.

Their intercourse never varied from this light-hearted, half-respectful banter upon one side, and a good-humoured tolerance upon the other. They never quarrelled, and thus lost sight of their lack of sympathy.

Suddenly dismissing all frivolity, he became grave.

"What are they going to do with their shooting, Jack?"

"I did not ask them, sir," returned John Rumblelow, with a laugh.

"No, no—of course not. Hope they won't let it to any greedy fellow who'll poison the foxes. Kinton might. He's all business and no sport. But Podymore will see to that. What sort o' woman is this new girl?"

John Rumblelow paused. He had paid very little attention to Hetty Oswin. "Oh, a little, dark, lean-faced girl with big eyes," he said carelessly, "who waves her hands about when she talks."

"She's richer than any man within ten mile," reflected the Squire thoughtfully. "And Oakleigh has the prettiest covers I know. But Podymore is all right. Still, we'll ride over and call upon her. It is nothing but right and seemly, after all. And I'll ask them to come and look at Whorbury some afternoon the beginning of the week."

Thus the conversation closed. To the subjects of cock-fighting or donkey-racing the old gentleman made no reference whatever. But then, Master John, with all his advantages, had not turned out the complete sportsman that a true Rumblelow was expected to be.

CHAPTER III

ANCESTRAL TOMBS

IT is the privilege of healthy youth to dream only by day, and sleep quickly brought to the imaginings of John Rumblelow a brief forgetfulness. His last thought was of Margaret Lane, and in the morning he awoke with a strange feeling that something had happened—something important the day before. What was it? To be sure, he had met and talked with that girl at Oakleigh. It made him smile to think that so small a matter could have seemed of any magnitude. Of course, she could be nothing to the heir of Whorbury, and John Rumblelow was too conscious of his position to include any such possibility amongst his dreams. Yet already he was longing to see her again.

To a country gentleman, so young that he has only to amuse himself, the month of August is the dullest time of the year. With a bright sun and shallow streams there is no fishing except for an hour or two at dusk, and shooting has not yet begun. The carelessness of old Squire Jack in respect of all the business of the estate deprived John of much useful occupation which he would gladly have undertaken ; but his grandfather had never yet received a suggestion without impatience, and although John Rumblelow was ashamed even to think of the waste, he recognised the im-

possibility of doing any good. After breakfast that morning the old gentleman cantered away to Bristlington to attend a justice-meeting, a duty to his country which, in consideration of the criminality of poaching, he never neglected. So John Rumblelow was left with some hours before him and nothing in particular to do.

He put on his hat and, avoiding Hallett and the mill, strolled down the river. Of course he had no expectation of seeing her there, but in a sentimental mood how slight an association will unconsciously direct a young man's steps! He walked on to the bridge and stood upon the boundary to the two estates. Did she often come there of an evening? he wondered. He would wait a few days and then accept the invitation to fish at Oakleigh. Perhaps he might meet her again.

The comments made by his grandfather upon the night before came into his mind. The respectful mention of the great wealth of Hetty Oswin made him smile, and already half suspect the old gentleman of a sly attempt at match-making. At the idea of marrying that very insignificant little lady he laughed aloud. Yet, of course, the advantages of such an arrangement were as clear to him as to anybody else. His dreams, however, that morning assumed a different form. If that fellow Oswin had only done the just thing and left Oakleigh to Margaret Lane, he might have married her and made the whole estate complete again. Though, of course, Whorbury was a little dipped, he knew that. Great heavens! if she had only been the elder niece! He felt his pulse quicken at the thought of it. It was strange that the arrangement of the late Josiah Oswin when looked at in that light did not appear to him unfair.

A mile away, peeping between tall elms and slender poplars, stood the little grey tower of Oakleigh church.

Rumblelows had lived at the Court and been buried in those aisles before Whorbury, which came to them by marriage, was built. There were ancient tablets in the nave, and tombs of crusaders in the transept; yet, the place having been sold, he had never in his life entered the church until the funeral the other afternoon. Then his eye wandered to the memorial stones, now almost illegible, and he determined to walk over some day and examine them. Why not that morning? He had forgotten all about it until now. Of course, since he had before intended to do this, he could not be going with any absurd hope of meeting Margaret Lane.

But Oakleigh was a village through which it was impossible to pass unobserved.

Mrs. William Cotching, noting the hat of a traveller above the causeway wall, dropped her bucket, and ran down to the garden hedge to establish his identity. And there, sure enough, was Dorothy Chick tiptoeing with all her might to peep over a row of raspberry canes.

"Why, 'tis young Squire!" whispered Mrs. William Cotching, in astonishment.

"An' zo 'tis," replied Dorothy Chick.

The shop stood at a bend in the road; and there sat Miss Keziah Crane behind a cup of "chaine-y-oysters" and double stocks, staring, as they say, "with all her eyes." As he turned the corner, coming towards him, and quite close, he met Margaret Lane.

A flush of self-consciousness reddened her cheek. She also had been dreaming, and his sudden, unexpected presence—for she had never seen him before in Oakleigh street—came like a detection of her secret thoughts. She could not hide this momentary confusion, and she felt that he observed it. She nervously

quicken her pace, so much so that to the village gossips it looked as if she gladly hurried to meet him. Miss Keziah Crane rose at once and flattened her nose between the bottles of peppermint bulls'-eyes against the shop window-pane.

They began, as otherwise intelligent young people when fluttering on the brink of love often will, by saying the most senseless things.

"You are not down by the river to-day," he smiled and told her, as they shook hands.

"Oh, no. Not to-day. In fact, my angling is quite an accident. I used to go with poor Uncle Jos."

"I hope seeing you there may prove a frequent accident."

"It was my cousin who suggested it last night," she answered, quite irrelevantly.

"Was that so?" he asked, shaking his head with much affectation of gravity. "Then I shall never know content until I find you fishing upon your own initiative."

But conversation of this fine quality could not, of course, be long sustained. A pause followed, and Maggie began to display a disposition to proceed upon her way.

"I want to go into the church." For the first time he spoke quite naturally. "Perhaps you could tell me where to get the key?"

"There is one at home," she said, at once turning to go back. "My aunt and cousin have just gone into Bristlington. I will come and give it to you."

"But that will be troubling you."

"Oh, no. My errand was quite unimportant."

They walked together down the village street—a proceeding in Oakleigh by no means so unworthy of

mention as may at first sight be supposed—and up the drive to the house. The key was in the hall. She ran in to fetch it, and then led him, by the private path into the churchyard, to the door by which he might enter. There she would have left him, for she held out her hand to say 'good-bye.' "Do please come also," he begged of her. She hesitated a moment. "I am sure I shall want a guide." She accepted the appeal in apparent good faith, and they stepped at once into the large pew where the Rumblelows of old had worshipped and still slept under the stones.

It was very like a room, and parted off from the body of the church by a carved oak screen. There were no fixed seats, but chairs—arm-chairs in front for the quality and rush-bottomed chairs behind for those of lesser degree. There was even a fireplace in one corner, just beyond the effigy of the crusader lying in a niche in the wall. Everything was old-world even in those days. The tracery of the window held fragments of coloured glass that cast gleams of bright colour upon the wall across the upper tablets, but the panes below were of dull green.

He stood reading the inscriptions. They were all of ancient Rumblelows and the marriages of ancient Rumblelows. He glanced at the heraldry, but it recorded nothing that he did not already know. His grandmother had been quite learned in all these matters.

"My pilgrimage has led to no results of any importance," he said lightly, as if amused with himself for having come.

She had been standing by the open doorway, but now she stepped forward and also glanced up at the tablets.

"I believe I venerate them more than you do," she

laughed. "I have read them with increasing awe every Sunday ever since I could spell. But there is a large monument in the chancel."

She pushed open a door in the oak screen and led the way almost to the altar steps. Let into the wall, and reaching to the roof, was a huge memorial stone, bearing two life-size figures, very quaintly carved with the frills and ruffles of the sixteenth century. They were kneeling side by side, and opposite to them, also upon their knees, were two rows of children, boys and girls, four of each, nicely graduated in age and size. The legend was a whole domestic history. It told, in quaint simplicity and in strange spelling, how Sir John Rumblelow, Knight, of Oakleigh, married Hannah, daughter of James Taylor, yeoman of the same parish, and how they both, with eight of their children, were carried off by the Plague in 1564. It finished with a eulogy, in verse, upon Dame Hannah Rumblelow :—

"Though in an humble station borne,
Her higher lot she dyd adorne ;
In welthe she lived unspoylt by pryde ;
The poor bemoned her when she dyed.
Of children deare she bare eleven ;
Alas ! that eight rejoyce in heven."

"Sir John seems to have been a sort of Oakleigh King Cophetua," said the girl, still looking up at the figures.

"Yes. No doubt the Taylors were very small people. There is no other mention of them, so far as I know."

"There was a great deal of mention of them at the time, you may be sure," she answered, laughing, and she turned round and stood close by the rail.

"There must have been a nine days' wonder in Oakleigh."

"And they were married on this very spot, and she came to live at the Court," the girl reflected, and her eyes brightened at the thought of the romance.

"They may have been married elsewhere. It was quite easy in those days."

But she shook her head. "No," she said firmly. "Sir John was a bold knight. He had a mind of his own and lived up to it. She was beautiful and good, and her father gave her away. I will not accept any other version."

He had finished his reading. She turned and walked across the nave as if there were no more to say, and sauntering a few steps behind, he followed her back into the ancient pew. All the while his eyes were closely watching her, and every movement satisfied his fastidious observation. There was no affectation or self-consciousness about her. When she came to the door, which was open, she stopped and waited for him standing full in the sunlight.

"I believe when the sermon is dull or long you imagine these people and invent stories about them."

He spoke gaily and loitered as if inviting her to talk, but she moved quickly out of the doorway on to the path.

Her answer came like an echo of the thought about herself that had just passed through his mind.

"I always picture Dame Hannah as quite simple and natural," she admitted with a laugh, as she took a step or two towards the house and waited again. "If she had given herself airs, the surviving children would have been ashamed to record her humble birth."

There was no choice left him but without delay to lock up the church and carry back the key to the house. The distance was very short, and a moment later they were shaking hands in the porch.

She had by some means given him the impression that she was in haste.

"I am afraid I have taken up a great deal of your time," he apologised, as he wished her good-morning.

"Not at all," she answered. "I am sorry that my cousin is not at home."

Yet so little do these conventional phrases signify that by the time Hetty Oswin presently returned the meeting with John Rumblelow had quite escaped the memory of Margaret Lane.

At least, she did not even mention his name.

CHAPTER IV

THE COVERS

JOHN RUMBLELOW did not go directly home. He was in no hurry, and he took a way through the woods, down a long hunting-path with thick copse upon each side, and tall trees whose branches, dense with foliage, met and intermingled overhead. Whatever the old Squire might neglect, he spared no expense in preserving his covert, and the place was quite solitary and quiet. It was too late in the season for the songs of birds. The thin grass and mosses underfoot deadened the sound of his steps, so that pheasants stalked slowly into the ride unaware of his presence, and once a hare came lopping towards him, until quite close she stopped and turned into the hazel undergrowth.

A subtle change came creeping over his mind. The thought of Whorbury, with his future position as the representative of an ancient family and owner of a fine estate, was never far away. How should it be? He had been brought up from childhood on the expectation of all this, and with a keen sense of the obligations it imposed. There were things which a Rumblelow might not do, and other things that were essential. A spirit of *noblesse oblige* so completely directed the family conduct that even the old Squire defended his

extravagances by the reflection that they were necessary to a Rumblelow.

John Rumblelow began to reason with himself. To marry Margaret Lane was of course out of the question; and to be running after her for mere amusement was beneath the dignity of a Rumblelow. The folly of having gone to Oakleigh that morning arose clearly before him. Not that it was possible for anyone to suspect his purpose, but such weakness carried with it a loss of self-esteem and dignity. She was a lady worthy of all respect and admiration, yet not a lady of his own class with whom he might even philander without serious consequences. If people were to see them together only once or twice, there would be no end of ridiculous gossip. And there was a greater danger than that. He felt it in the glowing excitement which neither prudent reflection nor the quiet of the woods had overcome. Some day he might betray himself. There was something in her presence now that cast a spell and a constraint upon him, but a moment of weakness would certainly befall, when suddenly he must burst through all that by telling her that he loved her.

In his agitation he unconsciously quickened his pace.

Yet what folly it all was! He had scarcely spoken to the girl until last evening. What an absurd fuss, all about nothing! He was not going to make a fool of himself. He would keep away from Oakleigh, and unless he went in search of her, they might not meet in the next twelvemonths.

No sooner had he made this virtuous resolution than his reflections were interrupted by the dull thud of a horse's hoofs at some distance behind him. He turned round in surprise, prepared to resent an intruder; but there, cantering along the ride, was his grandfather.

The old gentleman was evidently in the best of spirits. His eye was bright, his cheek red, and his beaver hat bore itself with an air of moderate festivity. As he came up and reined his nag into a walk he shouted in a voice so boisterous that it might have been heard at Whorbury—

“Why, what on earth are you about? I thought it must be some trespassing fellow running away from me. You walked so fast. But I’ve seen Podymore—went in with Kinton. Spent an hour there. He’s all right. It’ll be all right. A good fellow—a good sportsman—Podymore. Can open a good bottle of wine, too.”

The young man had already recovered himself.

“I did not know you wanted medical advice, sir,” he said with a smile.

“Eh! What? I want medical advice? What are you laughing at, you rascal?” cried the old gentleman, hugely delighted. “I went to have a word with him about the people at Oakleigh.”

“I am glad you found it satisfactory.”

“Oh, yes. Podymore says she is a nice, generous girl—a delightful girl, in fact. She’ll do everything she can to promote the good of the county; and she has the means to do it. I told him we meant to call this afternoon.”

“I did not know you had made up your mind, sir.”

“We will start at three,” replied the old gentleman decisively. “I’m not going straight home. Just order them to be ready at three. Come on.”

The last words were spoken to the horse, and the Squire was just upon the point of riding away when John Rumblelow stopped him with the question—

“What will you ride?”

“Ride? We will have out the coach.”

This announcement gave him so much surprise that John Rumblelow, glancing quickly up, caught his grandfather's eye, and they both roared with laughter.

"I thought you said the other day, sir, that there is only one thing worse than the coach, and that is the hearse."

"And that's true," retorted the Squire, in his short, crisp manner that refused to argue or explain.

The fact was—and reiteration had, on previous occasions, made it known in the locality—old Squire Jack detested to be driven, a form of locomotion which he had before now contemptuously described as "being hauled about." However, after a brief pause, as a concession to the wonder of his grandson, with a twinkle of humour lurking in the wrinkles of his grey eyes, he went on—

"I have an impression that your grandmother would have taken me in the coach—if once she consented to let me go at all. It was a great blow to her to part with Oakleigh. She would never have countenanced people living there, unless—well, she might have come to think it wise to unbend. The place can never come in the market, and Podymore tells me it is by far the smaller part of the fortune. I tell you what it is, Master John"—the old Squire leant forward and spoke in a low tone—"the man who picks up that girl will be the richest man in the county. It is all very well to be proud, but it is just as well to be prudent. And when I think of the—of the——"

"Of the covers, sir?" suggested the young man slyly, but without a smile.

"Very well, of the covers then," returned the Squire with sudden impatience; "and that none but a Rumblelow has ever drawn those covers since there were hounds,

and that now some upstart fellow from nowhere may step in any day and upset everything—why, by George, it makes me feel that if I were only fifty years younger, I'd—I'd enter for the lady myself!" The old gentleman paused a moment for reflection, and then added, "I would, by George!" with a nod of determination so emphatic that it almost looked as if the fifty years were a mere excuse, and he still ready to contract matrimony in the interests of fox-hunting.

"You would acquire a mother-in-law, I am told, sir," said John Rumblelow with perfect gravity.

The old sportsman's irritability had been but momentary, and now he chuckled at the thought. In proof of his jovial good-humour he lapsed into dialect.

"I'll tell thee what it is, bwoy," he cried. "A man must take some risks, an' I'd court the maid to-morrow if I hadn't got an heir."

"I implore you, sir, not to let me stand between you and happiness."

"Happiness?" burst in the old man. "Never mind about happiness, you young rascal. It wouldn't pay off the mortgage, or make Whorbury and Oakleigh one again. However, we'll go and look at the lady. Order the coach. We'll go in the coach." And turning round in his saddle to shout back these repeated injunctions, old Squire Jack cantered away.

Thus, at the very moment of his prudent resolution to see Margaret Lane no more, John Rumblelow found himself compelled to pay to the ladies of Oakleigh an immediate visit of ceremony.

CHAPTER V

THE CALL OF CEREMONY

THE ladies of Oakleigh were sitting in a large bay window which commanded the approach to Oakleigh Court. Conversation had flagged and dropped into an intermittent whisper, for there was a disposition on the part of Mrs. Oswin to sink into an occasional doze, which ought on no account to be disturbed. Not a word had been spoken for quite five minutes. Not a sound was to be heard but the slow and even respiration of that most respectable individual. Then suddenly Hetty sprang from her chair and gazed in astonishment down the drive.

“What is this?” she cried with an eagerness that awoke her mother with a start.

Mrs. Oswin rubbed her eyes and stared. Then, as if by inspiration, she saw what it all meant.

“Ah! It is the same that came to the town when we lived at the farm. The travelling doc-taire. And he had then a big black man and a leetle, leetle monkey. And the black man—no, the leetle monkey—no, it was the black man—they both play so many pranks on a leetle stage, and *he* drive up then in this gilt coach with the fur coat lined with red—and the big black man—no, the leetle monkey—no, the leetle black man with the big monkey—no, no—well, well—but

there was a woman, what you call—what you call cross-eyed, and she have a double tooth on the stage taken out without pay, and her second husband, he——”

But the story, just as it was becoming impressive, was interrupted by Maggie, who recognised the Whorbury livery.

“It is Squire Rumblelow!” she gasped in an agitated whisper.

And sure enough, there was the large, yellow-bodied chariot, ancient, cumbrous, with a footboard behind and a coat-of-arms upon the panel, almost at the very porch. It had carried many generations of Rumblelows in great dignity and comfort, but Maggie had not seen it for years.

“He cannot be coming about the trout!” At the mere thought of it Hetty Oswin turned pale.

“Oh no,” replied Maggie. “He must be coming to repeat the young Squire's invitation.”

And so it appeared; for at this moment the coach drew up, the obsequious Bracher was promptly at the door, and old Squire Rumblelow alighted, with a jovial expression upon his countenance which made it apparent that he was in the very best of humours.

A feeling of exultation kindled in the heart of Hetty Oswin.

The anomalous position of her uncle she had perceived, and the question of her future standing was for ever before her mind. From that first startling moment when she realised herself the possessor of Oakleigh a ceaseless ambition had grown up within her soul. It consumed her leisure hours with unrest. It held possession even of her sleep, calling up fantastic visions of Job Oswin and the relatives at Bristlington to disturb her dreams. The vulgarity of these people

haunted her. They were not of the sort to hide their lights under bushels, and if she did but read their names in the weekly paper her courage sank. And to-day this first glow of gratification was nipped off by a sudden chill. Her joy withered at the thought of her mother. Could Mrs. Oswin be persuaded to withdraw or induced to recognise the beauty of self-effacement? She might entertain the Squire of Whorbury with a revised story of the big black man and the little monkey. At the mere imagination of this horror Hetty tingled with shame from head to foot. And then, before any expedient could be devised, the door was opened and the two visitors were announced.

The girl at once stepped forward to greet them.

Her dark eyes looked larger and brighter than ever. The struggle between her exultation and her doubts had brought a vivid colour to the cheeks that wore generally a yellow pallor, and her lips were of a glowing crimson. At that moment she looked so strikingly brilliant that the Squire, losing sight of her slight frame and shortness of stature, gave himself up to that admiration which even elderly gentlemen experience in the presence of a handsome woman. And to a stranger Hetty might well appear quite calm and self-possessed. She was of that high-strung temperament which, easily agitated beyond measure about trifles, nevertheless out of the very intensity of its excitability manages to draw an exaggerated self-control.

She bade her visitors be seated, taking care to indicate to them chairs as far as possible from the danger of the big black man and the little monkey. Squire Rumblelow sat down by her side, and the young Squire between Maggie and Mrs. Oswin.

Then Hetty talked. Her tongue was loosened and she rattled on, giving fearless utterance to whatever came crowding uppermost into her mind. The Squire was in his breeziest humour. Their conversation very soon predominated. The others remained silent; but only Maggie could detect the agitation hidden under this unwonted vivacity.

To be sure, Squire Rumblelow could not long remain away from his favourite subject. He hoped that Miss Oswin was interested in hunting. "Everybody," he cried, with an expansive wave of his hand, "ought to hunt."

The girl took her cue in a moment. She was secretly afraid of horses, and her answer was a strange mixture of candour and unreality.

"I am dying to hunt," she cried with enthusiasm. "And I have fully made up my mind to do so. But I am afraid of my life at the mere thought of it."

"There is nothing to be afraid of, my dear lady—nothing in this world," shouted the delighted old sportsman, his voice rising as his manner became more hearty. "Get a horse, not too young, that knows his work, and you sit still. He'll carry you like a bird. Don't have him too big—not too big. With your weight it'll be all holiday; he'll have nothing to do." The Squire eyed her critically as he spoke, and then leaned forward and became confidential. "And, between ourselves, my dear lady, when a man breaks his neck, nine times out of ten 'tis his own fault."

"I can see that must be a consolation to others," laughed the girl, "but it is very little comfort to a broken neck."

"None at all. Only it shows it serves 'em right," roared the Squire with an air of conviction; and then,

having chuckled awhile with evident enjoyment, he recognised a serious aspect to the matter. "Yet, after all, it's better than a six months' illness in bed," he added.

"But a broken neck is not what I am most afraid of," cried Hetty Oswin, shaking her head at him with decision.

"No? What, then, my dear lady?"

Squire Rumblelow leaned forward, awaiting her reply with the greatest curiosity.

"It is the fear of doing wrong that oppresses me," replied the girl mischievously. "I have heard that even an innocent offence is followed by the most terrible consequences."

"Eh? My dear lady?"

For full ten seconds the Squire did not understand. Then without explanation the appalling fact became clear to his mind that this "Jenny-wren of a maid," as he afterwards called her, who, by-the-by, had spoken of him as "old Squire Jack," was poking fun at him.

He turned to Margaret Lane and raised an accusing finger. "Now you've been telling tales out of school," he said.

And then old Squire Jack, leaning back in his chair and shaking his sides with merriment, took up the joke with the same genial alacrity which accepted any challenge, from fighting a man to racing in a donkey-cart. He liked the spirit of the girl. "A very merry little woman—a plucky little filly," he thought to himself.

"It's all for their good, my dear lady. And if I should rap out a word or two just now and then—why, they'll none of them listen, unless I swear. They must have adjectives. Oh, it pains me to have to use the words I do. But, I tell you what, you must come out

yourself. You shall come with me. Now I won't take 'no' for an answer. You shall come out under my wing on the opening day. And I'll find you a mount that shall carry you, safe as a cradle. And, upon my honour, my dear lady, admonition shall coo like a ring-dove, and—and be strictly private!"

With this Squire Rumblelow rose to depart, but as he shook hands with Hetty he added, "So that's settled, my dear Miss Oswin."

And Hetty, although with a misgiving still unsatisfied by the assurance about the broken neck, accepted the invitation with delight.

"And when will you come and look at Whorbury? Come to-morrow afternoon. I hope you will be persuaded to bring your daughter, madam. And do not forget your rod, Miss Lane. I've heard how well you can use it. We shall expect you to-morrow."

And so, turning around from one to another in a whirlwind of his own breeziness, Squire Rumblelow made his adieux and took his departure.

The visit, although not long, had given him the liveliest satisfaction. It was so obviously right about the covers that he had thought it better to say nothing about them. And the girl had pleased and amused him hugely. As the coach went trundling down the drive the old gentleman became quite explosive in his praises. "A clever little girl." "A quick-witted woman." "Not one of your sheep-faced ones." And then, forgetful that a long experience with horse and hounds had taught him the necessity of tact and gentleness in dealing with youth, he said to his grandson, in a tone of sharp decision—

"Jack, the heir of Whorbury ought to marry that girl!"

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But the heir of Whorbury only laughed and said that he would think about it.

"Ah! You'll think too long. There will never be another such a chance," barked the Squire, in a tone of impatience and discontent.

And the ladies of Oakleigh were no less charmed with the condescension and good-humour of their visitors. They recognised in this visit the beginning of a new social era. Hetty was in an ecstasy. Carried away by an overwhelming excitement, she gave way to childish demonstrations of joy. She kissed her cousin. She embraced her mother, who indeed had behaved throughout with a reposeful dignity worthy of the deepest gratitude.

"I shall ask them to shoot at Oakleigh in September," she cried, turning to Maggie; "and we will go out and have luncheon on the hill by the copse."

CHAPTER VI

DISCLOSURES

NEARLY three months had passed and signs of approaching winter were everywhere present upon hill and copse and mead. There had been a frost the night before ; and, although it was now afternoon, rime still lay white upon the grass wherever tree or hedgerow had cast a shadow from the midday sun. A cold east wind was driving the last yellow leaves from the tall elms by the road.

A powder-flask peeping from his breast pocket, a shot-pouch hanging by his side, and a double-barrelled gun upon his shoulder, John Rumblelow came up from the Oakleigh meadows and stood upon the bridge. With the early frosts snipe had become plentiful in these water-meads, and he had walked over them every day for a week. He was a constant and ever-welcome guest at the Court, and he shot upon the estate as freely as if it had never been severed from Whorbury. He had just come therefrom, and Hetty Oswin had walked with him as far as the gate at the bottom of the lawn.

His light-hearted response to his grandfather's advice—that he would think about it—contained more truth than he intended or was aware of. Ever since that day he had scarcely ceased to think about it. All through September he had tramped over the stubbles

and grass of Oakleigh in company with old Dr. Podymore and a brace of pointers that had been the pride of the late Josiah Oswin. They had enjoyed the most delightful days. The genial old surgeon was full of the importance of his position as trustee. He did not undervalue either the lady or the fortune. "Never was there a better-hearted girl," he said. "She would have shared everything with her cousin if it had been possible." And there might never be an heiress at Oakleigh again. One of the girls was certain to marry, if not both, and after that there would be heirs in plenty. Why, the Rumblelows had never failed for an heir in all these centuries, though the stock was running short—running short now. Old Dr. Podymore frequently assumed this tone of warning. Master John had better look alive and choose himself a wife, and give him a chance to bring a third generation into the world before he went out of practice.

John Rumblelow knew what he meant well enough, though he only laughed; and the restoring of Oakleigh seemed quite sufficient motive for all this advice and admonition. For it was a lovely estate. As he walked over it some fresh beauty of river, copse or glade was for ever bursting upon his senses and touching him with deeper regret. Then the feeling would arise that the place ought never to have been parted with, and that he had been turned out of his own. But he did not mean to marry Hetty Oswin. As an actual possibility the thought took no root in his mind.

His heart still harboured a romantic tenderness for Margaret Lane. Yet, although he saw her often, no closer acquaintanceship had grown up between them. He had fished with her at Whorbury, and met her accidentally both in Oakleigh and in the street at

Bristlington. Upon these occasions, if she were alone, they sometimes walked together. But the girl, wrapping herself in an impenetrable reserve, had never talked to him freely since that day when they were in the little church. Latterly he noticed that she avoided him whenever Hetty Oswin was present, and found always some excuse to go away. She just now left Hetty to walk with him to the gate. Two things became clear to John Rumblelow; that Maggie also had joined this conspiracy of match-making, and that Hetty was ready to marry him if only he would say the word. The thought did not render the idea more agreeable to him.

He stopped upon the bridge to load his gun. There was a figure in the distance walking briskly towards him upon the Bristlington road. He was in no hurry, and the process was long. First the charge of powder from the flask and repeated blows with the ramrod, then a wad, also rammed tight, then the shot and then a wad pressed home. By the time both barrels were finished the wayfarer was quite close to him, and he recognised a postman from the town.

The man hurrying towards him held out a letter.

He took it. It was addressed to him in an unknown hand, and there was eightpence to pay.

"You may keep the change," he said carelessly, as he handed the postman a coin of unexpected liberality.

The man replied, "You're a gentleman, sir," touched his hat, and trudged smiling on his way.

It gave John Rumblelow pleasure to be lavish. It belonged to his position, and kept up the honour and credit of the name of Rumblelow. With a light heart he leaned his gun against the low wall upon the bridge and sat down upon the stones to read.

He examined the letter with some curiosity, and then

broke open the seal. But as he glanced rapidly at the signature an expression of annoyance clouded his countenance, and before he had read to the end he sprang up and stamped his foot with indignation.

“Rascals! Scoundrels!” he exclaimed. And then, as if unable to believe the testimony of his eyes, he read the letter again with closer attention.

It was a short and formal notice from the money-lenders with whom he had contracted his loan, pointing out that the interest being now a month in arrear, they had decided to call in the capital, and “to prevent unpleasantness” must beg Mr. John Rumblelow to remit the whole amount by that day week.

“*To prevent unpleasantness!*” What did the rogues mean by a threat of that sort? That they would arrest him if the debt were unpaid. The impertinence of the thing was so astounding that for a moment it completely hid from him the danger in which he stood. He saw nothing but the insolence of the request. In his attitude towards money he was a true Rumblelow, and he blazed into a hotter anger than his grandfather when Kineton gave that hint of trouble about the mortgage. The price charged was exorbitant in all conscience. Did not the fools know that their money was as safe as the bank? It must be merely a device to extort still higher terms. He was a fool to borrow of such fellows. A gentleman of position should seek accommodation only where himself and his prospects are well known, and leave such thieving usurers to those who had no security to offer. It was a false pride to desire secrecy in so small a matter, and he had acted like a fool.

But the thing could soon be settled. He must do now what he ought to have done in the first place—go

to Kineton and raise the money in a respectable way. It soothed his dignity to reflect that he need hold no further communication with these blood-sucking Jews. They should not squeeze John Rumblelow. He would get the debt cleared off at once without comment.

A few fields away, close under the woodside, was a keeper's cottage. He hurried across to it, disposed of his gun and ammunition, and then with this excellent intention started briskly to walk into Bristlington. The rapid movement in the bracing frosty air dispelled both anger and gloomy thoughts. Everything could no doubt be arranged in a five minutes' conversation with Kineton. By the time he passed the "Green Dragon" he was again the light-hearted young Squire of Whorbury towards whom all the world felt good will.

From the window whence everything could be seen, the worthies of Bristlington watched him enter the office of Lawyer Kineton.

"That's a man who doesn't trouble," said His Worship, John Pudsey, Esquire, who, having been recently re-elected to the office of Mayor, was in the best of health and spirits.

"None of that family ever did. Never sick—never sorry. And a freer action man never saw," laughed old Mr. Jennings, as if he were recommending a horse.

"But Squire Jack is going to be sorry one of these days, I'll bet a guinea," cut in Mr. Harry Crickshaw, with a wink so knowing that it awakened in the breast of everybody present an insatiable desire for knowledge.

"What about, then?"

Mr. Harry Crickshaw glanced around mysteriously, and in a confidential whisper proceeded to explain himself.

"I would not have it said I said so."

"No, no," put in the Mayor in a tone calculated to assure, and old Mr. Jennings emphatically declared, "Certainly not."

"Young Rumblelow is after Miss Margaret Lane. He's over there with her all day long. He used to go fishing with her back in the long evenings night after night. Now he walks around there with a gun, and she goes out to meet him in the wood."

"You don't say so!" cried old Mr. Jennings, taking a whisker in each hand, a thing he never did except in moments of incredulity or astonishment.

"Fact. You don't see 'em together, because they are pretty secret about it. But everybody in Oakleigh is full of it. That's all right. They're engaged. But they don't want it known or talked about for the present—delicacy, you know—death of the old man—and you know what a village is."

"To be sure—to be sure," agreed His Worship quickly, and then he became sentimental. "Ah! Peggy Oswin's daughter ought to have had more than she did."

"That's no odds. Look here——" Mr. Harry Crickshaw paused and raised his hand to his mouth to concentrate his whisper and prevent it from straying in wrong directions. Mr. John Pudsey and old Mr. Jennings leaned forward until their profiles almost met, and lent an ear apiece.

"Miss Oswin has taken advice. Not old Podymore, but a good man at Bristol. She's all wrong. She can't live two years." And then with a very solemn expression of countenance Mr. Harry Crickshaw confided as a great secret, first in one ear and then in the other—

"Heart! Heart!"

The three men stood up and looked one another

blankly in the face. A silence followed which was more impressive than words.

"I do know," nodded Mr. Harry Crickshaw, "for I had it from a sure source."

Then a sly smile gradually dawned upon the wrinkled countenance of old Mr. Jennings, and he prodded the chief magistrate of Bristlington just where the line of his rotundity lost itself in the ribs.

"Pudsey," he chuckled, "he had it from a sure source."

The Mayor laughed outright as he repeated, "Ha! ha! He had it from a sure source." The idea was so delightful that they fell to probing Mr. Crickshaw upon both sides, because he had it from a sure source.

By this time a brief winter dusk was quickly bringing on the night. The lamplighter with his ladder on his shoulder passed hurrying down the street. Then also in the parlour of the "Green Dragon" the lamps were lighted and the shutters were drawn to.

It was quite dark before John Rumblelow came out of Lawyer Kinton's office. A north-east wind came driving down between the houses, carrying here and there a whirling flake of snow, and all the life of Bristlington had settled comfortably indoors. There was no one to observe the young Squire, as with head bent he strode through the town and gained the Whorbury road.

Here in the solitude he slackened his pace, and once he stood still and made an effort to collect his thoughts.

Lawyer Kinton had been both frank and clear. Moreover, he had supported his statements with documentary evidence. Yet even in spite of proofs the thing seemed inconceivable and incredible. That Whorbury was what is generally called "dipped" he had always been aware; but the recklessness and extravagance of

his grandfather suggested to his light-hearted Rumblelow temperament a misdirection of wealth, rather than a way leading to poverty. He had ordained for himself a year or two of prudent living—no hounds, a moderate stable, and the shooting well preserved—during which the estates should be placed in perfect repair, and he receive the blessings of a devoted tenantry. Sometimes, though not without compunction, he had added up the rents and apportioned a moderate sum sufficient for himself, leaving a handsome residue upon which to make Whorbury an example of what a fine estate should be. But always he pictured himself admired of the neighbourhood and beloved by those dependent upon him. And all this was a dream!

There came a shout out of the darkness close behind him. He was so absorbed in thought that in the bluster of the wind he had not noticed the sound of approaching wheels, and already a gig rapidly driven was almost upon him. He sprang on one side, but the horse had swerved. The driver poured on him a flood of indignant profanity and drove on. He recognised the voice of his grandfather, who after fighting a main of cocks was driving home to Whorbury.

At another time the recklessness and wild humour of the old man would have amused him. To-night they assumed deeper significance; they had led to ruin.

He quickened his pace. It would not do to be late. The conversation with Mr. Kinton was confidential, and he did not want the old Squire to ask where he had been. Kinton had talked to him out of kindness; had even shown the new mortgage, that he might see for himself how little was left after paying the interest to keep up such a place as Whorbury in the style suitable to a Rumblelow. Kinton had been almost moved

to tears—the wreck of such a handsome property was so pathetic. Five-and-twenty years of exile was the shortest term that could certainly restore the fortunes of Whorbury.

To John Rumblelow such a time was an eternity. He would be close upon fifty then, and to his fresh-blooded youth that seemed to be old age. It was like coming home a stranger, late in life. His heart sank to think of it. But there was no alternative, except—and Kineton also had hinted that—a rich marriage.

Again all the advantages of marrying Hetty Oswin passed rapidly before his mind.

Everything unchanged as he had hitherto imagined it, but with every embarrassment removed—Oakleigh brought back—the whole estate so kept and managed that it should be the admiration of the county. And Hetty was good-hearted, as Podymore pointed out—and quick-witted as he himself knew—and “a plucky little devil on a horse,” as his grandfather, who was delighted with the rapidity with which, under his tuition, Hetty had learnt to ride to hounds, with superlative praise constantly affirmed.

And his grandfather would be pleased, and the neighbourhood would rejoice that Whorbury need not be shut up; for everybody had foreseen that it must come—except himself. Kineton told him so. People had been talking for years, and the money-lender, no doubt, got hold of something and took alarm. And why should he not be happy with Hetty Oswin? He found her most amusing company. Yet the east wind seemed to grow colder and chill his blood at the thought.

The full moon, whilst he walked, had risen above the wood beyond Oakleigh, and now was emerging from behind a bank of cloud. It cast a faint light upon the

landscape, by which the familiar hills and trees could dimly be discerned. But as he reached the bridge its broad face became uncovered; the river shone in the bright light, and here and there like gleaming threads he could trace the meadow-gutters along which he had just now walked for snipe. He stopped a moment looking at the place where the house lay hidden among the trees.

Suddenly the association of the place started a new and unexpected train of thought. That fellow Oswin, with nothing, after twenty years had brought back this enormous fortune. Why might not another do the same? Why might not he by his own exertions win something to shorten this enforced absence? The idea fascinated him. The ancient Rumblelows had all been good for something—adventurers, soldiers, seamen. From the days of the old crusaders until the beginning of the last century they had built and added. Only since then had they diminished and let down. He might go before the crash fell. And into a new country a man need not carry his pride.

He went on again, over the stile to the footpath across the fields, and then another vision filled his imagination and a romance crept into his heart. He pictured himself married to Margaret Lane. They were together far away across the seas and alone. They were successful and happy—happy in each other, and happy in the expectation of the day when they were to return. There was always the certainty that Whorbury was waiting for them at last. And, after all, if his father had lived to a ripe old age, he would not have come into the estate for twenty years. But Margaret Lane did not think of him—did not even care for his company. He had no hope that she would marry him at all, much less

to spend her life far away from her friends and the comforts with which she was surrounded.

He said to himself that come what may he would never marry Hetty Oswin.

Kinton should understand at once that his advice was accepted, and that the estate should hereafter be left to him to nurse. Then he would doubtless find some way to pay off this abominable debt.

Having thus arrived at some conclusion with himself, John Rumblelow, thanks to a happy disposition, plucked up heart and presently reached Whorbury in far better spirits than he had walked out of Bristlington.

CHAPTER VII.

MISTLETOE

IT wanted only a day or two to Christmas, and Oakleigh Street was gay. Such a concourse of people in front of the shop was indeed proof of an uncommon occasion, and it was well that excitement like this could not occur every day. Miss Keziah Crane's mistletoes were come! The word had run round the village like wildfire, and everybody was there; for in the middle of the street was drawn up a turf-cart, a vehicle with tall rails rising high above its two wheels, which brought peat for burning from a distant moor. The rich brown load towered up and dwarfed the old grey pony standing with the belly-band tight and shafts level with his ears. But the weight was nothing, and twelve mistletoe boughs hanging up round added little more.

Miss Keziah Crane was a merchant of great enterprise. For years she had imported mistletoes and supplied the neighbourhood. It was a venture of some magnitude, and two hours that morning did she watch at the shop door, in anxiety lest some accident might have befallen the cargo. But at last the argosy was come, and Miss Keziah Crane was busy.

She would trust no one to carry the boughs from the cart to the shop but herself. She suspected volunteers of wishing to pull off the berries. Twelve times she

passed to and fro, after each journey hanging a mistletoe upon a crook in the beam, or a nail in the wall, left vacant for that purpose, until the little shop, as Mrs. William Cotching justly said, "was worth walking down street any day o' the week only to look at it."

"An' however Aunt Keziah'll dare to zit in it," cried long Selina Hallett, "I never can't think."

"For 'tis really like putting temptation in the way o' the men," argued little Dorothy Chick, "to see it like 'tis."

"An' zo 'tis, sure," reflected Hannah Jones, "for 'tis so thick overhead as a wood, and wherever Miss Keziah Crane do sit she must be in danger all the time."

"An' la! She'll lose all her custom this week for certain sure, for no woman'll ever venture inside the hatch," lamented Mrs. William Cotching.

But Miss Keziah Crane, next to being "no gad-about," prided herself most upon "never listening to no idle talk." She looked down upon such "chackle," particularly when it was directed against herself. She walked around rearranging her boughs and turning them the "best-berried side" to the front, with a silent dignity that even deafness could not have excelled. But at this remark about custom Miss Keziah Crane spoke out.

"Now don't ee gie yourself no thought, Mrs. William Cotching," she said, with a spice of sharpness to season her good nature, "for fear you should bring on a headache; for there's one party is a-coming to my shop, and by appointment, too, and she is a female—I should say a lady. And the biggest mistletoe, every bit the same as for five-and-twenty years ago, is already bespoke."

"Ah! Poor Mr. Oswin! He always had the biggest. Well, when we be called we must go—for so 'tis arranged," reflected Hannah Jones devoutly.

"And that's true," agreed Mrs. William Cotching, suddenly dropping her frivolity and becoming serious.

"Iss," Miss Keziah Crane went on, now thoroughly appeased and communicative. "Miss Margaret Lane have a-come into this shop for mistletoe as mid be the Wednesday afore Christmas every year, nineteen years, never miss one, ever since the old gentleman—well, not old *then*—brought her down by the hand, like. And she do bear it in mind, for only last week, as she an' her cousin and young Squire Rumblelow rode by a-horse-back, well, she didn' draw rein, I don't say she did, but she waved up her whip quite pleasant-like, an' she hollared out: 'I shall be roun' for the mistletoe, Miss Crane, come Wednesday next.' An' she spoke it so natural, too. So she did now—'come Wednesday next.'" Then Miss Keziah Crane repeated the sentence in a very refined and ladylike voice, to show how free from all affectation the manner of Miss Lane had been.

"Now I've a-wondered more 'an once—an' more 'an twice," began Mrs. William Cotching with much deliberation, arising from a doubt as to how the matter might be received, "whe'er or no young Squire Rumblelow——"

"Ah!" cried Miss Keziah Crane, catching the sense without waiting to hear out the sentence. "I've a-marked the signs o' love months agone. I tell ee what, tidden they that do gad about do see most, for they do miss what do fall out at their very own doors, an' they hant got no time to think. Why, I watched 'em meet here overright the door. An' I crope up an' peeped atwixt the lollipop bottles. An' he did look smilen, an' she did turn pink—as a fair skin will—an' then she turned back an' they walked down street. Then I could tell what were to come for certain." Here Miss Keziah Crane

very wisely wagged her head. "For folk mid meet, but they don't turn back for nothing an' walk down street."

"I said so! I said so!" cried Mrs. William Cotching, in great excitement. "What did I tell you two months back, Dorothy Chick? Didn' I say that Mary Ann James said that they walked down street like turtle-doves? Didn' I hollar that over-hedge when you was a-pickin' in your big plum-tree, afore they was dead ripe, because the boys do drive sich work wi' stones——"

"Ay, the very same day that Johnny's vinger were a-stung, when I told you that, what wi' the thunder in the air, the bees was that spiteful, that verily an' truly 'twas not safe to go near the hives."

"An' so you did, for I can call it back to mind every word, an'——"

"Oh, 'tis so true as ever I be here!" And little Dorothy Chick's black eyes glanced from one to another with such a sparkling candour and firm conviction, that nobody could doubt for one instant that Mr. John Rumblelow and Margaret Lane were made for each other. But in a moment there followed absolute corroboration.

It was Sally Hallett who spoke.

"Now I can tell ee something, certain sure," cried Sally Hallett triumphantly, pushing into the centre of the group with her arm extended to command attention. "I did promise that I wouldn't tell, but I know none o' ee 'll ever so much as breathe a sound. She's engaged to un. She is, for a true fact. Everybody in Bristlington do say so, only 'tis kep' private till the new year. I could tell ee who told me"—here Sally Hallett's voice cracked with excitement, and she blushed violently—"but I promised not to tell, an' not to mention names is just the same as not to tell. But I had it on good authority, then, from one anybody can trust."

"Mark! from one she can trust," cried Miss Keziah Crane.

"To be sure, from one Sally can trust," echoed Dorothy Chick.

"La! but who *can* anybody trust?" asked Mrs. William Cotching, holding up both hands in horror of human duplicity.

"Nobody," cried little Dorothy Chick with conviction, though she had never suffered deception in all her simple little life.

"Ah!" said Miss Keziah Crane with a wise wag of the head. "But we do all know there's one a maid will trust; an' that's he that do walk out by her side an' whisper in the ear of her."

Everybody turned towards Sally Hallett and roared with laughter, whilst she blushed and giggled and looked a little brazen, in spite of her glowing face, because she felt so justifiably proud.

"Hush! Here is Miss Lane," gasped little Dorothy Chick.

And then, whilst Maggie was approaching from the distant end of the village street, the little crowd quietly dispersed, and Miss Keziah Crane, her face the colour of a holly-berry, was left alone amongst her mistletoes.

She worshipped Miss Lane. The girl from childhood had frequently gone in to talk to her, and always found much amusement in humouring her little ways. Keziah Crane had already in her mind selected the mistletoe that Miss Lane would have to have. In moments of excitement the good soul would sometimes talk to herself, and now she muttered, "Shall I? No, I'd better not to. An' eet, I should like to be the first." As Maggie, very happy and smiling, crossed her threshold, Miss Keziah Crane finally decided that she would.

The purchase was soon completed.

"An' I'm sure I wish ee joy, Miss Lane."

The words conveyed a deeper significance than the mere clinching of a bargain, and the girl looked up quickly, as if she did not understand.

"An' glad we all be to know that we be to keep ee in the neighbourhood."

Miss Keziah Crane nodded and smiled with all the mystery in life.

"Oh, yes. I am to stay with my cousin at present, at least," said Maggie carelessly.

"For the present, Miss Lane. But not for long—not for long, if we do read an' hear aright."

"Well, not for ever perhaps," laughed Maggie. "But my cousin wants me to stay altogether."

"Then now I do know 'tis true," cried Miss Keziah Crane, clapping her fat hands, "by the words you do choose for to put me off. Well, an' I do wish ee every happiness that heart can hope for—an' so do everybody—so they do—"

"What do you mean, Miss Crane?" interrupted Maggie, looking very perplexed.

"In your married life. I saw it. I knew it, that very first time I clapped eyes on Mr. Rumblelow and you together. I said to myself, 'Now the young Squire have a-caught a mind to Miss Lane——'"

The good woman suddenly curbed her enthusiasm and stopped short. She could see that she had done wrong. It was clear that Miss Lane was greatly agitated and vexed. There came a troubled look into her eyes. She became crimson with confusion. Her lips trembled, but remained silent. Then, after a moment's pause, she spoke quite angrily.

"You do not know what you are talking about, Miss

Crane. It is most absurd, and if anyone else had said such a thing to me I should have considered it insulting. I hope, indeed, you will not repeat any such folly."

Without waiting for explanation or apology the girl turned and hurried out of the little shop. As to Miss Keziah Crane, she felt that she ought not to have spoken. Sally Hallett said it was a secret, and no wonder Miss Lane had taken offence. But she had not denied it for all that. No, no. She had only turned the matter off. It was all as clear as a pike-staff.

Margaret Lane hastened homewards down the village street, but before she reached the gates of Oakleigh Court she changed her mind and went into the quiet little churchyard.

Her only wish was to see no one until she had gained time to compose and calm herself. The foolish words hurt her in a way she knew to be altogether unreasonable, but that made them none the easier to bear. She thought of John Rumblelow. What must he think if any such foolish gossip should come to his ears? She would not have that happen for the world. At the mere possibility of such a thing she tingled with shame, and felt for ever disgraced. And he was to come to Oakleigh that afternoon. She dared not meet him—she felt so self-conscious and ashamed.

He never thought of her. Never! Never! A man of his position must marry amongst his own class. Hundreds of times during the last few months her heart had told her that; yet this silly tattle sent a thrill through her veins that quickened her blood and made her pulses throb. No, she would not see him that afternoon. She passed through the little gate, and then

behind the shrubbery away into the distant garden, where in winter-time people scarcely ever went. And yet what folly was all this! It was like admitting to herself that she was in love with John Rumblelow—and that she had never done. Most likely he was there by this time. She hurried further away. And yet why did he visit Oakleigh so often? She turned abruptly and walked back towards the house.

She had scarcely entered the hall when a door opened, and her cousin ran quickly towards her. Hetty had been watching for her. She raised a finger to ask for silence, and then, taking Maggie by the arm, led her upstairs, to the same room in which they had talked after the funeral of Uncle Jos.

She carefully closed the door behind them.

"Maggie," she cried at once, in her excitement clasping her cousin tightly with both hands, "I have something to tell you. Nobody knows yet—not even mother. I am engaged to Mr. Rumblelow. It happened just now. In the room over the porch. When he came this afternoon."

For a few seconds Maggie could not speak. But Hetty did not notice it. She was so carried away with her triumph, and so fully alive to the incredible wonder of this unexpected news.

"Aren't you glad for me, Maggie, dear?" she cried in exultation.

"Yes, yes. Very glad."

With one swift glance Hetty scanned her cousin's face. "You did not look so," she said.

BOOK III
THE EGREGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

CHAPTER I

THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

THE announcement that the young Squire of Whorbury was to marry Hetty Oswin did not create the stir in Bristlington that so unexpected an occasion certainly deserved. There is a reticence natural to really fine intellects; and it appeared that, although the event had not been publicly predicted, it did not come at all as a surprise to the little coterie at the "Green Dragon."

Mr. John Pudsey admitted that, without being in a position to contradict the rumour respecting Miss Margaret Lane, he had "doubted it—gravely doubted it."

Old Mr. Jennings had "always secretly opined that an opportunity so exceptional, that it might almost be deemed providential, of uniting the two estates should not be permitted to escape." He expressed great satisfaction with the arrangement, which he described as "most eligible."

As to Mr. Harry Crickshaw, it was clearly not for him to call in question a popular belief; but, he confessed, he had accepted the statement with a grain of salt to be taken for what it was worth. He was not the man to swallow everything that came in his way. Oh, no—not at all. The most prudent course, and the one

he always adopted, seeing how unreliable all gossip invariably proved, was to hear all and say nothing—a conclusion which Mr. John Pudsey and old Mr. Jennings both warmly applauded.

The truth is, Bristlington was at this time agitated to its depths by a public issue so momentous that it left no leisure for the consideration of any merely private affairs.

A few weeks before, at a few minutes before eleven o'clock on the morning of the first Monday of this same month of December, a most imposing pageant might have been observed in Bristlington Street.

Preceded by his two Sergeants-at-Mace, His Worship John Pudsey, Esquire, descended the doorsteps of his residence at the corner and passed with slow deliberation in the direction of an old low archway in a tall stone wall. The handsome iron gates of this entrance to-day were open. Within lay a spacious court paved with stones, and enclosing a very ancient building of which the town was justly proud—the Bristlington Municipal Hall.

His Worship's progress was so dignified that it allowed time for minute and reverent observation.

The Sergeants-at-Mace were two of the finest men in Bristlington, and, added to this, they wore three-cornered cocked hats of impressive dimensions and richly ornamented with gold lace. They were attired in long coats with braided pockets, knee-breeches, white hose and shoes. The one upon the left carried the municipal mace, a splendid symbol, wrought in brass and fully three feet in length. This weapon, being of considerable weight and somewhat unwieldy, he hugged firmly to his bosom. The massive head reposed across his arm and projected above the height

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of his shoulder, and he boldly marched forward with much of the easy elegance and complacency displayed by a man when carrying a baby. The Sergeant-at-Mace to the right, with outstretched hands, supported a crimson cushion, upon which rested a Bible. He lacked the graceful bearing of his comrade with the mace. His steps were shorter, his position more cramped, and he leaned forward as if carrying a hot dinner from the bakehouse on a Sunday. Close at their heels followed His Worship, in all the glory of the civic robe and chain, apparently unconscious of the open-mouthed admiration of a small and juvenile crowd that at his approach stopped playing around the municipal pump.

His Worship was on his way that morning to a meeting of the Bristlington Corporation. Occasionally an extraordinary meeting of the Corporation took place. But this was the ordinary monthly meeting—nothing more.

The Mayor passed out of sight through the archway.

Upon the other side of the wall was a robing-room; and as he drew near, the door opened and the matured wisdom of Bristlington, the six Aldermen, looking a little as if by accident they had strolled abroad in their dressing-gowns, sallied forth and took up a position in order of strict seniority in his wake. Common Councillors, amongst whom Mr. Harry Crickshaw in his puce was alone resplendent, having no robes, fell in behind, or came along as best they could; and thus the whole Corporation of Bristlington proceeded solemnly to that ancient council-chamber, which was the pride and glory of their town.

The chamber was indeed worthy to be the boast of Bristlington.

A handsome Tudor hall, with dark oak ceiling and panelled walls, it was lighted by a lofty window at one end. Exactly opposite the entrance stood the civic chair, a very comfortable piece of furniture and greatly coveted, richly carved and raised upon a kind of dais like a throne. Above it hung blazoned the Royal Arms of England quartering the lilies of France. In front and below ranged two rows of oak stalls for the Aldermen, and a set of stools and benches for the Common Councillors. The personal dignity which adorned the manners of the leading people, the courtesy which pervaded Bristlington were indeed clearly accounted for.

It was a sight to see when, upon the first stroke of the hour, the procession, still in the same order, sailed into the council-chamber. The Sergeants-at-Mace stood aside at the foot of the steps that His Worship might ascend. The Aldermen solemnly passed into their allotted places, but remained standing until His Worship should have safely seated himself in the chair.

Now the civic robe of Bristlington, being a handsome crimson garment trimmed with sable, and therefore very expensive, was, of course, intended to adorn a long succession of mayors, and had been designed of a length to set best upon an average man. Thus, unless the mayor were very tall, there was no indecent exposure of trouser-leg; and none had ever been elected short enough to step upon his own skirt and fall. With Mr. John Pudsey, however, the fur did reach to within three inches of the ground, producing a very impressive effect upon the level floor or on a public platform, but demanding forethought and much care in going upstairs. It was necessary therefore for Mr. John Pudsey to pause and raise his skirt.

There is perhaps no human action bearing a subtler

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moral significance than the lifting of a skirt. In its nature it is feminine, and may be graceful, delicate, coquettish, prudish—anything you like. Mr. John Pudsey gathered his robe together a little above the knee, clutched it tight, and pressing his clenched fist upon his abdomen, ascended the steps. Only one word can describe the action, and that inadequately. It was manly.

With dignity and no unbecoming haste the chief magistrate of Bristlington seated himself in the chair. The Mace and Bible were solemnly laid at rest upon the table before him, Aldermen and Common Councillors shuffled into their seats, ranged in a double crescent facing His Worship, and the proceedings began.

Lawyer Kinton, now in a horsehair wig, rubbed up his gold glasses, exchanged nods with the Mayor, and at once began to read the minutes of the last meeting. He was the Town Clerk of Bristlington, and practice had made him very rapid in getting through these formalities. His voice sank into a low, monotonous murmur, and produced such a soothing effect upon the ear that Aldermen leaned back in their chairs and gazed at the ceiling, whilst Councillors nibbled at the feathers of their quills and knit their brows as if engrossed in profound reflection. It is, however, difficult to determine whether the municipal mind on such occasions wanders into abstract thought or merely enjoys a brief abstinence from thinking.

Only Mr. Alderman Oswin appeared to be alert and attentive; but then, the reading was for the most part about himself. "It was proposed by Mr. Alderman Oswin and seconded by Mr. Councillor Platt" occurred with such endless repetition that there seemed to be no room for the mention of anyone else.

He sat upright, even leaning forward a little, the better to hear. He was restless and somewhat excited, that was clear to see. Sometimes he stared defiantly at the Mayor, then he fixed his eyes grimly upon the Town Clerk, and at last glared around the assembled Corporation, to make sure that all his supporters were present. He had moistened and brushed a long thin lock across his glossy baldness before coming to the meeting, and he kept raising his hand as if to be certain that it was still there. But although afflicted with this nervous doubt, his face bore an expression of grim determination which was almost heroic.

At last the Town Clerk finished his reading and handed the minute-book up to His Worship to be signed.

"Is it your pleasure, gentlemen," His Worship asked, smiling around benignly as he went through a necessary formality, "that these minutes shall be signed?"

At the same time he leaned forward and dipped a quill in the ink before him in readiness to append his signature and flourish.

Suddenly Mr. Alderman Oswin rose. "I object to the signing of these minutes as they now stand."

The Alderman's manner was fierce, and indeed sadly lacking in proper deference and respect. But none could help admiring the gracious tone of the Mayor as he quietly laid down the pen, already poised, and leaning back in his chair in an attitude of close attention, called upon Mr. Alderman Oswin to "state the grounds of his objection."

The Alderman took a long breath, looked doggedly around, and drew himself up for a speech. Every member of the Corporation sat up and every face was turned towards him.

"I desire to call attention," continued the Alderman

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with great solemnity, "to a grave and important alteration which has been effected in the terms of a resolution proposed by myself and seconded by Mr. Councillor Platt——"

Mr. Alderman Oswin glanced at Mr. Councillor Platt, who supported him with an appropriate cry of "Hear, hear!"

"I refer to the resolution relative to an *affluvia* in Connegar Lane. In that resolution I stigmatised that *affluvia* in certain terms. Those terms, sir, were strong, but—although strong—those terms were advisedly chosen."

As Alderman Oswin made this assertion he raised his voice, he raised his right hand, he raised himself; for, inspired by a kind of moral elevation, he tiptoed beneath his aldermanic gown. Then, being a natural orator, he at once came down to common earth and continued with deep emotion.

"I cannot forget," he said impressively, locking his fingers and laying both hands at peace upon the region of his middle waistcoat button, "that I am a Bristlington man. As a native of Bristlington, I was born in Bristlington, and—and bred there. A weakness it may be,"—here he threw back his head and looked at the ceiling—"but I will confess to it, nay, I will glory in it, anything that touches the well-being, anything that touches the liberty, anything that touches the freedom of this my native town of Bristlington, touches me closely."

The sentiment was so beautiful that other Councillors besides Mr. Councillor Platt, and even one Alderman, were touched also. A gentle rumble of "Hear, hear!" passed around the assemblage; for to the credit of the Bristlington Corporation be it said, that, although no

member has ever been known to change an opinion under argument, or to fail in loyalty to his party at the critical moment, everyone is ready to applaud a truth or respond to a noble emotion, if only it be frequently reiterated and sufficiently trite.

Mr. Alderman Oswin felt gratified. He placed his arms akimbo, stood up like a Cochin-China cockerel preparing to crow, and lapsed into anecdote.

"When the Duke of Wellington, whose name will live for ever in the hearts of all Englishmen," he began instructively, "was marching to the glorious battle-field of Waterloo——"

"Order!" said the Mayor shortly, and raised in warning a podgy little hand.

Mr. Alderman Oswin leaned forward and became smiling and explanatory.

"I was only about to remark, Your Worship," he expostulated, and then went on very quickly, hurrying through the preamble so as to get to the application before he could be stopped, "that when the Duke of Wellington was marching to the field of Waterloo——"

"Order! Order!" cried His Worship sternly; and all the Council in a tone of indignation shouted "Chair!"

Then Mr. John Pudsey became judicial. Without haste, without passion, and in a manner almost paternal and compassionate, he pointed out Job Oswin's error.

"The worthy Alderman," he said, "is speaking to the minutes of the last meeting, and must not discuss the action of the Duke of Wellington thereon."

"I was coming to that!" cried Job Oswin angrily, and his face, even to his bald forehead, flushed crimson with indignation. But at once remembering the respect due to the Chair, he controlled himself and inclined his head.

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"I was about to offer an illustration, Your Worship. But, Your Worship, I most respectfully bow to Your Worship's ruling," he added grandly, and with a sort of holy emphasis upon the word "Worship."

Many members of the Corporation were visibly affected, and at this magnanimity on the part of his leader Mr. Councillor Platt looked proud. For such was the high tone of municipal life in Bristlington that, at an ordinary meeting, in the earlier hours at least, the bearing of the humblest Councillor might have added lustre to a Court.

The interruption had somewhat confused Mr. Alderman Oswin. He paused, stammered, cleared his throat and brought himself to the determination that he was not going to be put down. In this spirit he cast aside all rhetoric and went straight to the point.

"The terms alluded to were, 'offensive, deleterious and disgraceful *affluvia*.' I have retained a copy of the resolution as drawn up by myself and endorsed by Mr. Councillor Platt." Here he thrust his hand into an inner breast-pocket, and drawing forth a slip of paper in confirmation, he read: "'Offensive, deleterious and disgraceful *affluvia*.' By some person in authority these terms have been suppressed."

"Order!" said His Worship.

"I say, by some Jack-in-office these terms have been suppressed," repeated the Alderman, with growing heat.

"Order! Order!" cried His Worship.

"I care not one farthing about these terms. I object on principle. I defend my right to my own words—a right shared by the humblest member of this Council—and I say again that, by some meddling, ignorant, self-satisfied busybody, these terms have been suppressed," yelled the Alderman.

The Corporation became excited. Everybody stood up and spoke at once. The roof of the ancient council-chamber echoed with cries of "Withdraw!" "Apologise!" But Mr. John Pudsey raised both hands; and such was the authority of his office that presently a mesmeric calm, broken only by an occasional cry of "Chair!" like the last bang of a damp cracker when it goes off late, seemed to fall upon the meeting.

"The worthy Alderman has used language reflecting an aspersion upon the honour of a respected civic officer, and that I am sure the worthy Alderman did not intend," said His Worship, with the complacency of a man who feels that he is acting delicately and has spoken well. Then he settled himself in the civic chair as comfortably as if it were only the corner seat by the fireside of the "Green Dragon."

"Withdraw! Withdraw!" cried the Corporation louder still, and Mr. Harry Crickshaw stood up and shook his fist.

"I will never withdraw!" cried Alderman Oswin, glaring fiercely around upon his fellow-Councillors. "I repeat: meddling, fiddling, interfering busybody. I will thrash the matter out, and the ultimate verdict shall rest with my native town of Bristlington."

"I will be more explicit. The word 'suppressed' involves a stigma, and I call upon Mr. Alderman Oswin to withdraw that word," said the Mayor, with all the judicial calm belonging to a consciousness of irresistible power.

"And I repeat it, Your Worship," returned the heroic Alderman. "Suppressed — suppressed — suppressed!" The movement of Job Oswin's beard wagging up and down below his long shaven upper lip proved that he was continuing to fire off the objectionable participle

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long after all individual articulation was lost in the general uproar.

But presently there came a lull. Then everybody indignantly cried "Hush! Hush!" to everybody else, and again the voice of His Worship obtained a hearing.

"If the ruling of the Chair is not at once obeyed, I shall know how to proceed," said the Mayor, with quiet determination.

Great heavens! What could the Mayor intend? The words were not spoken in heat. A stillness of expectation fell upon the whole Corporation, but Job Oswin, as if inviting martyrdom, remained doggedly silent. What legal power, known only to himself, perhaps as old as the charter and fallen into disuse, was Mr. John Pudsey about to exert? What ancient right was he about to revive? In "another place" contumacious members were sometimes taken to the Clock Tower in custody of the Sergeant-at-Arms. Was it possible that Mr. Alderman Oswin could be handed over to the two Sergeants-at-Mace to be carried to the little dungeon that concealed the dangling weights of Bristlington town-clock? It was indeed a moment of crisis and suspense.

But His Worship was prompt. The Corporation had not long to wait.

"If the innuendo is not at once withdrawn," he said with slow severity, and then paused, "I shall immediately—*vacate the chair.*"

To say that the Corporation of Bristlington was struck with consternation is to use a mild and ineffectual phrase. It was beside itself with indignation and alarm.

Mr. Harry Crickshaw sprang to his feet. "As a man of business," he cried, his thoughts reverting at once to his forsaken doorstep, "giving up my valuable time in the interests of my native town, I assert——"

Here he was interrupted by old Mr. Jennings, whose deliberation in rising had been due to no lack of public spirit, but only to declining years and a certain stiffness of the knee-joints. "As a member of fifty years' standing," piped the Nestor of Bristlington, "and having five times passed the chair, I feel in a position to say that nobody knows more of——"

But Mr. Harry Crickshaw went on fiercer than ever: "That man who can insult our worthy Town Clerk and disregard the ruling of the Chair I despise. I ignore his presence. He does not exist for me. Let him retain his vulgar epithets and ignorant spelling. Let him be carried down to posterity on the minute-book as no classical scholar, but a pompous ass. Effluvia!" And Mr. Harry Crickshaw pronounced the word with scorn.

And all the while Mr. Councillor Platt, clutching the desk before him with both hands to steady himself, rose and fell upon the wave of a changing intention, never attaining his full height, and never quite resuming his seat. Wishing to second his friend Alderman Oswin, yet anxious not to push matters into extremity, he bobbed up and down in uncertainty, like a nervous bather afraid of cold water, but fully alive to the expediency of dipping the head.

But the Alderman's lips were still moving, and at last came a lull in the storm. Taking advantage of this opportunity, he raised his hand to his mouth to serve as a speaking-trumpet, and yelled, "And a good thing too. You ought never to be there; you ought never to have been elected."

Without deigning to reply, Mr. John Pudsey rose, and gathering his toga around him, with head thrown back and nose erect, descended safely to the floor. Then, with the dignity of a Roman senator, he stalked

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in the direction of the door leading out into the courtyard.

“Let all such as desire to consider themselves gentlemen,” yelled Mr. Harry Crickshaw, clutching the lapels of his frock-coat as he emphasised the word, and regarding Job Oswin with the loftiest scorn, “follow His Worship the Mayor.”

Upon this a procession was hastily formed, consisting of all the Aldermen but one, and a large majority of the Council. Mr. Kinton clapped away his spectacles, thrust the minute-book under his arm, and with an *ex-officio* kind of air brought up the rear.

But at the door His Worship stopped, and turning round, apparently disturbed in mind, gazed wistfully at the empty chair.

A fear crept into the hearts of his followers that John Pudsey, after all, was not man enough for the occasion. He muttered a few hurried words of anxiety in the ear of old Mr. Jennings, and then a whisper, like a nervous shiver passing along the vertebræ of a weak spine, rushed rapidly from mouth to mouth throughout the length of that straggling but devoted band of followers.

“The mace! The mace! What about the mace?”

To be sure, in moments of extreme excitement even an important matter may easily be altogether overlooked; and that he thought of this in time is a proof of Mr. John Pudsey’s great presence of mind. And it is indeed questionable whether the chair could be said to be vacated whilst the mace was lying on the table.

“Call me a Sergeant-at-Mace—no matter which,” commanded the Mayor.

The Sergeant-at-Mace came running in alarm.

Relying upon the quietude of an ordinary Council

meeting, he had divested himself of his gold-laced hat and coat in order to dust out the Justice-room. He was, in fact, stripped to the coloured shirt; and although, of course, he still wore his official hose and breeches with the broad gilt stripes, his braces, thrown for ease off his shoulders, gracefully festooned his hips. He ran in consternation, feeling apprehensive, as he afterwards admitted, lest the council-chamber chimney, which sadly needed sweeping, might have caught fire, or that, in the heat of discussion, some Councillor might have suffered bodily harm, or even fallen down in a fit.

But this was no time for pride or ceremony.

"The mace! At once!" cried the Mayor in a tone of command, pointing with a peremptory wave of the arm in the direction of the desk.

The Sergeant-at-Mace seized upon this emblem of office, and rushed as he was to the head of the procession, which at once passed slowly through the doorway, across the courtyard, by the robing-room, into the street. His band of supporters accompanied the Mayor as far as the entrance to his house, and there, refusing all invitation, would have respectfully withdrawn, had not His Worship continued to insist.

"I ask it as a favour," he said, turning towards them upon the top doorstep with a gracious bow, "that you will enter my walls and partake of some refreshment."

"Gentlemen," piped old Mr. Jennings, tremulously, for everyone felt deeply moved, "at such a juncture, at such a crisis in the history of the Corporation of Bristlington, the expressed desire of His Worship the Chief Magistrate of Bristlington is a command."

Responding to this appeal, they all went into the house; and when the mace had been safely deposited upon the top shelf of a dinner-wagon in Mr. John

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Pudsey's dining-room, that gentleman lifted the civic chain over his head, and divested himself of the municipal robe.

"The town shall judge," he said, with sublime resignation, "between myself and Mr. Alderman Oswin. It was high time a stand should be made. I will never sit again until the objectionable word 'suppressed' has been withdrawn. John, you will put on your coat, and bring the cushion and Bible with proper and seemly reverence. Gentlemen, you will excuse me one moment. It is my custom to decant my wine myself."

Thus to the exalted public spirit which at all times commands respect was added in the character of Mr. John Pudsey the plainer domestic simplicity that never fails to endear. During his temporary absence the room fairly echoed with his praises.

"What a man!" cried one. "What quiet firmness!" added another. "No nasty bounce." "And not a particle of gas about him."

"What a cur a low hound like Oswin is made to appear beside a gentleman!" reflected Mr. Harry Crickshaw, expanding his chest and standing at his full height.

"Gentlemen," said old Mr. Jennings, with a seriousness that carried great weight, "we have been acquainted with John Pudsey for years, and respected—nay, loved the man—the genial man in him. But we have never known him until now. The unsuspected keynote of his character, not found lacking in the moment of emergency, is a lofty personal dignity. Gentlemen, I will confess to you that I myself have not appraised Pudsey at his full worth until to-day. Shoulder to shoulder, whatever be the upshot, we must stand by our Mayor."

Carrying a decanter in each hand, His Worship re-entered the room before the cheers with which this

sentiment was received had died away, and it is only fair to say his followers stood by him with the enthusiasm which his spirited and noble-minded conduct deserved.

But as the wine began to run low, a restlessness on the part of all the company became evident. It is only natural that public men, upon the occasion of a crisis, should desire without delay to feel the public pulse, and old Mr. Jennings gave delicate expression to this wish when he appealed to his fellow-Councillors not wantonly to occupy His Worship's valuable time. Upon this, the party dispersed to mingle with the leading burgesses of Bristlington, and form groups in the street.

Mr. Harry Crickshaw alone hastened home without exchanging a word with anybody, and his behaviour upon this occasion was very mysterious.

Provided with a hammer, four tintacks, and a sheet of brown paper, he entered his little parlour, and mounting upon a chair, blocked up his only window, so that he might no longer be annoyed by the occasional apparition of the neighbour who did not exist. He then took out his ledger and a quire of foolscap paper. In order to write, however, it was necessary to light the lamp, and from that day almost until Christmas he spent his time in this sanctum, apparently engaged in difficult literary composition, and consuming the midnight oil, even at noon.

In explanation, he declared himself driven to this extremity by a prying rascal whose name should never again pollute his lips. He added also that at this time of the year this absence of light and air was most inconvenient and unwholesome, because he was invariably busily engaged indoors making up his annual accounts.

CHAPTER II

HEIRLOOMS

FOR a brief while after her engagement Hetty Oswin was beside herself with a sense of her assured grandeur. She was to be a great lady and the future was secure. She trod on air. In a short time her lot would be complete, leaving nothing more for heart to wish for. It seemed all too wonderful to be true. In her excitement she could almost believe she was another person—and then again she was the old Hetty Oswin walking in a dream. Sometimes there came a strange, haunting fear that everything was unreality, and that some fine morning she must awake to find that Oakleigh, the mansion, the park and her great fortune, were all illusion and had vanished. But she shook off these fancies. It was all true and beyond doubt. Old Squire Rumblelow himself rode over the next morning to express his satisfaction, and insist that they should all come to Whorbury to spend Christmas Eve.

“I’ll get Kineton and Podymore,” cried the old boy in his heartiest tone. “We’ll have an old-fashioned party. We’ll dance for an hour, my dear, and wake the old place up a bit.”

Lawyer Kineton ambled over also upon his old cob to congratulate his ward upon forming so desirable a con-

nection ; and old Dr. Podymore, when he came to shoot, was most fatherly, and began by claiming the privilege of giving the bride away. "When is it to be?" laughed this most genial of trustees, and then he became serious. "I never recommend a long engagement," he said, shaking his head most earnestly, as if he had been all his life administering matrimony as he would a bolus or a draught. "Reserve a little courting for after marriage, my dear," he advised, and looked very facetious indeed, in his old-fashioned way, as he repeated the word "courting"—so much so, that an uneasy thought flashed across Hetty's brain.

There had been no courtship leading up to this engagement. A feeling of unrest crept into her heart and alternated with her joy. John Rumblelow was not in love with her. He had chosen her because of the estate. At first she was able to stifle this doubt. The great people of this world, amongst whom she was now one, must marry with prudence, and this promised to her ambition everything that was wanting. She soothed herself with the reflection that there was distinction in his restraint of all emotion. The heir of Whorbury sought an alliance with the heiress of Oakleigh, and if his manner was somewhat cold and grave it added so much the more to her self-esteem. And yet, in quiet moments, again and again the misgiving would return. She could not resist it. It came in form of a small haunting discontent, that already grew and grew, like the beginning of a madness eating into her brain.

On the day before Christmas the meet was at Whorbury Wood, and she recognised the importance of the occasion. The engagement by this time was talked of around the neighbourhood, and as she rode by John Rumblelow's side she felt that she was the object

of universal observation. All the people were looking at her. She could constantly detect their glances, and knew well enough of what they whispered as they waited by the cover-side. Some stared, some were serious, and some smiled. She hated them when they smiled. And out of all this self-consciousness a spirit of devilry arose in her heart.

There came a whisper from the copse. Then a hound gave tongue—and then another. Within the wood old Squire Rumblelow blew a toot-toot-toot of encouragement upon his horn. From the far corner came a cry, "Gone away!" And then to the music of the hounds, and the blowing of the horn, they cantered along the woodside and through an open gate into a fallow field.

The girl made up her mind that day that she would go. She was trembling with nervous fear, for she had never really overcome her dread of horses, but yet more with secret shame lest she might appear to be afraid. They had been at the further side of the cover when the fox broke away, and now two fields in front of her she could see Maggie galloping beside the old Squire close behind the hounds.

For some time the fences were small and she rode through gaps or followed quite easily where John Rumblelow led; but soon they came to a stretch of level grass between two hills, and she saw before them the winding course of the river, here and there gleaming in the light and at other places hidden by overgrowing alder bushes and pollard willow trees. The stream was much narrower than at Oakleigh, but deeper, and now swollen bank high with a winter flood. She saw Squire Rumblelow ride at it, but the bank broke and his horse slipped back into the brook. Then another rider fell in. When she came up they were

still floundering, horses and men, in the yellow water. The field had stopped to think better of it.

"Come along. I know where there is a ford just below," said John Rumblelow in her ear, and she turned her horse to go with him.

By this time the old Squire had scrambled out upon the other side. She saw a horsewoman draw back a little from the crowd, hesitate, and then gallop boldly at the leap. But just upon the brink her horse refused, and as it swerved round Hetty recognised her cousin. So Maggie had attempted it and failed. For a moment she felt glad. Then a sudden impulse came over her. She would ride at it herself, whatever happened. Maggie's failure was a spur to her ambition. She would be the first—now, at this moment, with everybody there to see. She clenched her teeth, turned her horse towards the river, gave him his head, and struck him across the flank with her whip. She shut her eyes, for she had not the courage to look. And then, before she knew what had happened, she was over in the face of the whole hunt, and old Squire Jack, dripping wet, was shouting to her to come along with him.

"Why, you little monkey," laughed he with affectionate approval as they galloped away side by side, "you've cut out all the field."

She glanced back. No one had followed. John Rumblelow was riding with Maggie, showing her the way to the ford. Nothing could be more natural, yet to see them together filled her heart with distrust and jealousy. He did not love her. The thought came crushing in upon her triumph. It took the glory out of all her fortune and success. Still, Maggie had not ridden over the brook.

They had a magnificent run—the best in the season—as good as he had ever seen in all his life, so Squire Rumblelow repeatedly declared. One hour and forty minutes without a check, and then a fair kill in the open! What could be prettier? He and Hetty only were in at the death, and as he presented her with the brush, he raised his finger and smeared blood upon her cheek in accordance with time-honoured custom.

Sir Peter Wilkins, fatter than ever, rode panting up a little late, just as the ceremony was concluded. "Who's the lady, Rumblelow?" he gasped in his blunt fashion.

"That's my future daughter-in-law," replied old Squire Jack shortly. "I've taught her to ride to hounds; and I'm devilish proud of her."

"I should think so!" cried the baronet. "I'll bet you don't ride over that same place. I'll bet——"

But the Squire, without making reply, rode away at the head of his pack to draw another cover.

The girl overheard; for Sir Peter's confidential whisper was like a wheezy bassoon. She felt pained and angry. She was nobody and unknown. Her excitement was over. She did not want to ride any more. She had already taxed her strength to the utmost, and a feeling of weariness and fatigue came over her. She wanted to get away from the people and that John Rumblelow should come away also. Just then he came riding up.

"I wish you would take me home," she beseeched of him—"unless you very much want to go on."

He saw that she was tired. "There is a drove beyond the gorse. It will lead us into the Bristlington Road," he replied quite willingly.

"How far are we from home?"

"About seven miles from Oakleigh."

"Come along then," she said eagerly. "We need

not bother about Maggie. She has gone on. She will be all right." In spite of her fatigue she urged her horse into a canter until they were out of sight and hearing of the hunt.

"I do not believe you understand how greatly you have distinguished yourself," he said as he opened a gate for her at the end of the drove.

"I noticed that you did not share the distinction," she answered, jokingly lifting the handle of her whip towards him by way of rebuke.

"To share it would be to diminish it," he explained.

"No; it would have doubled the glory."

"I knew that was impossible," he laughed. "To see the Squire in the brook was a warning to me. And once in you cannot always get out."

"That is no excuse," she said with a shake of the head. "My idea of a lover is one who will follow through fire and water."

"But you have not told me that before. Now I have lost an opportunity; for it would certainly have been through water."

He unconsciously adopted towards her the tone of banter which was habitual to him when talking to his grandfather. In that instance the complete want of sympathy between them made it superfluous to talk sense. In this, it was an attempt to conceal even from himself how little his heart was satisfied with his engagement. For he could not play at love-making and give expression to an emotion that he did not feel. He had never assumed for one moment that Hetty was any more in love than himself, though he felt assured before he asked her that she would be willing to marry him. No doubt it was a most desirable match for both of them; and now that the step was taken he would abide

by it and devote himself to her loyally like an honest man and a gentleman. But he could undertake no play-acting. The marriage must not be delayed, and hereafter everything would turn out well. With every interest in common it must become natural and easy to regard her with a real affection. In support of this expectation he constantly assured himself of her many attractions. She was generous and good-tempered, with a clever tongue, well able to take care of herself, and she had no end of pluck—if only she would not shrug her shoulders and be at times so confoundedly theatrical.

They talked of many things that afternoon. The road was very undulating, and they walked their horses both up hill and down, breaking into a jog-trot only on the level ground. Thus their conversations were brief and sometimes interrupted by the change of pace. But as they came in sight of the irregular brown gables and grey smoke of Bristlington, the girl suddenly turned her head and said abruptly—

“Will you feel hurt if I ask you to explain something?”

She spoke doubtfully, as though the question had come on the spur of the moment and against her better judgment; and this timidity gave to her manner a childishness which he thought rather attractive.

“I shall be horribly pained if I have to expose my ignorance,” he replied with a laugh.

“Oh, it is nothing of that sort,” she said quickly. “You will know all about it—everything. But I do not understand in the least. Though perhaps I ought not to ask you——”

“Then do please ask,” he interposed, more gaily than ever. “The explanation shall be very complete, since you will not be able to detect the errors.”

"I want to know," she said, hesitating and knitting her brows in innocent perplexity, "what is a mortgage."

She saw the look of surprise which greeted so unexpected a question. Then for a moment he seemed to frown, as if searching for a sufficiently clear and satisfactory answer.

"Well, you see," he began slowly, "if a man has property—say an estate—and wants money, he—he can borrow by making the estate a security; and the lender cannot lose, because, under certain circumstances, he can take the estate for the money lent."

"Then it is rather a good thing to have a mortgage?" she said with startling inconsequence.

"It is sometimes the best way to raise money, and it is one of the safest ways of investing it."

The subject was not a fortunate one for him. It recalled his disappointments, and cast a momentary gloom upon his thoughts, so that for a while they rode on in silence.

But Hetty did not notice this. Her attention had been attracted elsewhere. They were already in Bristlington street; and stumping down the pavement, with more importance than ever now that he was sacrificing himself for a great principle and the public good, approached her cousin, Job Oswin. She thought she had never seen him look so truculent and vulgar. Would he see her? Could she pass him unobserved? Her doubts were quickly answered, for before they met the Alderman paused in his walk, stared at his relative with the deepest interest, and at last saluted her with a deferential bow.

The girl scarcely bent her head in response, but shame burnt upon her cheek and mounted to her brow.

As to Rumblelow, his mind was so preoccupied that

he did not see the Alderman at all, until, suddenly becoming aware that Hetty had recognised somebody, he hurriedly lifted his hat a little late and without looking round.

The girl noted his thoughtfulness with the keenest mortification, and hastily concluded that the greeting of the Alderman had been an offence to his pride. She was upon the verge of speaking when Rumblelow frankly took up the thread of the conversation.

"I fear I am only too well qualified to explain a mortgage," he said, with an attempt at a laugh, which, however, had no mirth in it. "I am sorry to say Whorbury is by no means free. But I expect you have heard of that."

"I was told something, but I did not quite understand," she faltered.

"Oh, it is very simple. The Rumblelows all spend more than they have. Then they borrow, and in the case of Oakleigh, as you know, my grandfather had to sell."

With this confession of the family failing he in part regained his light-heartedness. Whilst speaking he had turned towards her. As their eyes met he added with a smile—

"But surely it is not for me to regret that?"

"I should like it to be free," she cried with eager enthusiasm. "Old Dr. Podymore said something about the trustees being willing to buy. Would that be better, do you think?"

"You do not quite understand," he replied quietly. "In that case Whorbury would never be mine."

"Oh! not now, of course. But hereafter," she insisted.

"It is not possible to discuss it," he said coldly, setting the matter aside. "There are so many considerations."

They had, by this time, passed out of the town. They felt vexed and angry with themselves and each other, though they scarcely knew why, and the horses, conscious of this change of humour, or because they found themselves so near home, broke into a brisk trot.

A suspicion flashed across his mind that her apparent simplicity was but affectation — that her brain was at work with schemes about business and money, fit only for a lawyer, detestable at any time in a woman, and impossible to one who had been bred a lady.

And indeed, although her questions in reality had meant very little, she was quite as clever as he believed; for all the while she was thinking: "Yes; something might happen to me. Then he would have no land at all, for Oakleigh and everything else would go to Maggie."

The thought gave her absolute pain.

"I cannot ride so fast any longer," she presently gasped. "And I cannot pull him up."

He stopped at once. She had borne it as long as she could, and now he saw that she was very pale and out of breath, and that she pressed her hand against her side.

"Let us wait a minute," he said.

They were already entering the outskirts of Oakleigh. Upon one side of the road stood a large farm building, a sort of waggon-house with tall doors reaching up to a thatched roof. To one of them a small board had been nailed bearing the brief injunction: "Stick no bills." Just below it, as if in derision, some impertinent person had affixed a poster—a white poster with black letters of considerable size, which stared them full in the face. The doors were Hetty's property; and as if to add to the enormity, this outrage had been so recently

committed that the surface of the paper, being plentifully pasted, was still shining wet.

In those simple days the art of advertisement was in its infancy and scarcely understood. A mere handbill, therefore, was a thing of interest, and here was a shameless, glaring sheet of astounding dimensions. Thoroughly indignant, Hetty drew up to the roadside to investigate.

"It appears to be poetry," she murmured, in a tone of doubt.

"It is," agreed John Rumblelow with decision, and began to slowly read aloud, making a pause at the end of each line.

"HAVE YOU SMELT THE EFFLUVIUM IN CONNEGAR LANE? OR, THE ALDERMAN'S MARE'S-NEST.

"Have you smelt the effluvium in Connegar Lane?"

Asked one and another of Alderman O.

"Two hundred horse-power, it comes up from a drain,
And I tell you—well, there!" Said the Alderman: "No.

But I'll go;
For 'tis plain

I *must* smell the *affluvia* in Connegar Lane."

"Have *you* smelt the *affluvia* in Connegar Lane?"

Of one and another asked Alderman O.

"Most disgraceful! The town has a right to complain—
But I'll kick up a shindy and tell the Mayor so;

For I know
After rain,

There'll be pestilence brewing in Connegar Lane."

'Then a XXX pestilence rushed to the brain

And brought on a fever in Alderman O;

And he raved in delirium, crazy, insane.

It was truly remarkable how he did go

On, although,
To explain—

There was only a mare's nest in Connegar Lane.

“Should the Nobility and Gentry of the Municipal Town and Neighbourhood of Bristlington desire the identity of the Alderman under the epithet of “O,” they are respectfully invited to consider that “O,” being the cipher, expresses the signification of nothing, and although the Alderman, by the assumption of ignorance, may impose upon the credulity of the lower orders to obtain their suffrage, such is the ignorance of his habits and manners, and so mean, that no gentleman of education and respectability will touch him with a stick, and the truly refined will hold him in such contempt that for them he may be considered not to exist.

“GOD SAVE THE QUEEN.”

“The leading spirits of Bristlington take themselves very seriously,” laughed John Rumblelow, and he leaned forward to scrape off the offensive placard with his riding-whip. “A little man called Pudsey is the Mayor at the present time—a very decent little fellow, they say, with nothing of the Radical about him—and he has been distinguishing himself lately. You may have seen it in the paper——”

“Oh, no!” Hetty hastily disclaimed any knowledge of the matter. “I rarely read the Bristlington paper.”

“Well, it’s rather funny. Kinton was telling me of it yesterday. He is hugely delighted. He is the Town Clerk, you know. Pudsey called somebody to order who wouldn’t obey, so he vacated the chair and announced that he would not sit again until the offending Councillor submitted. But the other man declares he will never submit. So there is a fine point of dignity, and Kinton won’t help them with a word. You see, he does not want any meetings, because he has to attend. Meanwhile, Bristlington is deeply agitated. No doubt the thing we just read has something to do with it, but I do not quite understand what.”

Thus he rattled on, always as if Bristlington were

some distant region inhabited by strange people, of whom news might occasionally travel as far as Oakleigh and Whorbury. All the while the girl's mind was in a ferment of small thoughts, which arose one after the other to assume an exaggerated and fantastic magnitude. Did he know that John Pudsey was her second cousin, and Alderman "O" her first cousin once removed? Did he feel ashamed of her when he remembered it? Yet, if he did not know it now, he would soon learn.

But in five minutes they were at home standing before the porch. He dismounted and lifted her from her horse; then quite affectionately he put his hand upon her shoulder.

"I will not come in now," he said, quite kindly. "You are very tired. You must rest as long as you can, to be ready for Whorbury to-night."

"Oh, yes! Do come!"

But he would not yield to her entreaty. Yet, after all, it was a relief to her when she heard him ride away. Her heart was ill at ease and full of discontent. More had come to her, greater riches, loftier station, than imagination had ever dreamed of, and yet every half-hour brought something that disturbed her peace and snatched away the joy from her good fortune.

She ran upstairs to her room. A great fire was blazing in readiness for her. She dragged forward a low armchair, and throwing herself upon the hearth-rug, rested her arms upon the seat and hid her face within her hands. He did not care for her. He had snubbed her when she spoke about the mortgage. Then the picture of Job Oswin, so common-looking and self-satisfied as he stood upon the pavement, arose

before her. She sobbed aloud. She wished she had never been born. She wished she were dead. She would never go into Bristlington—not even if she must travel ten miles to another town. In her misery she said she had been happier when she was poor.

But this despondency did not last long. She no longer felt tired, for excitement had overcome her fatigue. What need it matter to her if John Pudsey was a fool, or about a few trumpery lines concerning Job Oswin? Since her uncle's funeral she had never set eyes on either of them except in Bristlington Street, and there she need go no more. Let Maggie go if anybody must. It could not matter about her. In the summer she might be married—the early summer; and as Mrs. Rumblelow—or rather, Mrs. Rumblelow-Oswin——

The retention of the name did not give her satisfaction. She would rather that everything savouring of Oswin might be lost and forgotten. She raised herself from the chair, and as she did so the sleeve of her habit pressed scorching hot against her arm, and she drew back from the intense heat of the fire. Laid out across the foot of her bed she caught sight of the white frock put ready for her to wear that evening. At once her mood was changed. There would be dancing. She loved dancing. She loved the lights, the music, the dresses; and she danced superbly, and knew it.

She had tried on the frock the night before—a white satin, high-waisted and with short sleeves. It was very simple, but it suited her to perfection. The others said so, and as she stood before the mirror she could recognise for herself the striking effectiveness of her dark complexion and masses of black hair. Again everybody would be observing the rich heiress whom John Rumblelow was to marry. A thrill of joy made her

heart beat fast. She would create a sensation as she had done that morning in the field.

It was still quite early in the afternoon, and she had a long leisure before her. Yet the short winter day was already beginning to darken. Very soon Maggie would return and run at once to inquire for her. Or at any moment her mother might come bustling in, full of questions about the hunt and wild talk of the party. She did not want either the one or the other. Maggie! She felt herself beginning to hate the girl whom, only a few weeks before, she had implored to stay with her.

She rose hastily and rang the bell.

She told the maid who answered her summons to bring her some tea at once, and to arrange that no one should disturb her, as she wished to lie down and rest. Then she took off her habit and wrapped herself in a loose dressing-gown. Although it was not dark, she ordered candles to be lighted and the shutters to be drawn. When at last the maid had gone, Hetty rose and noiselessly bolted the door behind her.

The bedroom Hetty had chosen was the largest in Oakleigh Court, with two tall windows and dark oak panelling, which reached up to the ceiling. It had formerly been occupied by Mr. Josiah Oswin, but she refurnished it out of all recognition, and in spite of the expostulations of her mother, took it for herself. To the imagination of Mrs. Oswin it was a gloomy chamber, rendered ghostly by the visitation of death. She could not understand why Hetty would sleep there, she said, and certainly the girl had taken no pains to enlighten her.

Now that she was secure from interruption, Hetty placed a chair in the recess formed by the projection of the fireplace; and, just too high for ordinary reach,

she slid aside a panel, thus disclosing an iron safe built into the wall. This she unlocked and opened, and bringing a small case in her hand, came back and once more sat down by the fire.

It was a proof of Hetty's love of concealment, and also of her force of will, that she had not shown this hiding-place even to Maggie. Josiah Oswin contrived it for himself when he restored the house, and during his last illness discovered it to old Dr. Podymore. But the cunning secrecy of it, far from begetting an impulse to tell, possessed a strange fascination for her. It added to her delight as, pressing her thumb upon the spring, she watched the cover of the case burst open, and the great diamond, which uncle Jos had constituted an heirloom by will, flash in the firelight.

She laid it upon her open palm, turning her hand to and fro at different angles to search for its finest ray. It was truly a magnificent jewel and of the purest water. Uncle Jos got it in India, and it was "as big as a bean," as he was proud to boast. It was set as a small oblong brooch, and he used sometimes to wear it in his cravat, and never tired of pointing it out. "A fortune for a poor man," was his blunt testimony to its great value; and then he would often add that what it cost he had never told a soul, but it was worth twice what he gave.

The girl carefully turned it over and examined the setting—a claw of gold that gripped the stone upon each side. The design appeared scarcely strong enough to secure so rich a treasure. An appalling fear came over her lest some day she might lose it. It was an heirloom. The possession of it carried an unknown weight of responsibility. What would happen if such a thing were lost or stolen? What could be done to

her? She half determined to lock it away in safety; yet only half, for whilst this nervous dread still haunted her imagination, she rose, walked across the room, and stood before the mirror. She held the diamond against her hair, but it was lost amongst the wavy tresses. Then she fastened it upon a velvet ribbon and tied it closely around her throat. It gleamed upon the looking-glass before her, darting forth long sharp points of light, brilliant and pure. It reminded her of a great planet she had seen one evening reflected upon the still waters of the lake below the lawn.

A strange superstition came creeping over her mind. There were jewels reputed to have magic properties which could bring good luck or ill to the possessor. A shiver passed over her, with the thought that this heirloom might have come into her hands charged with fate. Again she took it upon her palm and stood gazing into its clear transparency—half expecting and half in dread lest it might have something to reveal. Then she shook herself free from such fantastic folly. Nobody had ever been more fortunate than Uncle Jos, and the diamond was a portion of the universal good luck that his successes had brought to her.

Upon the ribbon, just as it was, she laid it away in a drawer out of sight. She would put it on herself at the last moment after she was dressed.

CHAPTER III

THE PARTY

THE ladies from Oakleigh were a little late in arriving at Whorbury that evening. Old Dr. Podymore drove over from Bristlington to dine with them and escort his ward upon this important occasion. He was extremely proud of his position as trustee to so large a fortune, and delighted with the engagement. Wherever he was called in—and the practice of so genial an old gentleman would naturally be very extensive—he discussed it with his patient even without waiting to inform himself of her symptoms. “So we are to marry the heiress to young Rumblelow of Whorbury,” he began with a mysterious nod and a smile, which seemed to take credit to himself for masterly treatment of a very delicate case.

As he proudly strutted into the hall at Whorbury with Hetty upon his arm, and Mrs. Oswin and Maggie following close behind, his goffered shirt-front looked a little crisper than usual, and his cheek a shade more rubicund, but there was nothing to distinguish his holiday from his everyday attire. The girl wore a broad black sash, and the velvet with the great diamond was around her throat.

Old Squire Rumblelow hastened forward to welcome them.

“Just in time,” he cried lustily, “to stand up for a quadrille.”

Indeed, there was not a moment to spare. The fiddlers, perched on a large table in the corner, were busy tuning, and couples already went chasing each other around the room in anxiety to find a suitable *vis-à-vis* or even a vacancy in one of the rapidly forming squares. John Rumblelow at once claimed Hetty. Old Dr. Podymore, bowing gallantly, offered his arm to Mrs. Oswin. So the old Squire took Maggie, captured a cruising couple, and made their set complete.

Now, the quadrille in those days was not the degenerate alternate shuffle and twirl which we have witnessed in later times. The demoralisation of dancing began with the prevalence of trousers. So long as a man wore breeches and hose all went well, and even in highlows he was not completely lost. He still took a proper pride in his calves, and danced steps. And to note the conscientious art of old Dr. Podymore, as he skipped to and fro, with a one-two-three and one-two-three, and how he pointed his toe and arched his instep, and exhibited a proper shapeliness from ankle to knee, if not a liberal education, was at least a lesson to any man. There was such thoroughness and finish in all he did, such lightness, you might think he had springs in his soles, and such stately urbanity whenever he bowed as he set to his partner—although he could no longer bend, but only double at the hinge—that it was inspiration to little Mrs. Oswin, who happened to be one of those persons, of whom there are many, who, conscious of weight, if considered by a vulgar avoirdupois standard, nevertheless pride themselves upon being light and fairy-like “upon their feet.”

Nor was this without reason. Inflated with delight

and radiant with enjoyment, she gracefully held forth her black satin skirt between fingers and thumbs, displaying the neatest white-stockinged foot and shoe secured with crossed elastic, and, with her head upon one side, she dapped her one-two-three like india-rubber. Such indeed was her enthusiasm, that even when at rest she still went on dapping in simple, unconscious mimicry of the other dancers, marking time with such precision that when her turn came round again she dapped in upon the very stroke of the music.

This childish simplicity and complete abandonment to the joy of the moment attracted so much attention, and recommended her so strongly, that during the rest of the evening she was never lacking a partner for more than five minutes, except upon one occasion, which shall hereafter be recorded.

John Rumblelow watched her attentively. He had never noticed it before, and it startled him to mark how close was the family likeness between her and Hetty. One of those thoughts, distressing and unaccountable, which seem to come from nowhere, flashed upon his mind. Perhaps even she had been thin and slight when she was young. Would his future wife, by middle age, become plump and podgy like that?

"What are you thinking about?" asked Hetty, close to his ear.

But just then the set was finished. The music stopped. He offered her his arm, and they commenced a solemn promenade around the hall. Of course, such a calamity was not possible. But the thought had given him a turn.

The girl was gayer than he had ever seen her. She glanced around the lofty walls. Upon every side were portraits of Rumblelows. Rumblelows who had been

admirals; Rumblelows who had been generals; a Doctor of Divinity, with a fat chowl and red snub-nose; and Rumblelows who had been nothing at all;—they were all there. The candles were high, and lighted them well. Hetty's face also became illuminated as she looked up, and her lips were reverently parted. She divined the truth that lies hidden behind cocked hats and periwigs. This was the real thing. No one could see and doubt. At times, beautiful as it was, she had suffered a suspicion about Oakleigh. Now she felt the reason of it. The heraldry that Uncle Jos had caused to be carved above the mantelpieces was as fine as anything at Whorbury, but there were no portraits there.

"Let us sit down," she said, drawing him towards the seclusion of a window seat.

The musicians were tuning again for the Redowa. Nobody came near to disturb them, and when the dancing began they were as free to talk as if they had been alone.

"You are too tired to want to do much," he said, placing a cushion behind her shoulders before she settled comfortably in the corner. "Did you have a good rest?"

"None whatever, but it is not that; I would much rather sit here with you."

"What have you been doing, then?"

"Exciting myself about this evening."

He shook his head, half in jest and half in earnest.

"You wear yourself out," he said.

"Ought I not to be glad, then, at the thought of coming to my future home? I do not believe you ever think about it. You just live in the present moment, and give way to no romance."

She fixed her eyes steadily upon him. The words,

although lightly spoken, were of the nature of an accusation, and he knew that they were true. There was no romance in his engagement, but something in her manner touched him, and an unexpected tenderness crept into his heart. In the half-gloom of the window-seat, with dark oaken shutters above, and the crimson cushion throwing into relief the delicate lines of her neck as it rose out of the soft folds of snowy muslin, her beauty was more striking than ever. Even her voice, so quiet and subdued for the time being, possessed a charm before unknown to him. Hitherto her vivacity had repelled him. He had scarcely realised how small and slight she was. But now in her eyes he discovered something helpless, feminine, and dependent. And she was to be his wife.

He leaned forward—closer to her—and his voice sank into a whisper.

“Why should I quarrel with the present,” he asked, “since we have it and all the future too? This, at least, is not the moment to begin.”

Her ear was quick to detect the change in his manner. A thrill of joy quickened her blood, a tremulous delight in the perception that he was not indifferent to her. It was the triumph of herself, whereas before she had only known the triumph of her ambition. She also spoke quite softly, and with hesitation, as if shyly confiding a love secret.

“Will you promise not to laugh if I tell you one thing I did this afternoon?”

“I will not even smile if I am not to.”

“Well, I sat down by the fire. I locked myself in. I took out the great diamond my uncle left me—but, after all, I will not tell you.”

"It would be heartless to stop now. By the way, is that the diamond?"

She quickly raised her fingers, and detaching the gem from the ribbon, held it towards him.

"I meant to show it to you," she said.

"It is a wonderful stone—the best I have ever seen," he exclaimed in admiration, as he examined it closely. "But please go on telling me," he added, without looking up.

"You know there are crystals in which people can see things?"

She asked the question with an affectation of childishness, but evidently in her heart she held this belief in some respect.

"I have heard of such a thing. But this is sorcery. I shall believe you are a witch."

"Never mind. As I held the diamond in my hand, I became aware—I cannot tell you how, but I was quite certain of it—that it possessed this magic power. I demanded to see the man who loves me."

She paused. Her black eyes, fixed intently upon him, were full of witchery. Her manner was intensely earnest, and still she waited for him to speak.

"Yes; and then?"

"Then came the mysterious part of it. You did not come."

She gave a low, mischievous laugh. It was not altogether mirthful, and as it died away she again became serious. In her left hand she held a fan trimmed with white feathers, and she tapped upon his arm to command his close attention.

"I am still certain of the magic property of the stone, so now you know what you have to explain," she told him gravely.

"I have every confidence in the stone, too. There must have been something missing in the sorcery," he said, falling in with her humour, and shaking his head with mock seriousness.

He was wearing a dark blue coat, and he placed the brooch against his sleeve.

"Let me try," he said. "I conjure up the image of the man who loves to distraction Henrietta Oswin, of Oakleigh, spinster. Look! There I am, you see, as plain as life."

And the girl, leaning forward, could discern the reflection of his face upon one of the facets of the diamond.

"I just make out something," she said carelessly, and looking away at once. "Do you feel the same confidence now?"

"More than ever," he cried.

All the time whilst they had been talking, a crowd of thoughts rushed hurrying through his brain. She was certainly attractive—quite strikingly so to-night—and she was clever, quick, and entertaining, more so than nine-tenths of the girls he had ever met. When they were married, and every interest in life was thus made mutual, all would be well. He should learn to love her. Even now, to-night, he did love her.

"When *will* you make Whorbury your home? Don't let it be long, Hetty. Let us marry as soon as we can," he whispered with growing warmth of emotion.

"Do you want it to be soon?"

"Very much."

"I will very shortly let you know."

Her manner was so tender and confidential, so free from the eager restlessness which had so often worried him, that his heart felt satisfied. They were to be very

happy, and everything would be well. Just then the dancing came to an end, and people went hurrying about the hall in all directions. The movement broke in upon the confidential quiet of their talk. He handed her the diamond and she put it back upon the ribbon at once; so quickly, and with such ease, that he could not help saying—

“Are you quite sure it is safe? Are you not afraid of losing it?”

“Horribly afraid. It is an heirloom, too. Just think of informing little Kinton that it was gone. What could they do?”

“I don’t know. One would rather give twice the value than that anything should happen to a trust of that sort.”

“It is worth an immense sum. I was thinking about it only this afternoon. But what *could* they do? Now, suppose I wanted money very badly for some urgent need—something known only to myself, and secret. If I were to sell it, nobody could be the wiser. It would not be missed until I was dead; then there would be a nine days’ wonder and a mystery. I do not see how calling it an heirloom can make it secure.”

She looked up at him as if in expectation that he would explain. But this sort of thing, even when spoken in joke, jarred upon his sensibilities. It irritated him, just as her anxiety about the mortgage had done. It seemed to him that the mind of a lady should not stoop to consider and trifle even with such imaginary possibilities. Thus he was rudely awakened from that passing dream of love.

“I suppose it is a question of honour,” he answered coldly.

“Yes, yes, of course,” she insisted. “I only meant I can see nothing to prevent it.”

"No doubt it might be done, if——"

"Exactly. It might be done——"

With quite startling suddenness a wild strain of concerted music burst out upon the other side of the window, close behind their heads. The instruments were uncommon and difficult of identification, but amidst the din a drum, a horn, several Jew's-harps, a fiddle, and some kitchen utensils of the tin-kettle order could clearly be distinguished. There were also vocalists, and as every musician sang or played his loudest, the effect was excellent. The people crowded round to listen.

*"And a-mumming we will go—will go.
And a-mumming we will go——"*

"The mummers!" cried everybody as if in astonishment, although it was the likeliest thing in the world, and Mrs. Oswin clapped her hands.

"Open the door, somebody. Let 'em come in and show the best sport they can," cried old Squire Jack heartily.

Straightway the door was flung open, and a troop of fantastic figures filed into the hall. Some of them wore helmets of pasteboard, and others had turned down the brims and thrust up the crowns of their billycock hats, making them tall and conical; but all were trimmed with sprigs of glistening holly, and adorned with long, flowing ribbons of many colours. Two were attired as women, and many of the others were saints. But the saints were martial, and St. George wore a complete suit of pasteboard armour, plentifully bedecked with rosettes and festoons both red and white. Some wore masks, but no disguises could save them from recognition by people of the neighbourhood. The pair of lamb's-wool hose and knee-breeches that supported the enormous

scales and the gigantic wings and tail of the dragon, could contain nothing on earth but the crooked legs of little John Baker. But John had been a mummer all his life, and, although now stiff and a little short of memory, made a most appropriate dragon, the more so, as must be admitted, because he was gifted with a tenor voice, small, but sweet and reliable to lead off the singing.

The guests drew back to make room, but the mummers, as if haste were a matter of life and death, were already dancing around and singing :

*“ And a-mumming we will go—will go—
And a-mumming we will go.”*

Then from amongst them stepped forth old Father Christmas, with his staff and long, snowy beard :

*“ Here come I, old Father Christmas,
Welcome or welcome not,
I hope poor old Father Christmas
Will never be forgot.”*

He recited some dozen lines of doggerel, called upon Dame Dolly to “stand forth and clear the way,” and his part was done. She called upon the fool. He called upon the four knights of the British Isles, and they upon their patron saint :

“ Stand forth, St. George, our champion, and clear the way.”

As it appeared from his own estimate of his past performances, there was nobody more capable than St. George of fulfilling that command. Backwards and forwards he strutted, waving his sword of silvered lath and boasting of what he had done :

*“ Far have I roamed, oft have I fought, and never do I rest.
'Tis my delight to defend the right and succour the oppressed.
And now I'll slay the Dragon bold——”*

But the Dragon was not backward. Hardly were the words spoken than the little legs of John Baker hurried to the front, and the tenor voice, a trifle thin and cracked in two places, uttered the most ferocious threats. He called St. George an English dog, snapped his teeth and said he would eat him; and as, to equalise the combat, the Dragon was armed with a sword, it appeared very likely.

Well, they fought in the most determined manner, click-clack, click-clack, until the lath swords positively emitted sparks. But at last St. George struck the Dragon such a blow upon the pasteboard that there was nothing left him but to die and leave the saint to go back to his boasting.

Then St. Patrick, St. Andrew and St. David each in turn cleared the way by handsomely killing his man; and then a tall Saracen stepped forward with a great piece of holly in his turban.

"Who the devil is that playing Saladin?" asked old Squire Jack of his grandson. "I don't know that man. That's not a Whorbury man."

And during the rest of the performance he kept repeating the question to one and another with growing irritability because nobody was able to answer it.

"Who is it, Podymore?" he inquired, turning sharply to the little doctor. "The fellow is carrot-headed. I know no man in Whorbury with a red head."

He spoke resentfully, as if some interloper had come into the house under a false pretence. In a man of such careless hospitality this may seem remarkable, but with all his open-handedness old Squire Jack was not one with whom it was wise to take a liberty.

"Do *you* know who it is, Kinton?" he asked anxiously—"that chap with the ginger poll."

"I do not," was the decisive reply.

"Just step this way. Just one word."

He button-holed the little lawyer and led him off into a small room opening into the hall.

"Kineton," he said with a genial touch of pleasantry in his tone, "I'm open to bet ten to one that a brace of bailiffs has sneaked in with the mummers."

Mr. Kineton did not accept the offer. It was as much as he could do to keep his temper.

"But surely you know whether a writ has been served upon you!" he cried, holding up both hands in horror.

"Now you mention it," reflected the old man affably, "a fellow did shove something in my hand, just as I was riding away. It's in my red coat pocket, I think—unless it is there."

With a quick gesture he pointed to a small side-table strewn with papers and letters thrown back in confusion. The lawyer stepped forward to make a rapid search.

"But bless my heart! Don't you open your letters, Squire Rumblelow?" he cried, staring in blank astonishment; for at least one half of the wafers were still unbroken.

"Not unless I know the handwriting," replied the old sportsman in the tone of a man who disclaims a folly. "But I must get back. Just see what you can find, Kineton, and deal with it—deal with it."

Thus relieved of all responsibility, old Squire Jack returned to his guests with a light heart. He had never deluded himself with the idea that business did not require attention, but having now overtaken all arrears of correspondence, his conscious was at rest.

The party still proceeded with the greatest sobriety and decorum until shortly after supper, when, with some ceremony, a great punch-bowl, a basket of lemons, a

basin of sugar and a steaming kettle were brought into the hall. The kettle was set upon the fire in readiness, whilst the old gentleman, with a beaming countenance, squeezed his lemons, measured his sugar, and poured in his rum. At the brewing of punch he was an adept; and it was an ancient custom in Whorbury that upon Christmas Eve everyone in the house should partake.

Very soon he was busy ladling the steaming mixture. A delightful bouquet filled the air, each tongue was loosened and there arose a charm of voices chattering altogether as the birds sing in May.

The Squire glanced around to see that everyone was supplied. The butler standing by with a tray of glasses for the servants' hall took this opportunity to whisper a word in his master's ear.

"There be two fellars out there, came with the mummings, sir, an' they won't go."

"Then they must stay."

"But 'tis a couple of rough fellars, sir. An' they do sit down, and look round, as if they do think the place do belong to 'em," remonstrated the servant.

"Ah! 'Tis a fancy I have before now cherished myself," laughed the Squire with sympathetic cheerfulness. "Take them out a glass of punch apiece."

From this time a complete change came over the spirit of the party, which, beginning as a solemnity, now developed into a romp. They played "Puss in the corner," "Blind man's buff" and the roundest of round games with forfeits. But above the din and laughter of the fun, as if she were everywhere at once, from all sides came the clear staccato of little Mrs. Oswin. She talked to everybody and took one and all into her confidence. Impressed by the baronial magnificence of Whorbury Hall, she became most communicative upon

the subject of her own ancestry, claiming descent from the noblest houses of ancient Spain. She was merry, serious, frank and confidential all at once and in the utmost confusion; and this versatility made her very popular.

"Now, then," cried old Squire Jack; "we'll have the cushion dance. Draw round for the cushion dance."

This dance, familiar enough when he was young, had by this time fallen into disuse and become almost forgotten. But Squire Rumblelow always insisted upon its performance at the Whorbury Christmas party. He picked up the cushion against which Hetty had leaned and pitched it to John. "Take and begin!" he cried.

The dancers, an equal number of ladies and gentlemen, were drawn up in a circle as if they were going to play "Kiss in the ring." There was a deal of laughing and whispering as John Rumblelow, hugging a cushion, skipped around, singing all the time with great gravity—

"Oh, do you know the muffin man—the muffin man—the muffin man?"

Oh, do you know the muffin man who lives in Drury Lane?"

And the circle, all the while revolving, responded like a full choir in the performance of an anthem.

"Oh yes, we know the muffin man—the muffin man—the muffin man;"

Oh yes, we know the muffin man who lives in Drury Lane."

As they stopped, John Rumblelow laid the cushion upon the floor at Hetty's feet. She knelt upon it, and he kissed her. Then with the utmost exultation they all sang together—

"We all know the muffin man—the muffin man—the muffin man;"

We all know the muffin man who lives in Drury Lane."

This universal acquaintance with the muffin man being satisfactorily established, John Rumblelow withdrew and Hetty was left with the cushion. But she got out of it easily by choosing in her turn old Dr. Podymore, who chose Maggie, who contented herself with little Lawyer Kineton, who had returned from his examination of the Rumblelow documents as soon as the punch was ready ; and so, amidst much mysterious whispering and nodding on the part of the dancers, the game went on, the circle narrowing as the performers gradually fell out.

Whilst this tomfoolery was engaging the attention of everybody, as the merriment rose to its noisiest, Hetty returned to the window corner and sat there alone. She expected John Rumblelow would follow her, but he remained talking in the little group which she had left. She saw him stroll to the other end of the hall with Margaret Lane, and beside the open fireplace they stopped. There was a roaring fire. The flames leapt up ; the firelight danced upon the girl's white frock as she stood looking down upon the burning logs, with one hand raised to the high mantelshelf and one foot upon the long back of an andiron which had been dragged out from the hearth.

They were making very merry together. He was talking in his most light-hearted manner, and now and again the girl glanced up at him and laughed. Not even the slightest movement escaped the eager observation of Hetty Oswin as she sat in her solitude, leaning forward with her dark eyes fixed intently upon them.

Maggie drew away from the fireplace, and talking with animation, stood with her hands behind her back. How tall she looked, how upright ! Her head and face

glowed with a colour both rich and delicate against the sombre brown of the dark panelling. Hetty felt the charm of that graceful figure, of the well-formed throat, the neck so fair that it melted into the white muslin folded across the shoulders. Oh, yes! Maggie knew how to pose, though she had not the prettiest face in the world—nobody could think that. Yet to-night Maggie looked almost beautiful—and, for all her affectations of shyness, was speaking frequently, as if with enthusiasm. And John Rumblelow kept laughing too. What could the fool find to laugh at? Maggie, at any rate, had no more wit than an owl. What could they be talking about—all this age? Would they never have finished? Could he not see that she was left alone? These few minutes seemed like a century, they were so full of a sudden madness of envy and jealousy. And this was the girl upon whom she had lavished favours! She felt as if she hated Maggie the more because of the benefits bestowed upon her.

She could endure it no longer. She must at once break up this very engrossing conversation.

She rose quickly to cross to the fireplace. But at that moment the number of the dancers had dwindled to two. She had before noticed a deal of whispering without understanding it, but now the pith and marrow of the conspiracy was clearly disclosed. Her mother was solemnly kneeling upon the cushion. And to see old Squire Jack kiss the widow, as he did upon both cheeks in the most sportsmanlike manner, was for many people the crowning delight of the evening's entertainment.

She hurried on and went up to Maggie.

"It must be time to go," she said, and her eyes gleamed with anger although there was a smile upon her lips.

John Rumblelow turned towards her at once. "Not one bit of it," he laughed. "All this foolery is over. They are going to dance again. Come along."

He offered her his arm; but she would not dance. He felt vexed to find her hurt, as he supposed, about her mother; and he hated all that sort of nonsense himself. He led her back to the window.

"You thought the other day that my cousin was reserved. She seemed to have a great deal to say to you just now," she said with an air of false pleasantry which did not in the least conceal her vexation.

"She had," he answered with a smile. "We have found a subject at last. She was singing your praises."

"That must have reassured you," she laughed. "Bring back the cushion and let us sit down again."

Her eyes followed him eagerly as he went to do her bidding, and sparkled with eager anticipation and delight as he arranged the corner for her comfort. But her quick sensibility found no response in his manner. He was politely kind, but his attention revealed neither passion nor tenderness. She watched in vain for a rekindling of the warmth that had marked their intercourse an hour or two ago. It scarcely sounds a subject for tragedy, but Hetty Oswin was wildly in love with the man she was to marry.

CHAPTER IV

BLUE HACKLES

IT was early morning before the Squire's party, much against his wishes, was brought to an end by the departure of the guests. Still under the protection of old Dr. Podymore, the three ladies of Oakleigh arrived at home in safety, and, as they all declared, without feeling fatigued. They had never felt so wide awake and so little in need of rest. Yet when the most fatherly of trustees had left them, not without serious admonitions to make haste to bed, they were very glad to say "Good-night" to each other and retire to their respective rooms.

As to little Mrs. Oswin, her brain was the battlefield of the wildest perplexity. She could not decide between the comparative merits of old Dr. Podymore and the Squire of Whorbury. Sometimes one seemed to obtain the advantage, and then the other. Certainly Squire Rumblelow was of higher social position, but then old Dr. Podymore was so very attentive. And he was the more graceful dancer of the two. Yet the Squire was to be the father-in-law of Hetty, and there was a fitness in that. Moreover, he had kissed her upon both cheeks, and that might be held to compromise and restrict her choice. But Dr. Podymore was somewhat the younger man, and, after all—— In spite of these distractions,

so readily did the good woman's mind respond to the suggestions of circumstance, that no sooner was her head upon the pillow than she fell asleep.

But Hetty remained long in a whirl of thought and emotion. The evening had no more been a success than the day, and the cause of failure was in herself. Always just as happiness seemed within her reach, she found she could only touch it with her finger-tips. She snatched off the diamond, placed it hastily in its case without stopping even a moment to glance at it, and thrust it out of sight. It had brought discomfort by some strange process which she could not understand. Whilst she was speaking of it she had felt John Rumblelow suddenly become quite proud and cold. Perhaps he thought she was boasting of its great value. She could never get hold of what he felt and thought. They had been engaged only a week, but already her heart cried out that the engagement would never come to anything, unless—unless they could be married almost at once—before there was time for any misfortune to befall. In common decency he could not change, say, in three months; and having spoken of an early marriage, he must quickly urge it again. Why should it not be in the spring? A tumult of passions—love, jealousy, fear—made her mind alert to every little possibility that could render her more secure. The moment everything was arranged she would tell old Podymore and little Kineton—indeed, she might consult them and take their advice beforehand. For she would never consent to part with him. It would break her heart. It would kill her with shame. And besides, she loved him. She kept telling herself, half in fear, that she loved him.

How her head throbbed! And there was a buzzing in

her ears. Yet she was not tired. She could have gone on for hours longer if only he sat by her side and talked to her. A recollection of those few exultant moments in the window corner flashed across her mind, and at once her mood changed. He must love her—love her with all his heart, now that they were to be together so often—if—unless—unless some other woman were to come between them.

She rose suddenly—her teeth set, her fists clenched—and strode across the room.

As she passed she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and stopped. In the half light and strange cross shadows of the two candles upon her dressing-table, the wild look upon the face startled her. The eyes were larger than ever, and there were dark circles underneath. The cheeks seemed to have become thinner and more pallid, the forehead looked waxy, and of a dusky green.

Surely this could not really and truly be herself! It was someone unknown, someone much older, and—it made her shiver to look at it—someone quite ugly. She stood fascinated, staring at this vision in astonishment and horror, until at last, with an effort of will, she turned away in haste, and trembling from head to foot, glanced in uncertainty around the room, half expecting in the gloom to meet again with the ghost of herself. Then she made haste, so that she might put out the lights and hide in darkness.

But on the following day there was consternation in Oakleigh.

Hetty was so overcome with fatigue that she did not get up, although John Rumblelow was to come over in the afternoon. Mrs. Oswin, bustling around in great excitement, found her daughter really ill, and predicting

every complaint known to pathology, and some which had not so far received recognition of science, she sent post-haste for Dr. Podymore.

"Ah, my poor lamb!" she sobbed. "It will be the small-pox, and she shall be an angel like the rest. Or if not, she will have the marks all over her poor face to the grave. There was a young lady, when I was a girl in short frocks, and she had the St. Anthony's fire, and she was to be married too; but she caught a cold from thin shoes at a missionary meeting, and then she died before she was married, although it was only the next week. And the young man lived in Durham, where his brother was a corn-dealer, and what made it all the more sad, that one—no, that other one—took an affection and was taken in three days, without a will, and that one, he left that other one ten thousand pounds."

But by this time little Mrs. Oswin, completely overcome, stopped to wipe away the tears that ran trickling down her cheeks.

The prognosis of the doctor, however, proved more favourable.

He recommended complete rest for a few days, with great care, and persevering tonic treatment. Thus, as it was impossible for Hetty to get up, even if she had wished to, and as Mrs. Oswin could weep nowhere so beneficially as at the bedside, it fell to the lot of Maggie to receive John Rumblelow and explain to him the state of affairs.

The shyness which formerly made her avoid him or kept her silent in his presence had passed away. Although the news of Hetty's engagement came upon her as a painful surprise, she had never been so vain as to suppose that she occupied one moment of his serious

thoughts. So clearly had she recognised the folly of the sentiment which her heart secretly cherished that she went in fear lest a word or look might make it suspected. But now that he was to marry Hetty all her fears vanished. Even to weave around him imaginary and idle romance was no longer possible—in theory at least; and Maggie's life had been so altogether simple that she would have shuddered to find herself doing so in fact.

So Maggie went down to the great dining-room, the room in which her uncle's will was read, and found John Rumblelow sitting in the armchair upon one side of the fireplace. Her step was light, and he so preoccupied with his thoughts that she surprised him with his head bent and resting upon his hand. As he rose and came towards her she could not help noticing the worried and anxious look upon his face; but news of bailiffs at Whorbury had not yet been brought to Oakleigh, and she saw only distress at finding Hetty unwell.

At once she became sympathetic, and a new charm was added to her voice and manner. She repeated the reassuring phrases of old Dr. Podymore—but still, it would certainly be a few days before Hetty could be about again. He listened with grave attention, and solemnly bowed acceptance of this inevitable misfortune. But he did not immediately sit down, although he showed no inclination to take his leave.

He returned at once to the old subject which they had in common.

“Do you begin fishing very early in the season?” he suddenly asked her.

“We used to brave the most bitter days of March,” she said, laughing at the recollection of some of them. “Wind and rain made no difference to my uncle, and

so it made no difference to me. Sometimes we got drenched; sometimes we were almost blown into the water. One of the best days we ever had was in a driving snowstorm. My uncle rather believed in that sort of day, and I always loved the wind and rain."

"Do you tie your own flies?"

"Oh, no. He always tied me some. The keeper used to rear chickens on purpose for the hackles, and he was always getting feathers and things."

"It is a little difficult to get the true colour in hackles," he agreed.

"There are bagsful of them out there now," she said quickly, "and all sorts of other things that he collected—unless the moths have eaten them."

"You will have to learn to tie them up now."

"I scarcely suppose I shall go out."

"But why not? Where are the things? Let me show you. I will set you up for the whole season."

He spoke with so keen an interest that she felt it impossible to refuse.

"Everything was kept in the summer-house," she answered in some doubt. "But I could run and fetch some of it, if you will wait a few minutes."

"I will come with you," he cried gaily, and sprang to the door and opened it for her to pass out.

She glanced out of the hall window. It was a humid winter day, and the trees at the bottom of the lawn looked dim through the grey mist. She snatched up a shawl that was lying upon the table and threw it over her head and shoulders. Then they walked together along the terrace and through the shrubbery to the old summer-house, the brown roof of which now peered between the leafless branches.

She lifted the lid of the oak chest, upon which she

stood to take down her rod on the evening of her father's departure when Hetty made her promise to stay at Oakleigh, and handed him the strange medley of silks, feathers, and fur, the merit of which none but an angler can truly appreciate. Since that day she had never entered the place, and the scruples that then disturbed her mind now came back with redoubled force. She had received no news of her father; but indeed she knew that would not be possible for many weeks. And yet her conscience began to accuse her, because of this inevitable ignorance of his safety. She might have gone with him, and then——

A sadness fell upon her, in the belief that her soul could perceive a subtle connection between her breach of duty and the unhappiness which had since crept into her heart. Argue with herself as she would that nothing had happened, she knew that a calamity had befallen, and the whole dull weight came crushing upon her during the minute that John Rumblelow stood there in silence turning over the strange treasures of poor Uncle Jos's angling bag. Of a sudden her mind was made up that she must go away. She would never stay to see them married. And Hetty had no need of her now. With this determination she came also to a quick decision that she would go to her father. It would be easy to learn of Lawyer Kinton the place where his allowance was to be paid, and there, at least very shortly, he might certainly be found.

"Do you know anything about Australia, Mr. Rumblelow?" she asked timidly and without looking at him, yet with an eagerness that gave unexpected importance to the question.

"Very little," he admitted. "If I wanted to learn something I should undoubtedly have to come to you."

"You would be disappointed. Of course, my uncle used to talk of it a good deal, but chiefly about the diggings, or driving cattle, or being away with sheep on lonely stations for months together. He only thought of the wild life and of successful speculations. One might have supposed that Australia was peopled only with men. Yet to hear him always made me want to go there."

He quickly laid down a feather he had been holding up to the light of the window and turned towards her.

"But you do not dream of going away?" he said, looking at her attentively all the while; for he felt that she was in earnest, and that she must be thinking of Hetty's marriage.

She also caught a glimpse of the thought passing through his mind, and it disturbed her so that her voice faltered as she replied—

"I—I wish to do so." She stammered and blushed in her confusion. "I mean—that is—I felt at the time I ought to go with my father. I might be of use to him. I said so, but they overruled me—and—and Hetty wanted me. But since then the desire has grown—until now——"

"But it is quite impracticable," he interrupted. "Your friends could never for one moment allow it." His manner was almost peremptory, but it was kind, and tacitly included himself amongst those entitled by right to protect her from such folly.

More clearly than ever she saw that it would be impossible to stay at Oakleigh, and as that feeling increased she gained her self-control.

"Nobody could urge a syllable against it," she said with the firmness that comes of conviction. "It is only natural; and besides, it comes to me as a duty."

He only shook his head. He had heard of Mr. Peter Lane, but, of course, it was altogether out of the question to speak of that. He would have a word with Podymore and Kinton, and they must use their influence.

"Do you know, I have always wanted to go," she went on; "no doubt that was from hearing so much about it. My uncle's stories fascinated me even when I was a child; and since then I have often thought, if I were a man and poor, I would never stay in England. I believe I could revel in a hard life, just as I love the wind and rain."

"But you would find it very different to what you imagine."

"Very likely," she said almost sadly, "but nothing but experience will destroy the illusion."

"But you would have to wait some time, to hear from your father that he is in a position to receive you."

She knew that he was putting her off, and she let the matter drop as regards herself.

"If I were a man," she presently went on, "I should not like to have everything easy for me—at least, not in the beginning. I should like to overcome something for myself. My poor uncle was so proud of what he had done. He had very few advantages, and people used to smile, but for the most part they were proud only of what had been done for them. That was one of the things he used to say. I should think, to be—to be a gentleman born, and—and educated—and then to have reverses and do as my uncle did—I should think it must be glorious. I wish my father could have done it; I should have worshipped him."

As she talked her face glowed with enthusiasm. In the approaching dusk of that winter afternoon, now fast closing around them, he saw her glorified as by a light

of poetry and romance. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks warm, and her whole countenance animated by the ardour of her delight in this ideal, which, if not of the loftiest, was noble, inasmuch as mingled with it was nothing mean or sordid.

And he had dreamed of this very thing, and cast the impulse aside in favour of an alternative which in a week had become irksome to him. If she had only said this before, when he was wavering! But then, she had never a word for him, and now she seemed to be speaking as if she had known his heart. Yet he saw that she had only added the graces of her father to the sturdiness of the late Josiah Oswin.

"It is chilly out here," she said quickly and with a shiver. "Let us carry the things in by the fire. I should think Hetty had better send them over to Whorbury."

This unconscious recognition that Hetty was the owner of even the trifling things of Oakleigh pained him to the quick. The rubbish might be his, he felt sadly, because she was also the proprietress of himself.

"I am afraid you have got very cold," he said anxiously, as they walked back together to the house.

Little Mrs. Oswin, preparing to light candles in Hetty's bedroom, was drawing down the blinds as they passed by.

"Why can Maggie have taken Mr. Rumblelow to the summer-house?" she said in great surprise.

Hetty quickly lifted her head from the pillow.

"Have they been in the summer-house? When did they go? How long have they stayed there?"

In the excitement she would have risen, but her mother prevented her; and for hours afterwards, and through the long winter night, she lay in a fever of jealousy, distressed with dreams of imaginary love-making between John Rumblelow and Margaret Lane.

CHAPTER V
THE DIAMOND

MORE than a week passed, and New Year's Day had come and gone before Hetty was well enough to get up, and even then she was only permitted to recline in an easy-chair before the fire without leaving the room. For news of the outside world—and the doings of Bristlington at that time assumed before her mind an exaggerated importance—she relied chiefly upon the weekly paper, supplemented by the reports of Bracher, who daily made excursions of discovery into the town.

From these sources she learnt that the offensive placard which caused her so much shame and annoyance had driven Alderman Oswin almost out of his mind. That he walked about the streets, openly declaring that it had been written by Mr. Harry Crickshaw, and he would have the law of him. That Mr. Harry Crickshaw, while scorning to deny such an absurd and unjustifiable imputation, affirmed that Job Oswin was no gentleman, and he would make him prove his words. That the Alderman, having discovered the printer in Bristol who printed the scurrilous anonymous production, fully intended to do so. That the printer had never heard the name, but would recognise the person of the individual who brought the manuscript. That the Alderman had forgiven the

printer in consideration of his making a journey to Bristlington at his own expense to view and identify the supposed culprit, but that, having carefully observed Mr. Harry Crickshaw upon his doorstep, the printer emphatically shook his head, and denied that this was at all like the man. "A little, buncy man, with fair hair," said the printer, a description which seemed to point to John Pudsey himself. "Only," as Bracher reflected, with a wise wag of his head, "Mr. John Pudsey was never heard to write portry, though Mr. Harry Crickshaw have been known before to indulge that way."

"He looks an impertinent fellow," said Hetty angrily. "Ask me for a cheque the next time you go in, Bracher, to pay his account. When anything is wanted hereafter first let me know."

But the fact remained that there was talk of two law-suits in Bristlington, the one to be brought against Mr. Harry Crickshaw for writing a libellous bill, and the other against Mr. Alderman Oswin for saying that Mr. Harry Crickshaw had written that disgraceful document.

These things kept Hetty in constant agitation. She foresaw two trials, with numerous cross-examinations of Job Oswin, lasting for hours, and filling columns of the local press. Certain that he would make a fool of himself, she imagined the whole countryside convulsed with laughter, and everybody whispering that the Alderman was a near relative of the rich heiress of Oakleigh, who was to marry young Squire Rumblelow. The anticipation of this filled her with a restless craving for the latest information; and although the reports of Bracher were sometimes contradictory, because he conversed freely and sympathised with both parties, she accepted with the fullest confidence whatever in them was unpleasant.

Then the first Monday in the month passed by, but John Pudsey did not sit, and soon it was observed that the minds of the ratepayers, even amongst his own supporters, were becoming a little restless, lest the ancient constitution of Bristlington should be undermined for want of an authority to make the Borough rate. Householders who had grumbled at it all their lives could not help asking in alarm, "But what about the Borough rate?" Nor was this attitude so inconsistent as at the first glance it may appear, since it is not in the making but only in the collection that a rate becomes personally offensive, and no reformer has ever contemplated that his fellow-burgesses should not pay rates.

Thus it happened that, early one afternoon, Bracher carried up the paper with greater solemnity than ever.

"There's a little something this week about Mr. John Pudsey, Miss," he ventured to remark, as he handed it to Hetty upon his silver salver.

"What is it?" she asked irritably, as she hastily unfolded the sheet.

"Portry, Miss," replied Bracher, with resignation. "But Mr. Pudsey says, Miss, that he does not mind at all for himself. What pains 'im is the letting down of the Civic Chair—calling 'im golden-spangled, Miss, you'll see; an' the gown, Miss—calling 'im an 'en."

Bracher deferentially withdrew, and sure enough, as he had predicted, Hetty saw at once, at the top of the column, in large type:—

"THE LAY OF THE LITTLE RED BANTAM.

"Joan Pudsey was a bantam bold,
A golden-spangled hen to wit.
The Corporation eggs got cold
Because Joan Pudsey would not sit.

FORTUNE'S DARLING

"The good the Council incubates
 Ne'er hatched to public benefit ;
 The Borough could not levy rates
 Because Joan Pudsey would not sit.

"And so the streets were rarely swept,
 The corner lamps were never lit ;
 The Burgesses they met and wept
 Because Joan Pudsey would not sit.

"The great Lord Chancellor shall know,
 They swore, 'Oh, he shall hear of i ;
 How everything gets addled so
 Because Joan Pudsey will not sit.'

"The great Lord Chancellor said 'D—— !'
 Then fiercely seized his quill and writ.
 The Corporation ceased to be,
 Because Joan Pudsey would not sit."

"We are informed that Mr. Alderman Oswin, an influential inhabitant, and member of an old family much respected in this town and neighbourhood, is about to forward a largely-signed petition to the Lord Chancellor, praying him to request Her Worship the Mare to resume her seat."

She threw the paper from her without reading another word, and it fell upon the ground just out of reach of her hand.

"What vulgarity!" she cried, and ground her teeth with anger. In this paragraph, which sounded so respectful, she half suspected some sly derision of the Alderman and all his race; perhaps indirectly they were laughing at herself, for people are overflowing with envy all the world over. She had always hated wealthy people before she became rich, as she felt that everybody must. And persons who have risen in the world are never liked, either by those they leave or those they go amongst. This feeling of isolation had grown upon

her so rapidly of late that she read some strange significance into every little incident and a second meaning into every word and every look. She was on the alert to discover herself derided or looked down upon. And all the while that she was upstairs a fear that Maggie might be with John Rumblelow never ceased to trouble her. She had so little confidence in her sex, that night and day she nourished this jealousy, with the thought that it would be only like a woman to win him away from her if it could be done. A secret malice against Maggie kept growing in her heart, and all the more from the consciousness that Uncle Jos had been unfair to her. She wished that she were rid of her. And yet, with all her quickness of perception, so little did she understand, that she told herself with bitterness that Maggie would never go now—not she. No girl would forego the grandeur of Oakleigh unless she were obliged.

There came a sound of approaching steps and voices outside the door. John Rumblelow was to call to see her, and she had been expecting him. It would be better to put the Pudsey nonsense out of sight. She hastily stretched out her arm, but it was necessary to get up, and she was still weak. She raised herself in the chair, stood up, and stooped to pick up the newspaper. With the effort and the excitement she felt quite faint, and before she could fold the paper to thrust it under the cushion, the door opened and Mrs. Oswin, prattling all the time, led in the visitor.

“Ah! you must command that she shall sit still, Mistaire Rumbell-low. Why can she not wait for the news and I shall read it to her? She will not do as she is told, and she shall be ill all her life. How can it not be if it is so? There was a man at Bath—and that

man's wife was just the same—and she had a dog would climb a ladder and crack nuts, and that dog——”

But Hetty scarcely heard her mother's nonsense. She saw that John Rumblelow had noticed her haste to hide the paper, and as their eyes met she felt conscious that he was closely observing her. Her heart was beating so fast that she could scarcely speak. Her cheeks were scalding, as if she had been detected in a fault. She fancied that he looked worried and unhappy, and she thought he was displeased. Then smarting with vexation that he should see her so weak, with a forced sprightliness held up her face to be kissed.

“But I shall not stay now,” chirped in Mrs. Oswin, always ready to feel romantic. “I shall tell you by-and-by.”

And so without delay she bustled off, and they were left alone.

He sat down beside her. Leaning towards the back of her chair, he laid his hand upon her shoulder and began to talk at once—making inquiries about her progress, and then endeavouring half humorously to support the appeal of Mrs. Oswin both with entreaty and warning. But all his light-heartedness had vanished, and this assumed cheerfulness only drew attention to the despondency under which he laboured.

Presently, with a suddenness that quite startled her, in a low voice, free, however, from all unreality and affectation, he said—

“You have seen the paper, Hetty?”

“Oh, yes. I have seen the paper,” she repeated after him, unable to control her mortification.

“What did you think?”

“I thought that all papers ought to be put down by law.”

"It is unnecessarily offensive, I think, but probably from ignorance," he replied with the calm of a man too proud to feel resentment. "I very much fear it has given you pain. You will believe me, I know; when I asked you to marry me I did not anticipate anything of this sort."

She sat upright in the chair and looked him full in the face. An appalling fear took hold of her that because of these Bristlington fools he was about to break off the engagement. She could see it in his eyes, she thought, and he was glad of the excuse. Yet, surely, such a thing was impossible. For a moment there was hatred in the thought that she would not let him go. Even the apprehension of it was crushing her bosom so that she could not speak.

"I should have talked to you before," he went on, "but I knew it would worry you. Now there is a public scandal. But I wished to be quite candid and have nothing hidden between us. These—these things,"—he pointed with his finger to the paper lying in her lap—"have brought a great change."

She felt perplexed and confused, but determined to resist him to the uttermost.

"It is very distressing, I must admit," she said coldly, "but I cannot see why it should make any difference to you and me."

Her manner was so unsympathetic that he gazed at her in astonishment; but her head was bent and she did not look at him. Then he thought that she was suffering deeply, and his heart melted into tenderness towards her, because she was so bravely concealing what she felt.

"There are people who take these things lightly," he said at last. "My grandfather, for instance, appeared to treat the whole matter as a joke. But I think

of it with shame, and all this publicity is terrible. The honour of the Rumblelows has always been so dear to me."

"But I—I am not to be held responsible," she sobbed, and then she burst into tears. They were tears of bitterness and anger, for indeed it was an injustice that she, a young woman of abundant wealth and blameless behaviour, should suffer for the vulgarity of any alderman under the sun.

"You are weak and excited, Hetty," he said, putting his arm around her with the kindness that springs from pity. "I ought not to have troubled you to-day; but seeing that you had read the paragraph, I thought it better to speak. Let us leave it until you are well." And in his contrition he drew her closer to him and kissed her.

"No! No! I am really quite well—quite. Tell me at once," she gasped. "I shall not rest until I know all you want to say."

"There is nothing more to tell," he said slowly. "You have seen that the hounds are sold and the horses. They are still at Whorbury, but Sir Peter Wilkins is the owner. It was hopeless to raise the sum my grandfather owed. The bailiffs entered with the mummets the night you were there, and Kinton has since unearthed all sorts of unsuspected debts. For fear of arrest my grandfather has gone abroad. That is what they mean in the paper by this." He lifted it from her lap and read :

"There was a large attendance at Corscombe Wood on Monday, but the hounds were not brought. It was rumoured that the respected Master, being in failing health, has been peremptorily ordered to take change of air."

"But has the anxiety made the Squire ill?" she asked, in innocent surprise.

Even in his trouble he could not quite suppress a smile.

"Apparently not," he told her, with a suspicion of his old humorous manner. "Sir Peter drove him away. The last thing he said was: 'Wilkins! I've been hunting something or other all my life. It shall take a good pack of bailiffs to catch a sight of old Jack Rumblelow's brush.'"

"And did he get away?" she asked eagerly, for she and the old Squire had been great friends.

"Oh, yes! He is out to sea by this time." But the sadness all came back to him again as he added: "He will never see Whorbury again."

"Why not?"

"There is no possibility of paying his creditors. If he should come back he would be taken. That is the change of which I spoke. Formerly I was a free man in this respect, that although the estate was mortgaged, I was assured that in time and with economy it might be redeemed. But now I see a host of liabilities that a lifetime cannot satisfy. It would be unendurable to me to live here in affluence and feel that my grandfather's creditors were unpaid. I could not walk about unless I could look every man in the face."

"But what do you mean?" she gasped, for she could not for the life of her understand why the debts of old Squire Jack should fall upon the heir of Whorbury.

"Everything in Whorbury will have to be sold at once, and I must agree with my grandfather to part with the estate."

He spoke rapidly, and his voice shook with emotion. It had stung his pride to suffer the grumbling of his

grandfather's tenants, but now the whole future became intolerable. His resentment when he received the letter asking for payment of the loan to himself had arisen from the pride which told him that the money owed by a Rumblelow, even when slow in its movements, was as safe as a bank. And the prospect of being penniless and dependent for everything upon a wife whom he did not love, in the midst of people who did not think of him with unqualified respect, was more than he could endure. The prudent engagement which three weeks ago offered such an easy solution to his difficulties had already become a grotesque comedy, in which there was no mirth. If Hetty also felt restless under its unreality, would she consent to marry him and go elsewhere, away from her own estate with Whorbury added, to some place where both the grandeur and the downfall of his family were unheard of? Beneath his trouble, his pride and his shame lay hidden a hope that his altered circumstances might save him from this marriage.

She grasped the whole situation at once, but to her mind it appeared in a different light and perspective.

It seemed to her that from this moment she was necessary to him, and that the hold which she had felt to be so slender was now strengthened so that it could not be broken. These scruples of his were but the excitement of his sudden distress, and would soon pass away. Yet she instinctively knew that they were real, and for the moment must be touched with delicacy and sympathy.

She impulsively put out her hand and drew him quite close to her. Then she threw her arms around his neck and covered him with caresses.

"My poor darling!" she cried. "Oh! I can feel what you must suffer. I love you so much that I

should die if anything were to happen to you. I will go with you anywhere—follow you anywhere in the world. And I love you ever so much more, because you are so proud and—and honourable.”

It was true that she loved him to distraction, and the gladness in her heart gave a wilder utterance to her passion. Yet she did not mean what she was saying, and all the while she was inwardly telling herself that nothing could hold him closer than the knowledge that he had won her love.

“But there can be no fear of what you say,” she went on eagerly. “No danger of it at all. Wait a moment. Kiss me. I want you to be good and do something.”

She raised herself, and turning round in the chair, pointed with her finger to the dressing-table.

“In the drawer you will find a book wrapped in paper and a key. And now I am going to show you my secrets. You see the panel, second from the ceiling and third from the corner; it will slide aside and there is a chest behind. In the chest is a case. I have been wanting somebody to give me both the book and the case, but nobody knows of the panel but myself. Will you do that before anybody comes, and then we will talk again.”

He gave her the book first, and she had unpacked it before the second portion of his mission was fulfilled.

It was a bank-book, only yesterday returned to her, and as yet unlooked at, with the half-yearly balance just made up. She opened the page and, although she had before watched every entry with the keenest interest, was startled at the magnitude of the added figures. This was the accumulation which had been promised as reparation to Maggie.

As he handed her the case at a glance he recognised

the nature of the book, and instead of sitting down he walked over to the fireplace, and stood with his back towards her as if to warm his hands. He felt sure that she was about to offer him money, and the thought of it made him very uncomfortable.

"I want you to come, or we may be interrupted," she said presently, after a minute or two of silence. "And then you can tell me what to do."

He took his old place by her side. She leant over and held the open bank-book before him, and then, with that affectation of childishness which seeks by anticipation of opposition to disarm it, she began :

"You see, the rents from Oakleigh bring more than we can spend—of course they do, with only three women to provide for. So all the money from Australia is untouched, and soon there will be more paid in."

He winced, yet could not help reading the figures that lay so clear before his eyes, and he saw that a sum of more than two thousand pounds was already standing to her credit.

"You must take it," she whispered decisively. "You must sell Whorbury, as you say, to the trustees. That will also produce some ready money. And then there is this." She pressed the hasp of the little case and the cover sprang open. "It is worth a lot—a fortune."

He could not sit in peace even for a moment, as if to acquiesce in her suggestions. He got up and paced across the room.

"My dear Hetty," he cried, "it is not possible for me to accept money of you. I understand the affection and generosity that prompts it, but——"

"No one can ever know," she interrupted with some warmth.

"But I could not do it," he said firmly.

"I cannot see why not," she insisted, and then went on speaking very rapidly. "If we were—I mean, another day it will be yours to manage to our best advantage. What difference can it make whether it be then or now? except that now it can be of real use, and then it may be too late. It seems to me quite the same thing; nobody is to know but ourselves. I have other things I could part with also, besides this." And as she spoke she again held out the diamond to him.

He stopped his pacing to and fro and stood close beside her.

He could see that she was trembling with agitation, but her mouth was firm and her eyes did not waver as she looked up into his face. To be sure, she felt that the logic was upon her side; for what difference could it truly make whether it were now or in six months' time, so long as they married at last and the transactions were secret? She was so clever and shrewd in respect of seeing every practical possibility, and yet she seemed to have no fine perception of any delicacy of sentiment. He wanted his refusal to be kind, but at the same time to make it evident that this subject must not be spoken of again.

"My dear girl," he said, speaking slowly and with a determination to be calm, "you do not realise what it is you propose. If you only understood, the diamond is not yours, except for life, and you can no more get rid of it than——"

"I had no thought of doing so," she interrupted sharply; "but you did not wait to hear. We could use it to borrow money, and after a while we should get it back again. It would be as safe elsewhere as here. I know that it can be done; I have heard of it—and read it, too."

"But it must never go out of your possession, Hetty. An heirloom is sacred, and——"

"Then are not the things at Whorbury sacred to you? If they are once sold, they will never be got back; and yet this is so simple."

He recognised that it was of no use to talk to her. She would not be convinced, and unconvinced, she would not yield. Besides, their conversation was becoming painfully near to a wrangle, in which she was not the loser, because she was not bound by the rules of the game; and he felt how ungracious it was to be vexed, when she was so full of anxiety to overcome his difficulties.

"Let me put it back for you," he said, laughing, as he held out his hand. "You must take care of your magic stone, you know, or your spells will fail."

With reluctance she allowed him to take the case, and then, of a sudden, she burst into sobs and tears, interspersed with bitter laments and reproaches.

"You do not care for me," she cried. "You do not love me one bit. That is why you will not let me help you. I know what you think. You think perhaps it will be broken off. You want not to be bound to me. If you cared for me, you would not be so proud. It would not matter—since only you and I could know. You ought to be glad to let me do what I wish. I could get the money myself and hand it to you. There need not be a word or sign. Whatever may come, it can never be known or traced——"

She had raised her voice until, with growing excitement, she was like one beside herself. But at this last appeal she paused, as if thinking the argument unanswerable. He did not attempt to answer it, but sat down again by her side and tried to soothe her with self-possession and quietude.

“Let us say no more, Hetty—at least, for the present. You are not strong enough to talk of these things now.”

“I am perfectly strong. As strong as anybody,” she cried in a passion of resentment, though the colourless lips belied the words they uttered.

“I shall find some plan, and we will confer another day. Believe me, I am grateful for your generous wish, but ladies do not understand these things. I shall never forget what you wanted to do.”

Still she sobbed and wept; but he knew she had not given up her point, although she held down her head and did not speak.

“And another day, Hetty,” he went on more gaily, “you shall shower benefits upon me.”

There came a sound of approaching footsteps in the passage.

She suddenly raised her head and listened.

“I want you to go before anybody comes,” she said, snatching the diamond from his hand and hiding it upon her lap under the newspaper. “I cannot see anybody now. I shall lock myself in; but come soon—come to-morrow, and I shall be down.”

He bade her a hasty good-bye. It was a relief to get away and be again in the open air, and, passing out without meeting anybody, he hurried into the quiet fields. He felt vexed and angry; and still more angry with himself for being vexed. His heart told him that all her wishes were generous, and he was mean in seeking to save himself by marrying her. He felt sorry for her; and unconsciously his mind drifted into philosophising upon the necessity to refuse her assistance in his difficulties. Setting aside the diamond, of course, there was a great deal in what she said; and would it be so much worse than what he had already done?

CHAPTER VI

ACCUSATION

THE winter, passing on, gave way to early spring, but as yet no changes had taken place in any of the arrangements at Oakleigh.

Maggie still remained her cousin's guest ; for, although Hetty's outbursts of temper were frequent and hard to bear, unconscious that she had become unwelcome, she thought it unkind to speak of going whilst Hetty was unwell. But she had not changed her mind, and this year she noted all the welcome delights of swelling bud and flitting wing with a keener interest from the feeling that by the next season she should be far away from the scenes where she had been happy all her life.

The rooks were busy building in the tall elms beyond the lawn, and the grass below became covered with the dead sticks that they stole from each other and quarrelled about and fought for, and therefore lost. The white anemones sprang up and bloomed in the woods behind the house, and then the primroses peeped out and opened into flower upon the banks under the hedgerows. There were peewits too, nesting upon the ploughed grounds and in the level fields beside the river, before the white blossom had dropped from the black-thorn.

In her love and observation of nature this spring she had found a companion.

It was true that Uncle Jos had taken an interest in the things of out-of-doors, and was quite willing to contemplate any object, with the exception of a hawk, a crow, or a stoat, without emotion. He knew a great deal about the habits both of game and vermin, whilst all other wild creatures, if familiar, he regarded as of little consequence. But John Rumblelow was still fresh from a healthy boyhood, spent in the woods and copses of Whorbury; and almost before the gales of March had blown themselves out he could tell her of the return of summer visitors whose notes he had heard. Then they listened to the song of the chiff-chaff in the silver birch beside the water on the lawn, and again and again did the willow-wren pour out its merry little cadence from amongst the branches of the elm.

They rarely went beyond the lawns and shrubberies quite close to the house, and there was no secrecy in their frequent but brief excursions. The wedding was to take place in the summer, but the month was not yet fixed, for Hetty, although she was better, remained very weak and scarcely able to go out. So John Rumblelow was at Oakleigh every day, and it was wonderful as the year advanced what a wealth of unsuspected treasures he discovered for Maggie quite close to home.

A pair of golden-crested wrens built that season in the old cedar, interweaving the twigs so cunningly below the nest that it hung suspended under the branch. They watched them quickly flitting to and fro between the boughs, sometimes clinging head downwards in their search for food. They saw them come with moss and feathers, and at last John Rumblelow took

out a little yellow egg, which the girl held in the hollow of her hand to look with tenderness upon its delicate transparency in the sunlight.

In an old thorn-bush he showed her also the oval cradle of the long-tailed tit, in shape of a bottle covered with emerald lichen, and firmly held amongst the thorny sticks and twigs. It scarcely looked like a nest, but more like some accidental growth of moss; yet there was the little round hole that served for a doorway, so small they dared not risk even to explore it with a finger lest the bird should find some damage and forsake. A few days later they found her sitting with her long tail jutting out into the air.

Then he discovered the nut-hatch busily plastering a mud wall where a hollow branch had been storm-torn from one of the gnarled oaks in the park. To her it was almost magical. There seemed to be nothing that he could not find quite close at hand. It was a revelation; for she had been watching these creatures all her life, and yet had never seen the marvels that lay close before her eyes.

She became enthusiastic in her praises of his cleverness, and wondered to find that Hetty received with coldness her expressions of delight. But Hetty had been very strange and uncertain of late—no doubt because she was so weak. And she was to be humoured in everything—old Dr. Podymore particularly commanded it. The idea that Hetty could be jealous of these short talks and walks, mostly in sight around the garden paths, did not occur to the straightforward mind of Maggie Lane.

As to the sorrow that often clung around her heart, she scarcely admitted its full meaning to herself. From the first she had never hoped—never believed it possible

that John Rumblelow would love her. Not a syllable had ever passed his lips from the beginning to beget such a thought, and she was not the girl to readily imagine that a man was in love with her. Besides, he was engaged to Hetty, and if ever a day-dream pictured what might have been if Uncle Jos had left her Oakleigh, and Hetty had been far away, she could only dismiss it as a folly which might quickly grow into a sin. Thus, although sometimes a sense of loneliness crept over her, and a numbness of heart at the dread of leaving the place and parting from all that she had ever loved, her blood was quick with the joy of life, and her senses the more eager for the beauty and delights of earth because as yet she had learned nothing of the world.

She had fully determined to go, and yet something was wanted to nerve her to the final step. The liberality of Hetty weighed upon her conscience and accused her of ingratitude, and since she could offer no new explanation of her change of mind she dreaded the opposition that she believed Hetty would certainly raise. But this condition was brought suddenly to an end.

It was a beautiful afternoon towards the middle of May. There had been a gentle rain during the morning, but now under a clear blue sky in the soft still air everything shone sweet and new. Out of the porch came Hetty Oswin quickly, and with a glance behind her to be sure that she was not observed. She walked across the terrace, and standing beside the stone balustrade, looked eagerly in every direction, scanning the distance through every opening in the trees.

The elms were clad in fresh green leafage, the beech was covered in shining leaves, and the great horse-

chestnut trees were beginning to show their flowers. Only the ancient oaks, with here and there an ash, still delayed to put on their verdure and glory in the universal joy. But that day Hetty took no delight in the beauty of Oakleigh, even though it was all her own.

During the weeks that she had been indoors, brooding over her love and restless under the weakness that she felt must delay her marriage, the suspicion had crept into her brain that Maggie and John Rumblelow were often together, that they were continually meeting—by the river, in the woods, secretly, where they were not likely to be seen. It began upon Christmas Day, when her mother saw them from the window carrying Uncle Jos's fishing-bag into the house; and after that it grew and grew, until gradually it occupied every moment of her time and completely filled her mind. She became a prey to this haunting jealousy and fear, that would never let her rest, but quickened a perverse ingenuity which found in the smallest incident fresh evidence of what she believed. Thus, when Maggie was absent from the house she had gone by appointment to meet John Rumblelow; and if she stayed at home it was because she knew that he would come.

The rain when it fell in the morning, freshening everything and glistening upon every blade, had led Maggie to express the opinion that trout would rise. To the heated imagination of Hetty it was an announcement that she intended to fish. Yet why had she not openly said so? Doubtless there was reason enough for such reticence. Hetty said nothing, but she became very watchful and alert, and quite early in the afternoon she saw Maggie go away across the lawn.

Then this pitiable self-torture became so intense that it could be borne no longer.

Hetty pictured them in the meadows talking together, as they were that evening when first she became acquainted with John Rumblelow. She had not yet walked far, for upon the slightest exertion she became breathless, but this afternoon the restless energy of her passion gave her strength. She felt no weakness, and she did not care. She had no plan—no fixed intention—only a fierce determination to get, unseen, to the gate into the meadows and watch them in the unrestrained solitude of the river side. She knew what she should see. They would dally, and stand close together, and under the pretence of talking look into each other's eyes. She had seen all this one day upon the lawn ; and then John Rumblelow laid his hand upon Maggie's arm and drew her to a place where she might better catch sight of something between the branches of a tree. A hatred that was murderous blazed up in the heart of Hetty Oswin at the mere recollection of it.

She stayed only a moment resting against the balustrade, and then she hurried on through the shrubberies, past the summer-house and down to the gate. She was glad to clutch the bar, to hold it tight and lean upon it, for her heart was throbbing so hard that it took away her breath, and she could do no more than gasp. And yet she eagerly scanned the landscape, her eyes following every turn of the stream in its windings through the level fields.

Not a person was in sight, and scarcely a moving thing. A soft haze from the recent rains lay upon the valley and veiled the distant hills. The quiet herd dotting the fresh green pasture chewed in the sunlight contented and at rest.

But neither this peaceful quietude nor the disappointment of her expectation could bring any solace to the

girl's soul or soothe her unhappiness. Her feverish anxiety did but invent for itself a new misery.

"They must have gone up towards Whorbury," she muttered, and shading her eyes with her hand she stared in the direction of the bridge.

"Why, Hetty, what made you come down here?"

It was the voice of Maggie, calling to her in surprise, and she turned round to find her cousin hastening towards her down the path.

"I could scarcely believe it. I was in the summer-house when you passed, and I just caught sight of you when I came out. Were you looking for me?"

"I could stay in no longer. I thought you would be out here somewhere."

The answer was quivering with excitement and anger. It forced itself from between the girl's set teeth, and a savagery only half suppressed made the second phrase an intentional insult. Already Hetty was writhing under the miserable uncertainty, *Was he also in the summer-house?* She saw how her words and presence disconcerted Maggie, and jumped to the conclusion that he was. An uncontrollable fury seized upon her, and broke down all her power of self-restraint; but for the moment, although she glared hatred upon her cousin, she could not speak.

"What is the matter with you, Hetty? What do you mean?"

A consciousness of long suffering, extending over many weeks, gave to these questions a tone of resentment. In the face of opposition Hetty found at once her power of speech.

"Mean!" she echoed. "My life is miserable. I wish I had never lived. I wish I had never been born. I wish Oakleigh had never been given to me. It was to

make a fool of me—to be envied, and laughed at, and trifled with. And you think I am so blind that I cannot see.”

She stood back from the gate, her hands clenched, her arms rigid with emotion, and glanced at Maggie, her black eyes full of malignity. Her lips, tightly set, were colourless, and her face, from which all the blood had fled, darkened and contorted itself with passion. Bending over the path above her, its golden blossoms almost touching her shoulders, leaned a laburnum tree, and as she moved the moist bough struck against her cheek. She seized a handful of the yellow flowers, tore them off, crushed them in her hand, and threw them upon the ground.

“I could serve it all like that,” she cried, and she looked across at the great mansion, smiling in the sunshine between the trees. “I should like to set fire to it and burn it to the ground.”

“But nobody laughs at you, or trifles with you,” reasoned Maggie, for her indignation vanished in the presence of this wild frenzy. “It is only a delusion that troubles you.”

The assurance, although well meant, was ill-timed, and only maddened her the more.

“Troubles me!” she cried with increasing vehemence. “You flatter yourself I do not know. But I am under no delusion. I am nothing to anybody—nothing to John Rumblelow except to go with the property, like a fixture in the house, or a stick of timber, as they call it, in the park. He would not care if I were to die to-morrow. So much the better. Then he could marry you. That would suit him just as well—though he thinks no more of you than of me—and reward you for your devotion. For you are over head and ears in

love with him. That is plain enough. Any fool can see it—how you throw yourself at his head; how you are waiting on the lawn, as innocent as a babe, when he comes, or find excuses to go out when he leaves——”

Of a sudden this hail of irresponsible words, poured forth at random with no purpose except to strike and sting and inflict pain, came to a stop. The shafts had been but too well directed. Smarting with shame and overwhelmed with bewilderment, Maggie pushed through the narrow swinging gate and was hurrying away across the meadows in the direction of the Bristlington road. The surprise found her defenceless. She had no answer to make. For with the accusations came a full consciousness that she did love John Rumblelow with all her heart. There was no shame in that. But that this unspoken love, hidden in her bosom so closely that she had hardly dared think of it herself, was not concealed from the eyes of others, covered her with disgrace. And Keziah Crane had seen it too. Everybody must have seen it—this secret love for the man who was to marry her cousin. It was shameless, indelicate, immodest.

Yet the insult wounded none the less deeply because it hit upon a truth, and for that very reason the injustice of it rankled all the more. But everything had been unfair. Her trustfulness, no longer seeking to explain away the unkindness that had befallen her, turned to bitterness of heart. After those years of happy companionship the will of Uncle Jos was a slight and an injury. Again, the silence of her father—from whom, if he had written as he promised, there was ample time to have heard—she felt to be heartless; and now on the very spot where a few months ago

Hetty pressed so many favours upon her she had been forced to suffer this outrage and humiliation.

Henceforth she would accept nothing of Hetty—neither for herself nor her father. She would hasten at once to Bristlington, go to Mr. Kinton's office, tell him to set aside all that Hetty had done, and insist upon repaying this moment whatever had already been remitted to Australia. Without a word of her intention—for she would never speak to Hetty nor even see her again—she must find lodgings in the town for a day or two, where she might stay indoors until arrangements could be made for her departure. From this moment she would shake the dust of Oakleigh from off her feet.

In this ferment of mingled pride and shame she quickly reached the bridge and took the road to Bristlington. Hetty, still thinking of John Rumblelow and eager to see where she was going, stepped out into the meadow and watched her head above the hedges and between the elm-trees. She passed on with the haste of one who has taken some sudden but unalterable resolve, and soon was out of sight. What could she be meaning to do? Hetty's courage sank, and she longed to call her back; but Maggie was out of hearing, and it was too late. If she were to leave Oakleigh, what a talk there must be, to be sure! and the servants must all know that something strange and unexpected had happened. And what would John Rumblelow think?

With her accession to fortune and position she had become painfully sensitive to the opinions of people around her, and with a presentiment that something unhappy was about to happen to her all her weakness returned and she walked wearily back to the house.

CHAPTER VII

A CONSULTATION

LITTLE Lawyer Kinton took off his spectacles, rubbed them, blinked, put them on again, and then bent forward his head in order to look over the gold rims.

To be sure, he used them chiefly for reading, and this was a way with him whenever he particularly wanted to scrutinise a client's face. He was seated at his office table, behind what appeared to be a chaos of blue papers and red tape, and he had handed Maggie a chair upon one side, distant enough to satisfy the strictest decorum, yet near enough for the merest confidential whisper to enter his recipient ear. But there were no confidences, nor even any request for his advice, only the expression of a predetermined intention. Mr. Kinton saw before him a young lady, heated with walking, evidently excited, but with her mind fully made up. But as to the cause of all this his observation helped him nothing at all.

Now, if there were any human being in whom, apart from property and the exigencies of professional practice, little Mr. Kinton took a personal interest, that favoured individual was Margaret Lane. When, therefore, she had unfolded her design to pay back Hetty, to endow her father, and to start for Australia at

once, he raised his eyebrows, smiled indulgently, and prepared to argue.

"But is not all this, my dear Miss Lane, a little—pardon me, a little Quixotic?"

Mr. Kinton coughed apologetically. It was a strong word, a word which, when applied to the action of a man, described a characteristic more reprehensible than a disposition to sharp practice, or even to reckless extravagance. For by the one he may acquire property, and by the other he may enjoy a run for his money, but a misguided magnanimity is always a nuisance to manage, and can lead to no good.

"Oh, no," replied Maggie, with prompt decision. "I have always wished to go, and now there is no reason for me to stay."

"But have you heard from Mr. Lane? Do you know where to go?"

"I shall go to the place where he receives the money, and so I shall be certain to hear of him."

"But without first communicating with him, my dear Miss Lane?"

She faltered for want of argument, although her mind remained firm.

"It is necessary. If I—if I send him the money, I shall—I shall have very little left for myself," she said at last, and then added quickly, "But I want to go also."

"Of course, that settles it," laughed the lawyer, changing his tone; for argument is so often lost upon a lady, and opposition frequently only confirms her in perversity. "When did you think of starting?"

"At once," she answered eagerly; "by the earliest ship that it is possible for me to take."

"Well, say the wedding were to take place in July or August, and then," he meditated, "you go through

very warm latitudes—very warm latitudes, my dear Miss Lane. How would October be, or the New Year? And that would give you time to write.”

“There is no need for me to stay for the wedding,” she exclaimed, with increasing agitation. “I thought in a week or a fortnight I might start.”

Mr. Kinton solemnly shook his head. They must have been having a tiff indeed, since a wedding no longer offered attractions! But such matters soon settle themselves if left alone.

“Things do not go at that pace, my dear Miss Lane,” he said soothingly. “You are worried at not hearing from your father—and quite natural too. But that is the very reverse of a reason for going in chase of him. However, I’ll think it over. And as to the money, let it wait for the present until we can have a longer talk. But my advice is: Let your cousin pay. She is willing”—he paused for a denial that did not come, and continued—“and it is right she should. She offered it freely and you accepted in good part. Now doesn’t it seem a little—a little ungracious to make these changes after all?”

“She has other claims upon her now,” replied the girl impulsively, for an explanation seemed necessary, and the truth she could not tell.

Mr. Kinton concluded that the little Indian had indeed been spiteful. But the gentlest of the sex are uncertain and liable at times to irrational outbreaks, so he only looked at the ceiling and reflected that from such a fortune the amount was not large.

“Oh, no,” he said pleasantly. “She will want you more than ever now that——”

There came a rap upon the door.

“Pardon me—one moment,” he broke off. “Come in.”

A clerk entered and handed a small slip of paper to the lawyer.

"I am engaged for one minute. Ask him to wait. I shall not detain him long," briskly responded Mr. Kineton.

But with the interruption everything was changed. Assuming a cheerful air of summing up the results of a most satisfactory consultation, he turned to Maggie and checked off the various points that had been settled upon his fingers as he spoke.

"Then it is decided—to leave the question of Australia awaiting a letter from Mr. Lane—to defer the matter of remittance, making it contingent upon the question of Australia—and to delay the proposal to repay money already advanced pending the decision upon both. In my opinion, my dear Miss Lane, you have come to a very prudent conclusion. Now was that all?"

He looked so wise, yet so guileless, and his manner was so full of congratulation, that she felt helpless to insist, or even to explain that her wishes remained unchanged. With an uncomfortable feeling that she was trespassing upon his time, she rose to go. He shook hands with her most cordially, and accompanied her to the door, chatting about Oakleigh and the springtime and the remarkable number, as it seemed to him, of nightingales that were to be heard in the neighbourhood that season.

When she reached the street and the sunlight she felt dazed and confused. She knew she had been frustrated and treated like a child; and, indeed, her wishes must appear childish since it was impossible to be frank and speak of the motives which inspired them. How could she tell of her love and Hetty's jealousy? Now she would have to write and insist upon what she wanted.

But the first thing was to find suitable rooms in which to live until she could run away from the place for ever.

Mr. Kinton bustled back to his office, rang the bell and ordered that Mr. John Rumblelow should be shown in at once. There was a great deal of business to be arranged at this time, and they remained together the greater part of the afternoon.

"By-the-by," said the lawyer, just as they were about to part, "your neighbour Miss Margaret Lane came to consult me a short time ago. She is desirous, she tells me, to go to her father in Australia."

"She has told me so. It would be a great pity," said John Rumblelow emphatically.

"Her friends should dissuade her," urged Mr. Kinton, lowering his voice to an earnest whisper. "It would be most unwise under any circumstances, but I have very grave doubts about Mr. Peter Lane. I fancy something must have happened to him."

He rummaged amongst the papers on the desk before him and presently found a letter. It was from a firm of solicitors in Sydney and dated the first day of March. Incidentally it mentioned that Mr. Lane had not up to that time drawn his instalment payable at Christmas.

"There was a sum ready for him upon arrival," explained Mr. Kinton, "and that he took. This is the first instalment of the regular allowance."

"And you think that is strange?" asked John Rumblelow.

"Unprecedented," was the terse reply. It was as near to humour as Lawyer Kinton could get, and a smile just flickered around the corners of his lips.

"Did you tell Miss Lane this?"

"I did not. I thought it would alarm her; and, of

course, he may be all right. But she must not be allowed to go."

"Most certainly she must not be allowed to go," echoed John Rumblelow with unexpected warmth.

But whilst this conversation was taking place Maggie Lane was inspecting the furnished rooms that looked down upon the High Street from the floor above Mr. Harry Crickshaw's shop. For Mr. Harry Crickshaw, being a bachelor and therefore at the expense of a housekeeper, possessed a very elegant suite of apartments which he desired to let—a fact almost forgotten in Bristlington, since nobody had ever been known to apply for them.

Great therefore was the excitement at the "Green Dragon" when Mr. Harry Crickshaw himself was noticed at his upstairs window, with puce-coloured arms upraised, to remove the card bearing the word "APARTMENTS" from behind the pane.

"He never can have let his rooms," whispered John Pudsey, with eager credulity.

"Never. He's only going to have the window cleaned."

"Or the card dusted."

"There's a lady in there, anyway."

"I'll bet a guinea he has let," cried John Pudsey defiantly.

"Whatever it is, Harry Crickshaw will be over in two minutes," winked old Mr. Jennings, to whom long observation and experience had taught the ways of men, "and then we shall hear."

"Oh, yes. Then we shall hear."

CHAPTER VIII

DEPARTURE

“**E**VERYTHING is quite ready, of course, Miss Lane,” explained Mr. Harry Crickshaw’s house-keeper, with unctuous satisfaction. “But when will your friend wish to come in, Miss Lane?”

She was a large person, red, smiling, and very deferential to a lady from Oakleigh Court. Her head upon one side, at that angle which indicates close attention and superior intelligence, she awaited the answer with one arm akimbo and the other hanging straight.

“I want the rooms for myself. As everything is ready, I will come to-day. I will see about it at once,” answered Maggie hurriedly.

“Will you require something cooked, Miss Lane?” gasped the woman. And this breathless astonishment first brought to the girl’s mind a clear perception of the great changes that were before her, and of the isolation of her future lot.

“Get whatever you think necessary. I shall be going out for a while. I may like some tea when I come back.”

Eager to impart the amazing information, the woman at once withdrew, and Maggie sat down on a horsehair-covered chair in the corner furthest away from the window. She had no eyes for the details of the dingy little room, with its dark furniture and maroon flock

paper. She was too greatly disturbed with doubts as to her next step. With Hetty's insults ringing in her ears, she had rushed on without pausing one moment to reflect. Everything was quite easy until now she was forced to stop and think. What a commotion there would be when it was known what she had done! Old Dr. Podymore, Mr. Kinton, John Rumblelow—how was it to be explained to them all? Hetty must think of that. For her own part, shame would keep her lips closed. They might want her to go back—but to sleep again under Oakleigh roof nothing should persuade her. And she need stay in Bristlington perhaps no more than a day—just long enough to get away her things—but how was that to be done?

To be sure, it was all a secret as yet. She might go back, walk upstairs to the room that had been hers as long as she could remember, lock herself in, and put everything ready to be removed. Nobody would know what she was doing, or even notice that she was there. She must bring away a parcel, or, better still, a small work-bag, in her hand, and afterwards arrange for the other things to be sent for. She need not even speak to a soul at the time. It would be easy enough both to come and go without being seen.

That seemed to be the best plan, and it did away with all danger of explanation, expostulation, and further quarrelling. But she must not delay. Already it would be late in the afternoon before she could get to Oakleigh, even by the quicker path across the fields. There was a way behind the shrubbery leading to a side door by which she could enter unobserved from any of the windows, and once in the house she might pass a hundred times without meeting anyone in the rambling passages.

She started at once. Already the people of Bristlington looked at her narrowly as she passed along the street, but she walked quickly, and soon she was in the quiet fields. There, with the clear blue sky above her head and the grass under her feet, she became calmer. The broad, open daylight poured everywhere. It seemed to enter her mind so that she could see the circumstances of her life quite clearly. It was all a mistake, her staying at Oakleigh. Hetty had never wanted her—never from love, but only to make use of her. She ought to have obeyed the secret promptings of her heart. They were never wrong—these secret counsellings that speak so distinctly within the soul, and even when disregarded will not be hushed. They were talking to her now—telling her that she loved John Rumblelow, that nothing could change it, nothing to the end of her life, and that she must go—go at once. With the consciousness that her love was known, she could not look him in the face again. The only way was to flee, and never see him any more.

She reached the house and went up to her room unobserved. She sat down upon the bed and sobbed, with distress such as she had never suffered even on the afternoon that saw poor Uncle Jos laid in his grave. The light was pouring across the mullions now as then, and Bracher had pulled down the blinds. She felt that to-day all the joy of life was for ever gone, and all her happiness lay dead and buried.

But the afternoon was already passing away, and evening would soon be drawing on. She dried her tears, shook off her grief, and aroused herself to the task that lay before her. By the foot of the bed was a leather travelling trunk of large dimensions, hitherto used only on those great occasions when Uncle Jos,

rendered uneasy by aches and twinges, determined to resort to Bath. She dragged it into the middle of the room, brought her things from the wardrobe and the chest of drawers, and knelt down to pack. She soon became so occupied that she half forgot her troubles.

There came a rap upon the door.

"Dinner is ready, miss."

"I will not come down to-day, Bracher."

"Can I get you anything, miss, or bring you anything up?"

"Nothing, thank you, Bracher," was the reply, and it no doubt hugely puzzled that functionary.

"Oh, yes. Miss Lane is not feeling well," answered Hetty in a careless tone, when Bracher was explanatory of what had happened. But it took a load off her mind to find that Maggie had returned, and was safely in her room. She had been thinking of reconciliation, of apology even, but again her heart hardened since it appeared that there was nothing to fear.

It was quite late in the evening before Maggie was ready to depart; and the sun, now nearing the horizon, was gleaming between the dark branches of the yew tree by the little church when she glanced out of the window for the last time. No one was in sight, either upon the terrace or the lawn; but, indeed, there was no danger of meeting Hetty now, if only she were once safely out of the house. She caught up the bag in which she had placed the things she wanted to carry, ran hurriedly down the broad staircase, across the hall, through the porch, and was free.

So it was over, without more hard words and bitterness. In a minute or two she had passed beyond the precincts of Oakleigh and was again in the open fields; but now the place felt quite lonely, for the sun had set

and twilight began to shed its mysterious shadow over the valley. She walked quickly, partly from excitement, but also from an uncomfortable dread of being out alone after dusk; and all the while her brain was busily agitated as to how she should act and what she must do next. It would be necessary to write to Hetty at once—even to thank her for what had been done, and then to refuse all further favours. That would be more certain than another interview with Lawyer Kinton. Phrases that she might use kept recurring to her again and again, and she repeated them aloud with endless variation—"your disgraceful accusations and unkind suspicions," "unjust suspicions," "your wicked suspicions." Maggie Lane could have put venom into her pen if she had known how, but this was the worst it came to after all. It should be sent by the fly that fetched the travelling trunk. Then she would go away from Bristlington at once. Why not to Bath? That was a good idea. Perhaps to the very house in which she had stayed with Uncle Jos.

She came to a small, swinging gate, where the footpath cut aslant through a high, overgrown hedgerow. As she laid her hand upon the post she found herself unexpectedly face to face with a man who at once stood back for her to pass. It was fast growing dark, and without glancing at him she pushed on.

"Maggie! Is that you?" he exclaimed in surprise.

She dared not look at him. She could make no answer; for she recognised the voice of John Rumblelow, and the suddenness of the meeting so startled her that she was glad to hold fast to the gate.

"But where on earth are you going—you of all people, at such an hour as this?" he laughed.

Then he became very grave, as, even in the dim light,

he perceived how deeply she was troubled, and with the misgivings of Kinton still fresh in his mind, he feared he was aware of the cause of her distress.

He stepped forward and stood close to the gate upon the other side. Then he saw that she was carrying something in her hand. He leaned upon the rail so that he almost touched her, and his voice was full of tenderness as he spoke.

"I am afraid you think of doing something unwise. Tell me all about it, and let me see if I can help you."

How could she tell him—him, of all people in the world? Yet, in any other trouble, there was no one to whom it would have been more easy to confide.

"No, no," she cried, half in anger; but it was impossible to pass on.

"Yes, tell me," he urged.

His unexpected presence there, just when the difficulty seemed over, broke down her courage. At the sound of his kindness her resolution melted. The work-bag slipped from her nerveless fingers and fell upon the ground. She laid her arms upon the gate, hid her face and burst into sobs.

He laid his hand upon her shoulder and implored her to be calm. "What is it, Maggie? What is the matter with you? What has happened?" he kept asking in an eager whisper close by her ear.

At last, in reply to these reiterated questions, she raised her head, but her answers were no more than passionate assertions of her unalterable intention.

"I will never go back. Nothing shall persuade me. If you want to be kind to me, help me to go right away. Arrange for me to go to Australia at once—as I have told you before."

"But you do not tell me what is troubling you."

"I can't. I have left Oakleigh. I cannot live there any longer."

"Have you had a quarrel with Hetty?"

She felt that for her sake he was thinking of reconciliation, and her voice sounded full of resentment as she cried:

"I will not speak of it."

Then again she hid her face upon her hands.

In the face of a refusal so complete he could ask no more questions, but it was easy to guess what must have happened. Hetty, bestowing her benefactions with too rough a touch, had wounded those delicate sensibilities which she seemed incapable of appreciating. He felt ashamed of the woman whom he was to marry, and angry—as if he saw that she had just disgraced him. And just then there came across the field a sound of distant voices.

"No, no; I understand that perfectly," he hastened to assure her—for how could she bring accusations against Hetty to him? "But this is a public path. Let us walk across the grass as far as the trees. Then we can decide upon the best thing for you to do."

She raised her head and stood a moment in hesitation. She was afraid of being seen with him, and the people were drawing very near. Besides, she wanted help; and who was there to befriend her if he did not? As he gently pressed the gate to pass through she drew back and yielded. He picked up the bag and, holding her arm, led her away from the path under the gloom of the tall hedgerow.

Close by stood a double row of ancient overgrown apple trees, of which the branches, meeting overhead, had become more dense than a wood. The day was quite gone, and the last gleam in the west had melted

away ; but behind the unenclosed orchard a new light was growing, and all the delicate tracery of the topmost twigs stood sharp and clear upon the silver radiance of the hidden moon.

A few weeks before, in a March gale, a tree had been torn up by the roots, and still lay there unremoved. She sat down upon the level trunk and thrust her arm around one of the slanting branches. She felt tired out and glad with the support.

He stood in front, looking down at her. He could scarcely see her face, and even the outline of her light spring frock melted away and was lost in the gloom.

“But what is it you want to do?” he asked, and his voice was very low and invited confidence.

“I want to go away—right away, and never come back. I went to Mr. Kineton to arrange for me, but he only set me aside. It was easy, of course, to do that with a woman. I understood it all the time, but I could find nothing to say. At last he talked to me about nightingales,” she answered hopelessly.

As if to confirm the lawyer’s statement, at that moment, from the hedgerow close behind them, came the deep jug-jug of a bird preparing to welcome the rising light. As if aware of their presence, it stopped—then twice repeated itself—and again there was silence.

The sense of her helplessness oppressed him so deeply that he could not speak. How was she to find her way alone to the other end of the world? And after that, whether she found her father or not, there awaited only disappointment. Yet he dared not warn her of Kineton’s misgiving. To her it would be only another reason for setting out at once. And always

during these weeks whilst Hetty's ill-health caused their marriage to be deferred, his love for Maggie had grown and grown until Whorbury, his position and the assured freedom from all his embarrassments were nothing to him. Each day he went to Oakleigh in dread lest the date of his wedding should at last be fixed. More than once he had surprised himself in the ghastly wish that he might find Hetty worse. He, who before his engagement never cherished one ungenerous thought, had even hoped that she might die, so miserable had the prospect become for him. The meanness of it all made his heart sick. Yet daily he told himself that he must abide by his promise. A Rumblelow could not run from his word. His discontent did not permit itself to contemplate the dishonour of breaking it off.

Suddenly the nightingale, only a few yards away, made up its mind and burst into passionate song, sometimes loud and piercing, and then so sad and low that the air seemed to quiver with emotion.

The girl could not bear it. Without the coarseness of words it was giving utterance to her own hapless love. She rose in haste from her seat upon the fallen trunk.

"It must be getting late," she whispered restlessly. "The people have passed on. I must not stay."

She hurried forward as if there and then to say good-bye. As she came out from the shadow he could see her quite clearly; her face, her features, even the brightness of her hair became visible, for the moon by this time was just rising above the orchard top and her direct rays came shining between the branches. Upon one side was a tree earlier than all the rest, and a spreading bough, drooping over the girl's head so low that it

almost touched her shoulders, held her in a bower of whitest blossom.

"You cannot go until you have heard me," he cried, casting aside all self-restraint in the sudden fear that this was the last moment, and if he did not speak now she was about to pass away from him for ever. "I have something to tell you before it is too late. I love you, Maggie, with all my heart and soul. I have never truly cared for Hetty. There were so many false reasons to tempt me to marry her—and I had scarcely talked to you then. Now the thought of it is horrible. All day and night I have been saying to myself that I cannot live without you. To marry Hetty has become impossible to me. Do you remember what you said in the summer-house that afternoon? It has been in my mind ever since. Let us realise it. You want to go to Australia. I love you, Maggie, beyond everything. Let us marry. Let us go together. Let us find out a way for ourselves."

He was so carried away by his passion that he stepped towards her as if to clasp her in his arms.

But she shrank away from him. "No, no. Don't touch me. It is all impossible," she faltered.

"Believe me, I have never loved anyone but you," he urged wildly. "When I thought I could marry without love I did not understand. Now I know that there is nothing else in life."

She felt frightened and afraid. Yet, in the midst of her distress, she was conscious of an overwhelming gladness. He loved her. He loved her. To her also there was nothing else than this in life, and her heart bounded with a great joy. She was sure he loved her. He belonged to her—to her alone, and not to Hetty. And yet—

"I cannot listen to you, Mr. Rumblelow," she said, suddenly becoming firm, and turning away. "What you say only confirms my intention. It is quite time for me to leave Oakleigh."

"Stay only one moment and hear the truth," he exclaimed, stepping before her as he spoke.

"I love you beyond everything. I cannot marry Hetty. I will not. Every day makes it more and more impossible. We are never together but we make each other unhappy—we do not know how or why. I will tell her so as frankly as I can. I will take the whole blame upon myself and break it off. I will not see you again until that is done. Then you must marry me. We will go wherever you like, and fight it out together until some day we may come back. And if you cannot love me or forgive what I have done, I must go just the same. I shall never want to see Whorbury again."

The beauty of the evening, the singing of the bird, the silent pauses until he burst forth afresh, the calm, sweet light for ever penetrating deeper into the secret recesses of the orchard to reveal in the blossom a clearer purity and grace, made the earth like a dream.

The girl forgot her troubles. She knew only the romance and burning happiness of a first reciprocated love. Her difficulties melted away. She was no longer alone. He loved her—had been loving her in silence as she him. What was Hetty to him? A means to restore his fortunes; and, now that he loved, he could make light of all that. She might take him to herself, far away from everybody. Why should Hetty seize upon everything? The wealth—the place—and the man who did not love her? Her heart

whispered that he was hers. Hers by right to take, whatever might befall——

A breath of air came sighing through the trees and rustled the leaves in the hedgerow. The summer was not yet come. There was still a chilliness in the evening breeze, and it touched her as it passed. She felt cold and shivered. A troubled thought rushed whirling into her brain that froze her joy and blighted her gladness, so that this too early happiness withered and the bright visions faded away.

“It will kill her if you break it off,” she cried, in a sudden agony.

To him her anguish was an admission of her love.

“I know you love me, Maggie,” he cried wildly, his voice trembling with emotion. “Say you love me.” And he seized both her hands and held them fast.

She dared not speak the words, but she did not struggle to be free.

He drew her closer to him. For one brief moment he held her to his heart and pressed his lips upon her cheek.

From the gloom behind them burst the sound of half-smothered mirth. A pair of idyllic lovers, for whom there was no tragedy in courtship, wandering noiselessly down the grove of apple trees, had stopped only a few yards away. Finding themselves discovered, they quickly disappeared amongst the mysterious shadows under the branches.

The presence of people so near to them, their laughter and light-hearted flight, broke the spell that for a moment love had cast upon the girl. She tore herself away from his embrace and hastily snatched up the work-bag from beside the fallen trunk.

“We must part at once!” she cried impetuously.

"We must never see each other again. No! No! You shall not come with me."

"Let me take you safely beyond the fields."

"No! No!" she repeated with firmness, and then she implored. "Leave me—please leave me."

Her misery was so great that he could not disobey. He followed her only to the little gate, and so after all they parted, without farewell.

She was already very near to Bristlington, and in a few minutes her eager haste brought her safely within the four walls of her rooms. The tea she had ordered was laid in readiness. Yes, she would have some tea, she assented, scarcely knowing what she said, and some paper to write some letters, please—that would be all. And so, very quickly she was left in the solitude she longed for.

She leaned upon the table and covered her face in her hands. She did not cry or sob, or even weep. She was no longer angry with Hetty. She had confessed her love, and her soul felt guilty of the very meanness with which she had been charged. All her emotions, even the love that burnt so fiercely an hour ago, were chilled and numb. She could not feel her own misery, and her hopelessness saw nothing left but to creep away and die.

Yet all the while she knew quite clearly what she would do. There was the paper, the pen and ink, waiting for her to send the word she had not been able to speak. She must bid him farewell in a way that was unmistakable; and that quickly, too, for fear that he should break off his engagement. "It would kill her! It would kill her!" The phrase for ever went on whirling in her brain, until her eyes ached and her temples throbbed with it. "It would kill her! It would

kill her!" Then Oakleigh and all the fortune must come to herself. The thought added a new horror to her fear. It was like contemplating murder for gain even to think of it.

But although her intention never wavered, this last word was hard to write. It was almost morning before she nerved herself to take the pen, and then, without a pause, she wrote:

"We shall not see each other again. I know you will do what is honourable. We must say good-bye at the stile where we met last evening, and all the rest is forgotten. By the time you get this I shall have gone away. Good-bye."

There were wafers upon the inkstand. Not trusting herself to read she folded the paper and hastily sealed it in three places. But how was she to send it without the delay of the post? The tacit admission of her love had made her strangely reticent, and she scrupled to entrust it to the hands of a hired messenger. At last she remembered that she must write also to Mr. Kinton, and decided to enclose it to him for immediate delivery.

In this letter she begged the lawyer to obtain her things from Oakleigh, and promised that after a day or two she would, in strict confidence, send him her address and ask him to visit her upon a matter of business.

The following morning she hired a fly from the "Green Dragon" and drove to a neighbouring town.

There, after an hour or two, she took the coach, and so, although not entirely unobserved, she passed for the present beyond the ken both of Oakleigh and Bristlington.

CHAPTER IX

THE BREAKING OFF

BUT in a locality where every man and woman was a strict moralist, the eccentric departure of a lady of good position could not fail to attract public attention and become the subject of much consideration. Every detail of the unexpected taking and equally hasty abandonment of Mr. Harry Crickshaw's lodgings was at once made known to all the world. It was discussed at the "Green Dragon" and in the village shop and street; and indeed—so subtle is the interweaving of all human affairs and interests—by distracting the mind of Bristlington, it did something towards undermining the already waning popularity of Mr. John Pudsey himself.

There was a whisper also that on the very night that Miss Lane left Oakleigh she met the young Squire secretly in the fields, and that they were overheard making arrangements for her flight. To most people this sounded incredible; and yet, since those who were loudest in their disbelief repeated it with the greatest frequency, the rumour grew. At last the most dispassionate observer could not fail to recognise that behind so much talk there must be a something—and anything so carefully concealed was very unlikely to be creditable.

Then, although she had never been liked, there sprang up a great deal of sympathy with Miss Henrietta Oswin. To be sure, if Mr. Rumblelow chose to marry her for her money, well and good; but then, let him stick to her. The marriage was quite popular in Bristlington, which contained a great number of small Rumblelow creditors, who argued that a wise patience at this moment might be rewarded by payment in full and future favours, whereas any injudicious pressing must result only in disaster and be remembered in the time to come. This feeling of confidence found great support in a statement constantly made in Bristlington that some very considerable amounts, for which the demands had been urgent, were already defrayed.

But gossip such as this, although upon the lips of everybody, was not likely, of course, to reach the ears of Hetty or John Rumblelow.

Weeks passed by and they were still engaged. The health of Hetty improved so rapidly that the wedding had been fixed for the end of July and preparations were busily being made. Oakleigh was full of excitement at the prospect of festivities, and John Rumblelow alone thought of the approaching ceremony with a sad heart. After the departure of Maggie he had firmly made up his mind to keep his promise, and from that moment, although it seemed to him that all the pride and happiness of life were sacrificed, his intention never wavered.

Upon the night after he had parted with Maggie he was beside himself with passion and excitement. He hurried home to Whorbury, and when the few servants still remaining there had been dismissed to bed, for hours he paced the silent empty mansion, a prey to a crowding multitude of changing and con-

flicting emotions. She loved him. That one moment of hesitation under the trees assured him of it. And yet she had left him abruptly—angrily—almost contemptuously, as if the recollection of this sordid engagement were enough to destroy her love. Yet she loved him—and therefore he could overcome her scruples and allay her fears. Without delay—to-morrow—he must hasten to her in Bristlington—fool that he had been not to find out where she had gone!—and force her to promise to go away and marry him. She must do so. He would plead his love and show her the misery of his intended marriage.

His heart was so oppressed that the air seemed heavy and close, and he could scarcely breathe. He went to his room and threw himself upon the bed, but his temples throbbed and he did not even close his eyes. He was so full of unrest that at last he could bear it no longer, and quite early in the morning he got up and went into the open air.

A pale mist hung over the park, denser and whiter in the valley where it clung to the river and marked its winding course. All the fields were covered thick with dew, glistening in the early sunlight that gleamed above the hilltops between long strips of cloud. Every blade and leaf was shining wet, and the damp air felt chilly and fresh as he strode on, his footsteps leaving a deep track upon the dripping grass. Regardless of time, he walked on and on. A dairyman driving back his cows after milking stopped to watch the young Squire until presently he passed out of sight into the wood.

“To be sure, with so many debts there must be a troubled mind,” was the man’s wise reflection as he strolled on again behind the patient beasts.

John Rumblelow, not keeping to the path, turned

off where the underwood had been cut some time before. For a long time he wandered aimlessly under the trees, sometimes pushing his way through the young copse, until at last he came out upon a road from Bristlington leading over a steep hill. He climbed the ascent and stood upon the brow of a sharp knoll. All the valley of Whorbury lay below; but, heedless of time, he had already been walking for hours and the sun was now risen high into the clear blue sky. The mist that hung over the meadows had melted away.

He could see the house, the river, the mill, the village, and the homesteads amongst their orchards, all at one glance. He loved the place, and yet he felt that he could be willing never to see it again. It had brought such disappointment, and in all these once happy places he had suffered such shame—inward shame that could not be fought against, but for ever wounded his self-respect. And how could he break it off with Hetty? The very things that hurt him most—the proposals that he should accept money and use the diamond—were prompted only by the desire to be of help to him. And once, in the stress of his difficulties, he had been half tempted to take her at her word. He shuddered at the recollection. In these six miserable months how his sense of honour must have become blunted! And Hetty loved him too, so much so that often her demonstrations of affection sickened him.

A hired fly, driven by a postboy from the "Dragon," came slowly crawling up the hill, and conscious of the strangeness of his loitering, he strolled along the road. At the hilltop the carriage quickened its pace, and presently overtook and passed him. A careless glance as it went by, and through the open window he caught

sight of the head of Margaret Lane. He also saw that she recognised him, for she hastily turned away, and then leaned back in the corner, where she was hidden from view.

Where could she be going? For a moment he was too surprised to speak. Then he shouted to the driver to stop, but it was too late. The horse was now travelling down the hill at a sling-trot, and his voice was drowned in the rattle of hoofs and rumble of wheels.

His first impulse was to hasten back to Whorbury, get a horse and follow her. He could easily trace the carriage, and perhaps overtake it before it reached its destination. He hurried down the hill, and took the nearest way across the fields, but at every step a feeling of hopelessness crept over him. His heart told him that she was fleeing from himself, and that when he found her she would refuse to speak to him. It cried out that she had ceased to love him—that his love was an unpardonable insult which she could not forgive. She had not even waved him a salutation as she passed.

As he reached the entrance to the house he saw the boy from Kineton's office bringing a letter. Notes and papers were constantly being sent of late, but they were always bills or duns, and he felt in no humour this morning for the consideration of business which was certain to be humiliating. He turned abruptly into the courtyard, but the boy hurried after him, and gave the letter into his hand.

He was about to tear it open with impatience, and then he saw the writing.

He moved quickly aside and read.

"There is no answer," he said sharply to the boy, and went indoors.

His breakfast had been waiting for hours, and he sat down to the table ; but no sooner was he alone than again he opened the sheet of paper, with its three lines, written somewhat aslant, and without address or signature. Then his own mind read into the communication a spirit that was not there. It was intentionally brief, and sent through Kinton to make the slight more marked. He felt that it was final, and the appeal to his honour touched him to the quick.

He knew now that he could not follow her, and fears for her safety began to trouble him greatly. But what was he to do? To be sure, Kinton had spoken of the matter only yesterday, and to go to him would be no more than to resume an unfinished conversation. He could not rest until he had ridden into Bristlington. But the lawyer, noting his eager anxiety, now became more reserved and evasive than ever. He had his suspicions, this shrewd little man with the gold spectacles, but he answered with an "Oh, yes; Miss Lane has since communicated with me. There has been some little disagreement, I believe. Perhaps it was natural under all the circumstances. It's no good to argue with an angry lady, you know. But I feel quite sure she will not act without my advice."

With no more than this John Rumblelow was forced to be content, and he rode back to Whorbury no happier than before. But now again his thoughts turned upon Hetty, and he felt that it was impossible for him to see her that day. At last he wrote her a line, saying that he had unexpectedly gone to Sir Peter's for a few days, and to make good his word he took advantage of a long-standing invitation and went. For a week Hetty endured a misery of uncertainty and jealousy, but before his return John Rumblelow firmly

made up his mind that he would keep his word, be the consequences what they may. Since then his purpose had never wavered, and now the marriage was to take place in a fortnight.

It was evening, after a day during which the heat had been intense. Hetty had spent the afternoon at Whorbury, where, for the present at least, they were to live; for with a nervous persistence which nothing could shake, she returned again and again to this point, and at last had won her wish. It was so obviously convenient, since her mother was to take care of Oakleigh until their minds were fully made up whether to let it or not, and John Rumblelow had become strangely compliant of late.

They had not long returned, and she and Mrs. Oswin were sitting under the chestnut trees in the cool shade.

Little Mrs. Oswin had been consulting an almanack, which still lay open upon her lap, at a page whereon were recorded the dates most favourable for the contracting of matrimony. She was charmed to find that the day chosen received the sanction of her favourite astrologer, for her belief in the almanack was so implicit, that even when she found it wrong she scarcely ventured to doubt.

“Ah! And it shall be all most for-tu-nate. For the nineteenth is a day when there will be good luck, and the moon will not be full for a week, and Innocents' Day this year will fall upon the Thursday, so it is all quite right, and the weather—let me see the weather.”

She took up the little paper-covered book, and turned over the leaves. “Yes. It shall be very warm and fair. But Hetty, you shall have to take care, for this is what it says: ‘Ladies with dark complexions should beware of poisons and infectious diseases——’”

"I can believe it," interrupted Hetty, with an attempt at a laugh, "if I judge by my feelings at this moment."

Then for a while she leant forward and groaned.

"Mother!" she presently cried out in alarm. "I feel very ill. It has come upon me quite suddenly. I must go into the house."

She tried to rise; but, with the effort to move, the pain which had seized upon her became so acute that she sank back in the chair and lay panting and exhausted. Little Mrs. Oswin took her hand, but it was cold—deathlike coldness and pallor were also upon her face, although great drops of sweat had already formed upon her forehead.

"Carry me indoors," she gasped. "It is burning me. I think—I think something terrible must have happened."

Mrs. Oswin screamed for help. A gardener came running across the lawn. Bracher heard through the open window and hurried out to see what was the matter.

Then, still in her chair, they carried Hetty through the great porch, across the hall and up the broad staircase to the panelled bedchamber in which she slept. And all the while poor little Mrs. Oswin followed close behind—imploring them to be careful, declaring that the poor lamb must have taken poison, and calling for somebody to ride for Dr. Podymore at once.

But when she had been put to bed Hetty became much easier, and at last lay quite still, as if the pain had left her. Dr. Podymore was not at home, but expected every moment. Yet the time passed on until the evening became quite dark, and still he had not come.

"You are better?" Mrs. Oswin kept constantly repeating. "It is gone?"

"Whilst I—do not move," faltered the girl with pain.

She pointed with her finger to a chair by the bedside as if wishing her mother to sit down.

"I think," she went on slowly, fixing her eyes intently upon her mother's face, "I am going to die. No, do not get up. Be still. I want to talk to you."

She paused for a moment. She was short of breath, and the effort of speaking was too much for her, so that again she writhed in agony. But presently it subsided and she went on once more.

"John does not love me—he has never loved me. He has not even said so. He was only going to marry me because I was so rich. I have known it all the time. But I love him—I love him——"

She broke off, unable to find words to express her passion. Then she raised her head from the pillow and sat up, leaning upon her elbow.

"If I could only live—live to have children—so that everything might be for them—I would not care." She leant further forward and the dark look of jealousy came again upon her face, as she went on in a deep whisper: "He is in love with Maggie. She went because I found it out. They understand each other. I believe they write. But I love him, mother—I love him so much that sometimes I could kill him for it."

Of a sudden her manner changed. She raised her voice and it became a wail of despair. "Now she will have it all; and he will marry her. Go down, mother. Quick! See if Dr. Podymore is coming. Send again to find him wherever he is. Make haste—go! I wish to be alone. There is something I must tell him too. I am much better now. Go—and leave me alone. I shall not rest until you go."

She had become so wildly excited and her manner was so peremptory, that poor little Mrs. Oswin, over-

come with terror, and utterly bewildered, could only obey. Yet only a short interval elapsed before her return, for Dr. Podymore's carriage quickly came in sight at the end of the drive, and she waited in the porch for him, that they might go up together. All the way up the stairs she kept telling him that her poor angel had spent the afternoon at Whorbury and must have taken poison.

They found Hetty lying quite still, like one worn out and exhausted by some exertion far beyond her strength. There was even a slight flush upon her cheek. The doctor called for candles. At once the shutters were closed and the great room grew dark except round the bedside.

Then the restlessness and anxiety that had sent away her mother returned upon her a hundredfold. She sat up in bed, and seizing old Dr. Podymore by the hand, began to talk to him in a low, rapid voice.

"I am so glad you have come. I was afraid you would be too late, and I have something—something I must tell you."

She glanced quickly around, as if fearing to be overheard, but no one else was present except her mother and she became reassured.

"I know that I am going to die. I shall not live until the morning. But I cannot go without speaking the truth," she began in a loud whisper, but with ever-increasing loudness and intensity. "I cannot bear the shame to rest upon my memory. The great diamond is missing—it is gone. I gave it to John—to John Rumblelow, you understand. All the money that I had was already gone. The money that was meant for Maggie—I had given it to him all. Then he asked me for the diamond, and we thought we could get it back after I

was married. He took it to get money upon it. He said he would borrow money upon it—but that it would be quite safe. I consented because he wished it. About a month ago—— Eh? What did you tell her? No, no; I am not delirious. My mind is clear—clear, and I swear it is the truth. He took it, I tell you. He took it—I thought of it first—for a security. And then there was another writ, and he—he came and fetched it.”

“Yes, to be sure; he came and fetched it,” echoed good old Dr. Podymore in his most soothing tone as he gently laid her head back upon the pillow. “He took it.”

“Yes! Yes! He took it.”

She gave a short, convulsive laugh.

But her fit of restlessness was over. From that moment she sank into insensibility, and before the morning, in spite of the efforts of old Dr. Podymore, she had passed away.

“A case of acute inflammation,” he told Bristlington on the following day. “There is nothing so sudden. She was a subject for it. I always feared it—always feared it. It was quite hopeless from the first. The poor lady was delirious before I got there.”

BOOK IV
THE TRIBULATION

CHAPTER I

PUDSEY WAS WRONG

“ I DO not hesitate to say, gentlemen,” said old Mr. Jennings with grave deliberation, and nodding as he looked around a select company of his fellow-burgesses, “that in my opinion—and it is an opinion largely prevalent in this municipal town—Pudsey was wrong.”

A hum of approval circled round the little group, which consisted chiefly of those Councillors who had followed the Mayor upon the occasion of his withdrawal. Pudsey was wrong; and disloyalty, latterly suspected in a few doubtful cases, was beginning to assume the proportions of a raging epidemic. Pudsey was certainly wrong.

“Not but what I consider His Worship morally right,” cried Mr. Harry Crickshaw; “but then, his animosity against Alderman Oswin was quite sufficient to blind him to the true bearings of the matter.

“Certainly!” conceded old Mr. Jennings with genial consideration, and he turned at once towards Mr. John Pudsey, sitting disconsolate and very uncomfortable in his customary armchair. “Certainly, nobody would accuse our worthy fellow-townsmen of wilful delinquency, but as a question of procedure, Pudsey was wrong. Pudsey was hasty. Pudsey was impolitic.

Pudsey was deficient in foresight in respect of the position in which he was about to place his friends."

Old Mr. Jennings paused a moment, and then proceeded to amplify this indictment, emphasising the various points as they arose with a wave of his forefinger. "Pudsey was wrong—in declaring that he would not sit. Pudsey was impolitic—in vacating the chair after the declaration that he would not sit. Pudsey was deficient in foresight—since he has led his supporters into a complication from which there is no dignified extraction. I must say," and here the ancient auctioneer and land agent became very stern, "that when I followed His Worship out of the chamber upon that occasion, I did it in full confidence that he saw clearly the course he was about to pursue."

It was an informal meeting of the Mayor's supporters held in the parlour of the "Green Dragon"—and there had been many such of late. Night after night excited burgesses dropped in to give His Worship a few home-thrusts and lament the plight of Bristlington; but neither taunts nor appeal wrought the slightest effect. Night after night Mr. John Pudsey remained silent, and—except that he was becoming a little more round, a little more rubicund, and possibly a little more apoplectic—unchanged.

It was in vain to lay the matter clearly before him and urge the necessity for compromise. With stolid determination, but without excitement, John Pudsey had invariably replied that he would not sit.

But to-night it had been arranged that "pressure" must be brought to bear upon the Mayor.

"The facts are these," explained the Nestor of Bristlington for the fiftieth time: "His Worship will not sit until the Alderman has withdrawn the offensive

word ; but the Alderman cannot eliminate the objectionable epithet until the Mayor is sitting. The contention therefore constitutes the horns of a dilemma which for six months has made our native town the laughing-stock of all the country for fifty miles around."

There was no point upon which a Bristlingtonian was so sensitive as the reputation of his native town, and every man present winced with the exception of the Mayor. He remained inflexible. To tell the sad truth, the description of himself in verse as a golden-spangled hen had so hardened his sensibilities that he was no longer susceptible to reason or argument. As he said at the time, it was not himself that he cared about, one whit, but the slur cast upon the civic robe and chain.

Then the conversation became general. The burghesses talked aloud to each other, for the most part across the parlour, completely ignoring the presence of the gentleman of whom they talked, a plan which combines the advantage of untrammelled freedom of speech with absolute privacy of opinion.

"Well, it was the stupidest thing that ever came under my knowledge."

"Certainly! for now the Mayor is bound to stultify himself."

"And that's a pretty spectacle for the world at large."

"Job Oswin will never withdraw."

"Not if I know the man."

But at the mention of Job Oswin things took an unexpected turn. Mr. Harry Crickshaw chipped in with a bit of exclusive information.

"I say. What do you think? Do you know anything?"

"No. What is it?"

"Why, haven't any of you heard?"

"No. Not a sound."

"Job Oswin's got little Mrs. Oswin there now. She won't stay at Oakleigh until Miss Lane comes back. She goes about all over the place saying that Mr. John Rumblelow poisoned her daughter in order to marry Miss Margaret Lane. She says John Rumblelow has had thousands out of the girl. I tell you, old Dr. Podymore is furious, and so is Lawyer Kinton too. The poor girl said this when she was delirious. But Job Oswin declares he'll take the matter up. He swears he'll get to the bottom of it some way or the other."

"Then there will be a pretty shindy in Bristlington."

"But there's no truth in it, for certain?"

"Well, some very funny things have been said. It makes a man wonder a little—not about poison, of course; but—but money was wanted."

"Oh, yes, money was wanted."

"But then we all know what Bristlington is and how people talk—though it is not so much what they say, but what they hint."

"Ah, yes! what they hint."

"Delirium invariably proceeds by contraries," cried old Mr. Jennings, raising his voice to be heard above the babel. "I may be wrong, and if so the future will refute me, but I venture to predict—and I think I am not prone to a premature expression of opinion—that Alderman Oswin will find another mare's nest. That, however, I presume will not minimise the pitfall into which Pudsey has run his head."

So again public attention was directed to the unfortunate Mayor, who under pressure was beginning to get fidgety and to fiddle with his fingers and shuffle with his feet.

"There is only one way," continued the ancient oracle. "Oswin must consent to substitute, and Pudsey must sit."

"Never!" cried the adamantine chief magistrate of Bristlington—"never as long as I live."

"I should suggest," went on old Mr. Jennings without deigning to notice, "that some gentleman of experience in transacting business of delicacy—I would not undertake the commission myself—should be delegated to call upon Mr. Alderman Oswin and induce him to undertake to substitute the word '*omitted*.' Then all I can say is, the ground being cut from under Pudsey's feet, he will have no alternative but to sit."

"Unless he desires to sacrifice the public interest to a private pique."

"Or to be the butt of everybody."

"Or to look like a cod-fish and stare and say nothing."

"He must sit."

"Of course he must sit."

"Then what the devil do we appoint a Deputy-Mayor for?" The words rang out above the general hubbub. There was silence at once. Exasperated, under pressure anything but gentle, yet by no means crushed, Mr. John Pudsey had leapt suddenly to his feet. He stood at bay, and glared defiantly around, challenging the boldest to reply to the repeated inquiry, "What the devil do we appoint a Deputy-Mayor for?"

It was a question never before asked in Bristlington, where the appointment had always been taken as a matter of course. The chosen individual, being upon all occasions ceremoniously and respectfully addressed as "Mr. Deputy-Mayor," added much to the dignity of the town, but his utility had not within the memory of man been put to the test. Always in reserve, he

shone unnoticed like a star in daylight in presence of the sun, and such the glory of the civic regalia, no Mayor of Bristlington had ever been known to suffer even temporary eclipse.

The effect was instantaneous. To be sure—the Deputy-Mayor! Nobody had ever thought of him. And here was His Worship all the while with a trump card up his civic sleeve.

“What did I tell you, gentlemen? What did I say?” cried old Mr. Jennings, rising hastily and picking up his stick. “I said we followed His Worship in full confidence. Gentlemen, that confidence has not been misplaced. I will myself—with the Mayor’s permission—approach Mr. Alderman Oswin without delay. I shall just catch him at home. I shall—with the Mayor’s approval—suggest “*omitted.*” He will certainly be at home.” And without waiting for either permission or approval he prepared to hurry away.

But Mr. John Pudsey, finding himself lifted upon a sudden tidal wave of popularity, was less accommodating.

“*Unwittingly omitted,*” he shouted.

Old Mr. Jennings, already toddling out of the door, echoed back, “*Unwittingly omitted,*” and was gone.

Mr. Alderman Oswin at once cordially responded. He explained that he had no private animus in the matter, and that his only desire was to vindicate the inviolability of the minute-book, an object now attained. But he could not accept “*unwittingly.*” “*Omitted*” he at once heartily embraced; but “*unwittingly*” was not the truth. He suggested the alternative “*with design.*” “*With design omitted,*” Mr. Alderman Oswin considered might meet the case.

Old Mr. Jennings returned prepared to recommend this, but Mr. John Pudsey at once shook his head. He would not even listen to the word "*design*," which he said to his mind conveyed an imputation against the Town Clerk. He further proposed "*inadvertently*."

Mr. Alderman Oswin refused "*inadvertently*" without comment.

And such was the nice discrimination of language begotten in Bristlington of municipal life that fully a week elapsed before a word adequate to the occasion could be selected. With an air of mystery in his manner, and an expression of phenomenal earnestness upon his face, old Mr. Jennings trotted to and fro between the parties all day long; but there were moments when an adjustment so delicate threatened to overtax the wit of Bristlington, even aided by Johnson's Dictionary.

The Alderman suggested "*purposely*."

But this was rejected on the question of style, for the Mayor considered it sounded petty, and Mr. Harry Crickshaw despised it as both feminine and childish.

He thought of "*intentionally*." Yet, although nothing could be brought against this truly unobjectionable adverb, it found no favour.

At last a happy inspiration flashed across the brain of Mr. Harry Crickshaw.

"Why not '*wittingly*'?" he asked.

"A most eligible word," cried old Mr. Jennings, and clapped his hands in glee.

"It does not pledge anybody to anything," said Mr. Harry Crickshaw with the airy carelessness of one who, knowing the value of his suggestion, is not going to expend valuable breath in pressing it. The word at

once found unanimous favour, and was cordially accepted by Alderman Oswin, who very quickly assumed the credit of having selected it himself. Within a quarter of an hour of this happy reconciliation it was known all over Bristlington that an adjourned meeting of the Municipal Council had been convened, and that an extraordinary meeting was to take place immediately afterwards. Then for the next three days the town waited, expectant, feverish with suppressed excitement, since it was whispered that upon the occasion of His Worship's resumption of the chair the ceremonial would be most dignified and impressive.

And so it proved. Over the adjourned meeting the Deputy-Mayor presided, as everybody afterwards admitted, with both grace and efficiency. The Alderman expressed a desire to substitute for the objectionable word "*suppressed*," the phrase "*wittingly omitted*," which he trusted would prove acceptable. The Deputy-Mayor silently bowed his consent. Mr. Alderman Oswin then rose again, and commenced what promised, from his demeanour, to be a long speech, when he was interrupted by the quiet voice of the Town Clerk.

"I do not know," interposed Mr. Kinton, and his shrewd little features looked sharper still under his horsehair wig, "whether Mr. Alderman Oswin will desire to continue his remarks, since the deleted words have been replaced more than six months ago."

The Alderman then graciously admitted that, such being the case, he had no more to say.

The Deputy-Mayor, having first signed the minutes of the last meeting, then rose. "Aldermen and gentlemen of the Municipal Town of Bristlington," he said, "it will be my privilege, as it will be my delight, without

delay to wait upon His Worship the Mayor, and inform him of what has taken place."

At once the old Council-chamber resounded with unanimous cries of "Hear, hear!" and "Support the Deputy-Mayor!" Here the whole Corporation, rising as one man, followed the Deputy-Mayor out of the doorway, across the courtyard, past the robing-room, and down the street to the residence of Mr. John Pudsey. Mounting the step, the Deputy-Mayor at once raised his hand to ring the bell, but before his fingers could possibly reach the knob the door was promptly opened by the senior Sergeant-at-Mace, and His Worship, fully robed and chained, and carrying his cocked-hat in his hand, stepped, with nervous alacrity, out upon the doorstep.

The assembled population of Bristlington raised a cheer. The Deputy-Mayor, in a voice inaudible in the tumult, was seen to inform His Worship of what had happened. His Worship graciously bowed, then turned, and, with an imperial wave of the forefinger, beckoned to both Sergeants-at-Mace, who, thus summoned, hastened forward, bearing the symbols of office. The time-honoured procession quickly formed, and, followed by the multitude, wended its way back to the Council-chamber, where, amidst deafening applause, the interim was brought to an end and John Pudsey sat.

It was on this occasion that Mr. John Pudsey made the memorable speech which, if old Mr. Jennings was a judge of oratory—and who should be if he were not?—had never been equalled from the civic chair of Bristlington, and will never be excelled.

He rose and said—

"Mr. Deputy-Mayor, Aldermen and Gentlemen,—It is within the knowledge of you all that for a period

of time there has existed in this Ancient Municipal Town of Bristlington" (*Hear, hear! Hear, hear!*) "an apparent—I speak advisedly, gentlemen" (*Hear!*)—"an apparent conflict between two great principles." (*Hear, hear!*) "I refer, gentlemen—if I may so express myself—to the chastity of the minute-book and the inviolability of the Chair. This Chair, gentlemen, of which for a brief term I am the unworthy custodian" (*No, no!*)—"the unworthy custodian—it is my loftiest aspiration to pass on to its next occupant untarnished and unimpaired. Gentlemen, the integrity of the minute-book is no less dear to me. And the honour of the Chair is no less dear to our esteemed fellow-townsmen Mr. Alderman Oswin. Gentlemen, his warmth was but zeal, and we respect him for it, and we recognise—and the town has long recognised—that there is no man living more worthy of the gratitude of his native town than Mr. Alderman Oswin." (*Hear, hear! Hear, hear!*)

Upon this Mr. Alderman Oswin rose and affirmed defiantly, as if expecting to find it disputed, that there was no man in Bristlington—nay, in this county of Somesuchshire—nay, in this home of freedom, our native kingdom of England, more respected, more beloved, more esteemed, than our worthy Mayor, His Worship John Pudsey, Esquire.

Then old Mr. Jennings, as he gracefully put it, got upon his feet to express the opinion—an opinion which might, however, be wrong—that Bristlington had never before known two such sons as His Worship John Pudsey, Esquire, and Mr. Alderman Oswin. Mr. Harry Crickshaw said the town might well be gratified at the tone in which the struggle had been conducted; and everybody in turn said something so pleasant and

silken that, for the time being, the Corporation chamber became a land of milk and honey, and, overcome by emotion, the Mayor shed tears.

For a moment he fumbled for his handkerchief under the civic gown ; and, when he had wiped his eyes, the meeting proceeded to the business of the day.

That, however, awakened little interest in the town, for Bristlingtonians were already busy with the rumour that, as to that other matter, Job Oswin had determined to take it up and push through with it to the bitter end.

CHAPTER II

THE RETURN

ALMOST a month elapsed after the death of Hetty Oswin before Maggie Lane was able to return to Oakleigh Court. At the time of her sudden accession to fortune she was staying with a branch of her father's family in Midlandshire; for Mr. Kinton, wisely considering that ten thousand was no mean sum in itself, but only when compared with Josiah Oswin's gigantic fortune, had some time ago communicated with the Lanes, setting forth her independent position, her isolation, and the possibility that she might some day inherit great wealth. In response Maggie was invited to Midlandshire, and urged by the lawyer, who pointed out that she might be the means of bringing about a reconciliation between her father and his family, she accepted the invitation and had remained there ever since.

But this delay, whilst it increased her longing to be back in her old home, also whetted the curiosity of the village concerning her return, and many were the rumours of her expected arrival. At last, one warm day early in August, it became known that Miss Lane was to arrive in the afternoon. "And that's certain sure," insisted Miss Keziah Crane loftily, "for Bracher the butler told me so himself, out of his very own mouth."

The news ran round Oakleigh in no time, and very shortly after midday everybody of importance had assembled at the doorway of the shop. But the conversation did not hum so merrily as in the time gone by, for the reason that, in a community where the highest morality was never to differ from popular opinion, nobody cared to be the one to speak first.

"You've all heard tell what's said," began Miss Keziah Crane, feeling her way gently. "Now, what do ee all think?"

"I do know what I do think," said Mrs. William Cotching, slowly and wisely shaking her head.

"An' so do I, too," broke in little Dorothy Chick.

"An' so do I, too," echoed long Selina Hallett; "but tidden for I to say."

"No more tidden."

"No more 'tis."

"Now, that's what I do think myself," continued Miss Keziah Crane with impressive emotion, "and this much I would say, that if wrong have been done—whether by high or low—I do hope, please the Almighty, that mid all come out."

The piety of the wish at once set everybody at ease and loosened every tongue.

"You see, there she was, up and well—and then she was gone. An' not so much as a teaspoon o' physic to help her like," reflected Mrs. William Cotching, who felt the pathos of this deprivation since in her time she had swallowed gallons of physic to remedy quite imaginary disorders.

"I said so to old Dr. Podymore, I did, when he rode over to see our John for the St. Anthony Fire," cried little Mrs. Chick excitedly. "I said I would to Sally Hallett—didn't I, Sally Hallett, that day that Mrs.

William Cotching killed a pig?—an' I did. I said, la! 'Dr. Podymore, do look as if she must ha' got poisoned, though we can't tell how.' 'Bless the ooman!'—so he said, quite angry like—an' I told Miss Keziah Crane the same the very same day, didn't I, Miss Keziah Crane? 'Bless the ooman! there is natures can poison their own selves unbeknown till they do honeycomb their insides into holes and then die to once.' Do make a body feel all over uncomfortable like—don't it?"

"Well, I do believe she poisoned herself for love," said Sally Hallett with decision. "An' she looked like one that could do it, to my mind."

"What! When she were to marry the one she wanted?" they all scoffed in chorus.

"Well, I do then," insisted Sally Hallett, determined to have a romance. "For what must a girl's feelings be to know the one she promised is all for another, an' that other for he. For the young Squire *was* a-kissing o' Miss Lane that night under the apple trees, for I saw it myself, wi' my very own eyes, and I *did* declare I never would tell, but now I have—so there!"

"Ah!" sighed Miss Keziah Crane, for she lamented such a falling off in the Miss Margaret Lane whom she had always so much admired. "There was more than showed."

"An' is," cried Mrs. William Cotching decisively.

"An' more to come to light. For they in Bristlington that have got it in hand don't mean to let it rest. And that I do know," cried Sally Hallett.

And so they tattled on, until at last there arose a little cloud of white summer dust above the hedgerows of the winding road, and then a carriage came in sight.

"'Tis she!" "No, it isn't!" "Yes, 'tis, I tell ee!" "So 'tis!" they whispered, elbowing each other in excitement

as the carriage drew near. Then they all curtsayed to her as she passed. "Miss Crane, Mrs. Cotching," said her lips as she nodded to each. "Ah, well! She's Fortune's darling again, whether or no," cried one. "And so she is," they all agreed; for the frankness of her smile in response to their salutation went to their hearts, and from that time forth they thought harm only of John Rumblelow.

And the sight of these homely people, whom she had known from infancy, was pleasant also to Margaret Lane. She turned her head and glanced back at them, after she had passed; and the familiar faces of this group of village folk, staring after her in wonder, just as though they had never seen her before, for the first time made her fully realise the startling change that had befallen her. Hitherto she dared not think of it—the death of Hetty came upon her with such astounding suddenness, that it filled her soul with awe. But this afternoon her mind was carried back to a time, more than two years ago, before Hetty had even come to stay, and when she was a kind of mistress in Oakleigh, with only Uncle Jos. The illusion was not dispelled when presently the carriage drew up in front of the great porch. Bracher shuffled forward, bowing, to open the carriage door, and old Dr. Podymore, who hastened out to welcome her, helped her to alight, and ceremoniously led her into the house.

"I am a self-invited guest for a few days, my dear lady," beamed the old gentleman, both proud of his rich trusteeship and fond of his ward.

"I am so glad," she cried, smiling her gratitude, and they sat down in the hall by an open window looking out upon the lawns.

"How is Mrs. Oswin?" she asked him quickly, in a

low voice. "I quite understand that she could not bear to stay here."

The old gentleman winced, and she saw his face become suddenly grave.

"I am afraid she is almost beside herself," he presently said half-testily, and then tried at once to explain it away by adding, "But she had never a strong mind, you know, my dear."

"It was so sudden," reflected the girl sadly. "Shall I go to see her?"

"Perhaps you had better not—better not for the present, my dear. We must have a little chat together—quite a business interview. Kinton will come over on purpose one of these days. Not now, but at an early opportunity, when you have settled down a little."

After this no more was said of Hetty or her mother, and very soon old Dr. Podymore went away to make some visits, and Maggie was left alone. For an hour or two she was occupied with the business of her return; but towards evening, when the trees were casting long shadows across the lawns, she strolled out of doors and loitered in the cool shade.

One by one she visited the familiar places where she had spent so many happy moments in the spring. But during her absence everything had changed. The gold-crest's nest still hung under the cedar branch, but the young had hatched and flown some time ago, and somebody had torn the tits' bottle out of the thorn bush. The birds to which they used to listen had ceased from song. A few weeks and they would be gone away again across the seas. A sadness crept over her as she thought of Hetty's death, and then she fell to wondering whether John Rumblelow had been very sorry after all when Hetty was snatched away so suddenly, and whether

Hetty had thought of her and forgiven her before she died.

Every nook and corner was haunted with some reminiscence of John Rumblelow, but at the thought of seeing him again she trembled with anxiety and fear. How would it happen, and where would it be? The letter she had written was abrupt and unkind. The appeal to his honour now arose before her mind as something hideous and insulting. Besides, she had turned away upon the hill and shrunk back as if the mere sight of him were hateful to her.

With a sense of loneliness there grew also upon her a feeling of self-depreciation. She fetched the key and went into the little church, and stood near to the old Rumblelow monument beside the vault, where the flat stone had been so recently relaid. Then all the rest was forgotten, and only the generosity of Hetty survived. She had wished to set right the injustice done by Uncle Jos. Already money was saved to do so; and all her irritability had been due only to her illness. In the dim light of the pillared nave all the littlenesses of the past melted away, until there remained only the memory of a Hetty glorified by death, and free from all weaknesses—even those that lie nearest to the human heart.

It was close upon sunset when she left the church, and a glow of yellow eventide was shining through the dark cedars and between the holly bushes. But she had not seen enough of her beloved Oakleigh; and, carrying the great key in her hand, she walked quickly down to the meadows, and then was tempted to run across to take one look at the brook.

She had scarcely entered the field when she came upon John Rumblelow.

Her surprise at seeing him there, in a spot so private and unexpected, was so great that she could not conceal her astonishment. But she quickly recovered herself, and stepped forward to speak to him.

He too was so disconcerted that he at once began to falter an explanation.

"I heard you were to come home to-day. I—I did not dream of meeting you. But I could not stay away. I thought that in the evening you would be out-of-doors, and perhaps I might just catch sight of you upon the terrace."

She turned back towards the house. "Won't you come in?" she asked him. "Dr. Podymore will be there very soon."

"Not to-night; but I will walk back with you if I may."

They strolled into the garden, wandering unconsciously to the very place where formerly they had been so often together. It was so natural to be there again, that the spirit of her letter to him was realised. They had left off at the stile where they met upon the evening when he avowed his love, and all that came afterwards was ignored; nor did the recollection of their brief half-hour place any restraint upon them, or destroy the freedom of their old confidential friendship.

"You have been staying with your father's people, Kinton told me. How did you like Midlandshire?" he asked her, as they drew near the house.

"It is not half so beautiful as this," she answered with enthusiasm, and stopped to glance round once more at the familiar woods and hills.

"Were they kind to you?"

She hesitated a little, whilst candour compelled the reflection that she had not been very happy at first, and

even less so when her sudden accession to fortune made her the object of universal enthusiasm.

“Oh, yes, they were quite kind; only—I was never really at home, and always longing for the old familiar places.”

“Nobody knows that feeling more than myself. It seems to me that there is no spot on earth to compare with Whorbury.”

Her ear found an underlying sadness in the tone of his voice; it was easy to understand that his love of Whorbury was mingled with regret. All the while she had felt that he was greatly changed since they parted some three months ago. The light-heartedness of the old days was gone, and many troubles had made him grave; but he loved her still—of that she could be quite certain. And she loved him with a deeper tenderness because he was unhappy, and her heart whispered that he had need of her. She was glad that he said nothing of his love; and yet it seemed to her that some hidden care troubled his mind.

Just then the plump little figure of old Dr. Podymore came bustling towards them along the terrace.

“May I come to see you to-morrow?” asked John Rumblelow eagerly.

“Yes, come to-morrow,” she replied in a whisper, for Dr. Podymore was already close by.

They stood all together and talked for a few minutes; and presently, at the porch, John Rumblelow took his leave, and the girl went indoors.

Old Dr. Podymore preferred a quiet walk by himself, intending, doubtless, to think about his patients whilst enjoying the delightful cool of the evening. But his thoughts did not wander from the case of Margaret Lane, and many a time he chuckled to himself—a little,

continuous, self-satisfied chuckle, that caused his ribs to shake, and his goffered shirt-front to vibrate.

"She must have written to let him know the very minute she was coming," he reflected, and laughed again, and then shook his head. "No doubt there is something in what they have been saying. You never can tell, and, as they always say, these quiet ones are the most deep."

But whilst he thus pondered, he kept repeating aloud, as elderly gentlemen given to contemplation frequently will, time after time, the same little phrase :—

"Oh, well! Oh, well! Oh, well!"

Which only meant that old Dr. Podymore was quite prepared to pronounce a favourable prognosis upon the case.

CHAPTER III

THE ANNIVERSARY

THE beautiful summer days passed slowly by, but nothing happened to tempt Maggie from the seclusion of Oakleigh. She had seen no one from Bristlington but old Dr. Podymore, for Lawyer Kineton's visit had more than once been postponed; but John Rumblelow, it was noticed in the village, walked over from Whorbury "every afternoon of his life, so regular as a church clock."

So they were constantly together.

Sometimes they sat for hours under the shade of the broad-leaved chestnut trees, or, unconscious that their doings could be of interest to anybody but themselves, strolled in the quiet woods, or even by the riverside, within sight of the road to Bristlington. John Rumblelow did not speak of love. Yet, by a thousand signs, she knew that he loved her. The loss of gaiety which was so noticeable in him she found natural enough, and she felt grateful for his reserve. She also found it easy to understand the delicacy of feeling which could not so quickly forget the sadness of poor Hetty's sudden death.

But one afternoon the tying of a fly gave them an excuse to sit in the summer-house. The place was delightfully sweet and cool, for the windows at this

season were half-covered with the green leafage of encroaching creepers that clambered over the walls and shut out the light, and the open door showed nothing but a mottled shade from overhanging trees.

She sat down in the old oak chair, and presently he unburdened his heart of the past and again spoke of his love for her.

“Do you know this is an anniversary?”

She looked perplexed. She did not in the least understand his meaning.

“It is exactly twelve months ago that you poached the fish from the bridge.”

She appeared to question it for a moment, and then she realised that indeed a year had passed.

“It seems impossible,” she said. “The time has gone so fast.”

“To me it has been a lifetime,” he replied mournfully.

Her sympathy with his troubles was so deep, and her unexpressed love for him so tender, that she unconsciously laid her hand on his arm as she tried to comfort him.

“At least,” she whispered, thinking of Whorbury and the bailiffs and all the rest of it, “they were not of your own making.”

“Yes,” he said with decision, “all that really distresses me was my own fault.”

“Your mind exaggerates,” she told him. “It does not seem so to me.”

“I will tell you,” he burst out, speaking very quickly from a sudden impulse to disburden his soul. “Twelve months ago I had never suffered a care, and never even thought a meanness. I fell in love with you then—that evening—and I have loved you ever since. But I was too weak or too proud to obey the longing of my heart ;

and almost at that moment I found that Whorbury, which had been everything to me, was in reality little more than a name. Nothing but exile lay before me. Yet even that I felt might be happy if only I had your love. I pictured the very thing you afterwards spoke of in this very place—fighting it out and making a way for ourselves. But I only dreamt about it. I had not the force of will to win you and undertake it. And the other thing was so easy. Sometimes it even looked like a duty——”

“Yes, I can understand that,” she interposed quietly.

“Well, you know how it turned out. A fortnight later the crisis came, and my grandfather went away. But the more I saw you the more I loved you; and the more I realised the hopeless state of affairs, the more despicable it seemed to marry only for money. I wanted to break it off, but that was impossible——”

She raised her hand to stop him. He saw her shudder and she was trembling with agitation, for he seemed to be speaking of that night under the apple-trees.

“If you had done so,” she cried, “we could never have forgiven ourselves.”

“You saved me from that,” he replied, in all sincerity and gratitude. “After your letter, I set myself to keep my word, and I—I loyally tried to make her happy.”

“She was happy, you may be sure. She loved you madly. So why should you upbraid yourself?”

He rose from his chair and paced restlessly across the room.

“I will tell you what mortifies me beyond everything,” he cried. “I could not speak of it to anyone else in the world. After all was arranged and the day fixed, an unexpected money difficulty arose. I was at my wits’ end. The rascals, no doubt, saw their oppor-

tunity. I might have been arrested for debt. I could not allow a public scandal then—on the eve of my wedding. And Hetty had before urged me to take money of her, until we quite quarrelled about it. She had saved a large sum. We were to be married in a month. I was weak enough to accept it to meet the emergency."

"That was the greatest pleasure she ever had," cried the girl, and her face brightened with joyful emotion.

"But it is gone and I cannot repay it."

"It was hers to give," she argued eagerly, and then a sadness fell upon her as she added: "Poor Hetty! It was to have been saved for me."

"It would have gone to Mrs. Oswin," he sighed. "It is a sort of debt of honour, and the thought of it vexes me beyond expression."

"You remind me that I may be wanted," said the girl, at the same time rising as if to go. "I understand what you feel and sympathise with you with all my heart. But do not be anxious about Mrs. Oswin. I mean to be very liberal to her. Mr. Kinton is to come this very afternoon, and that is one of the first things to be considered."

She paused a moment, then moved slowly towards the door, then stopped again.

"I think people are too proud about money," she said, but without looking at him. "Now I have this—this great fortune. What good could it do me if I might not help anyone—anyone I was fond of?"

"How I have wished you were poor," he cried fervently, "and I had everything to offer."

"You aspire to be another Rumblelow Cophetua," she suggested, with a little laugh that for want of gaiety came to an untimely end.

"No, not even that. I could be happy to be anything

without meanness—a labourer in a cottage—if I might marry the woman I love.”

There was silence, except for the gentle rustling of the leaves against the walls and upon the trees around. She was standing very near to the open doorway, but as he finished speaking she had turned away and he could not see her face. But he saw that her shoulders quivered and her breathing was short and quick.

“I will marry you,” she said slowly, in a voice very low, but at the same time most clear and distinct, “if you will agree to one condition.”

He sprang towards her. He would have caught her in his arms ; but there came a hasty step upon the path, the unmistakable shuffle of Bracher seeking his mistress. Bracher had searched many places in vain, and as he bent forward his venerable head and gave the information, “Mr. Kington, miss,” his confidential whisper seemed to be tinged with a melancholy bordering upon mute reproach.

“Coming, Bracher !”

With nervous haste she stepped out upon the path, and hurrying between the trees, stood in the open light and sun.

Then she turned round, waited until John Rumblelow was by her side, and again walked quickly towards the house.

“You have not told me the condition,” he said, “though I am dying to fulfil it.”

“Some other time must do,” she laughed, and quickened her pace.

“Make the anniversary complete,” he implored of her, “and come down this evening to the riverside.”

“I may not be able to get away,” she answered ; and at the same moment abruptly held out her hand to say “Good-bye.”

Yet as their eyes met she relented, and as they parted she whispered, "I will if I can."

The two trustees awaited her without impatience, solemnly chatting over a bottle of the late Josiah Oswin's port. Their conversation appeared to be of a peculiarly confidential nature, for they were leaning forward until their faces nearly touched; and although the lawyer had put on his gold spectacles, the bundle of papers by his side remained untied. As she entered they drew back, but with significant glances at each other which promised that the subject should be resumed hereafter. Were they saying that she would marry John Rumblelow? the girl thought.

However, they turned to business with alacrity, and their progress was most remarkable. For at all matters of business dear old Dr. Podymore was a jewel of the first water. He got such a quick grip of the subject and proceeded with such despatch, that things appeared to be settled in no time. He had one universal remedy for every complication—a solution for every difficulty. A lingering explanation of six months' rent in hand he set right in a minute with a "But you may leave all that to Kinton, my dear lady." And when Mrs. Oswin was spoken of, and Maggie, with feverish anxiety, reiterated that she wished to be liberal, "to be extremely liberal," he advised, in a whisper supported by something almost like a wink, "Leave that to Kinton, my dear. Leave that to Kinton."

So everything went, as people say, on wheels, and the plate had been checked off on the inventory and found correct, when old Dr. Podymore, with much importance, put his hand in his breeches pocket and drew forth a key.

"It will be enough for one of us to attend Miss

Lane," suggested little Mr. Kinton with considerate self-abnegation as he poured out for himself another glass of port.

Old Dr. Podymore offered his arm. Together they ascended the broad staircase, and with a stately formality, due to the importance of their mission, he bowed to Maggie as he opened the door and stood aside for her to enter the great panelled chamber in which both poor Uncle Jos and Hetty had passed away.

The room struck her as unexpectedly dark and gloomy and the air seemed close and oppressive; but there was no time for melancholy reflection, as old Dr. Podymore, having first turned the key against possible intrusion, mounted a chair and began at once both to explain and illustrate the opening of the secret chest. At last with birdlike agility he hopped from his pedestal to hand her the little morocco case of the great heirloom diamond.

The good gentleman was making quite a little speech, trusting that she might "long be spared to enjoy the great blessing of wealth and to wear this magnificent ornament which Providence——"

But the girl gave a sudden cry. She had pressed the spring, and the cover, bursting open, showed the gold setting broken and twisted, but it no longer held the stone.

"It is gone!" she cried—"stolen!"

Old Dr. Podymore's shaven face became purple with consternation. She saw his hand tremble as he took the case, and holding the bit of metal between his finger and thumb examined it narrowly as if half expecting that the diamond must be hidden there after all.

"It must be someone in the house," cried Maggie in alarm.

"No, no," he said, with quick decision. "Your cousin told me this, my dear, and I—I said she was in delirium. It's a terrible thing—a terrible thing. And they do become delirious, my dear lady—generally—in such cases. She told me the diamond was gone. She said Rumblelow took it to raise money upon it. Don't give way, my dear—don't give way. It will certainly be got back. That was intended. But I shall never respect Rumblelow again. It is not upright—it is not the act of a gentleman. I did not believe it. No man of honour, my child, would credit it of another. I would have sworn she was delirious, merely upon the impossibility of the thing. And such cases get delirious nine out of ten. But the man is a blackguard; the man is an—an—infernal blackguard. Don't cry, my dear lady, and—and look so frightened. We shall get you your diamond again—there is no fear of that. He can only have pawned it, you know. But there is no time to waste, and something must be done. We must inform Kineton. Let us do so at once, and then——" He strode towards the door. "But we had better leave that to Kineton. We'll leave it to Kineton."

He had scarcely got two steps before the girl stood in front of him. She was pale as death. She was not crying, she was even self-possessed, although there were tears upon her cheeks and in her eyes.

"Do not tell, Dr. Podymore," she begged eagerly. "He will get it back, or tell us where it is. Let nobody know but ourselves—not even Mr. Kineton."

"But the responsibility is too——"

"No, no," she implored. "There is none, because, as you say yourself, there is no risk."

She clasped her hands. Suddenly she threw her arms around his neck.

"Dear Dr. Podymore, do not say a word. It is a disgrace—and it can be hidden. It will be easy to hide it. And he has been in such difficulties. At least wait until to-morrow. And by that time it shall be right—I promise it shall be right."

"But it is due to Kinton to——"

"Tell him I am upset. I cannot come down again. Say the room was too much for me, and business must wait until to-morrow. Say anything, dear Dr. Podymore. From you it will come so well. And by to-morrow we shall see the way to set all right without telling at all—without even telling at all."

Old Dr. Podymore showed signs of giving way. She took him by the arm—led him to the door—half pushed him out into the passage. She listened to be sure of his doubting footsteps across the hall.

Then she locked herself in, and throwing herself upon her knees at the bedside, with one broken-hearted wail, "And I love him! Oh, I love him so much!" she hid her face in the counterpane and gave way to grief.

Evening was drawing on, and Maggie, knowing what was before her, summoned all her force of will to overcome the distress of mind under which she suffered. She knew that there was no time to lose. If she were very late in reaching the riverside he might not stay—and see him she must, or the only chance of secrecy would be lost. But now that the moment was come—the one opportunity of saving his honour, which she had seen and clutched at—she realised the ordeal that she must undergo.

She got up and nerved herself to the task. She had cried herself into a calm, and her mind was so clear that before going she locked the chest, drew the panel and

hid away the key. Then very quickly she was out-of-doors, in the cool fresh air, hurrying to the riverside.

It was indeed an anniversary, for the golden sunset was spreading all across the sky behind the bridge and elder bushes just as it did a year ago. The water also below the rushes lay smooth and clear as a mirror. The infinite calm of summer even, the low, unceasing murmur of insect life, the motionless leaves and the broad serenity of the cloudless heavens all wrought their effect upon her mind. She did not deliberate, for she knew exactly what she would do. Her heart was certain of the disinterested sincerity of his love. Had he not wanted her to marry him before she was rich, and whilst the fortune was within his reach? And all that he had done was but weakness and folly, which he now saw and bitterly lamented. Briefly and frankly she would tell him how everything was discovered, and how easily all might be arranged and hidden. Then, before they parted, to heal his misery and shame, she would make known the condition upon which she would marry him.

But he was not anywhere in sight. She stood scanning each bend of the winding brook, but in vain. Perhaps he had been prevented from coming—or was already gone. The fear disturbed her greatly, and hurrying along the river bank, she went upon the Bristlington road and stood upon the bridge. But no one was to be seen.

He stepped out from beside the buttress as he had done before, and came up into the road laughing.

"But you have not brought your rod!" he noticed with surprise.

"I did not come to stay," she answered.

Then he caught sight of her troubled face.

"What has happened? What is the matter?" he asked, with quick anxiety.

"I want you to walk back with me," she told him, turning at the same time towards the fields; for she could not talk upon the high-road, even though there was no one present.

They walked some distance in silence. He saw how deeply she was moved, and waited for her to begin.

Her voice did not falter, but her head was turned aside, for she dared not look at him.

"Do you know that when my cousin was dying she made a statement to Dr. Podymore?"

"I have heard that her mother is saying some wild things," he answered, and the reply sounded evasive.

"She told them she had given you money; but she also said you had taken the heirloom diamond."

"Her mind must have been wandering. I can understand it in that case, for she once suggested it."

"But it is gone!"

He staggered as if from a sudden, unexpected blow. "What—what do you mean?" he stammered.

She stopped upon the path, and turning towards him for the first time, caught sight of the look of alarm upon his countenance.

"We found the setting there, but the stone was gone."

"Someone has stolen it since!" he gasped.

It had been her first thought, but now she saw only a subterfuge, and the folly of it kindled resentment within her.

"But poor Hetty was explicit. She said you used it as a security."

He felt the change in her manner, and saw the flush of indignation mounting to her cheek.

"Surely you cannot believe this of me?" he cried reproachfully.

At this appeal her firmness wavered. For a moment she was ready to accept this wildest improbability, that Hetty was delirious, and the heirloom had been stolen since her death. He had just now been so frank in his self-reproach. She could not find it in her heart to believe that he would hide the whole truth from her. And yet she was mistrusting him, for all the while her love was making excuses to explain away what he had done—that he was driven to it by circumstances—that if Hetty had lived it would quickly have been redeemed—as it might be now——

She cast aside every other consideration in a passionate desire to assist him.

"Nobody knows it is gone," she insisted with eagerness, "excepting Dr. Podymore. If I could get it back, even Mr. Kinton need never be told."

"I know nothing of it," he answered gloomily, "except that this was proposed to me, and I refused."

They had left the riverside, and were drawing very near to the gate. Twilight was coming on, and the path beneath the trees in the garden was growing dark. A few steps more, and they must part. Then the opportunity would be gone, and she no longer able to help him. Her fears nerved her to break the silence which had fallen upon them.

"That is the only hope," she urged again with deeper earnestness. "If the pledge could be redeemed without delay, or even if it could be shown that the diamond is safe, then nothing need be said, and you and I would blot this out with all the other unhappy recollections of the past year."

"Why did not Podymore move before?" he asked

resentfully. "Why did he not look at once—when this was said?"

"He could not believe it."

"And now nobody will ever disbelieve it," he said, falling into despondency. Then suddenly a gleam of hope flashed across his mind. "Unless—unless Hetty pledged it to help me—and Podymore misunderstood—and some paper may be found——"

They had reached the stile, but before speaking she passed quickly through. All the rest her imagination could follow—the difficulties, the temptation, the weakness yielding to it—and her love was waiting to forgive; but now she felt ashamed of him.

"There was no misunderstanding," she cried hotly, in generous defence of the memory of the dead. "She said you took it. With her last breath she said so. If you—if you never loved her, you might be just to her memory. She loved you too dearly to cast the blame upon you to shield herself."

She was standing upon the very spot where she parted, for the last time, from Hetty. The recollection of the fierce jealousy of that overwhelming love came back to her. She could talk to him no longer; and almost before the words were uttered she had passed into the gloom of the trees, and was gone.

CHAPTER IV

THE CARES OF A CORONER

LAWYER KINETON was almost beside himself, and his sharp lean face was puckered with worry and anxiety. He swore that he wished Oakleigh, Whorbury, the will—although he had made it himself—and the heirlooms all at the bottom of the sea.

For Alderman Oswin had taken the matter up with a vengeance; and under the influence of his encouragement and sympathy little Mrs. Oswin, out of her misty reminiscence, evolved the most wonderful and circumstantial fables, which he afterwards repeated in good faith to everybody he met in the street. Therefore the chief industry of Bristlington had never been so brisk, and everything that was said came round, sooner or later, to the ears of the Town Clerk and Coroner.

Now by the ancient charter of Bristlington the town-clerkship and coronership were separate offices, in the annual appointment of His Worship the Mayor and the twelve capital burgesses. To be sure, the Municipal Council had no more dreamt of changing its Coroner than its Sergeant-at-Mace, and the formality long ago became a mere matter of compliment and pleasantries. But law is law, even when it has fallen into disuse; and Mr. Alderman Oswin was determined to remove a disgrace from the town by dividing the Corporation upon

the next election day. So there was a great stir in Bristlington with the promise of a greater fuss, and Mr. Kinton did not feel at all certain of his reappointment.

But although every person in Bristlington, looking at the supposed circumstances from an original and independent point of view, held a different opinion to all the rest, upon one point there was unanimity—something ought to be done.

Mr. Harry Crickshaw contended, flippantly but with warmth, that an inquisition should be held—that if poison could be detected, old Dr. Podymore should at once be placed under a glass case; but if death were found to have resulted from natural causes, Alderman Oswin, without delay, ought to be taken outside and shot. He saw a great deal to recommend these proposals.

Old Mr. Jennings, who venerated the house of Rumblelow with all the soul of a retired land-agent, and valued ripe experience beyond every other qualification in a professional man, confessed that considering some matters of which he had been “credibly informed” in connection with others which must be “held indubitable,” he was forced to the conclusion that “some deviation from strict propriety may have previously transpired.” He was clearly of opinion that Kinton ought to move. Then, if old Mr. Jennings had seen and knew anything of life, many misapprehensions would be dispelled.

John Pudsey held clearly that Kinton ought to sit. He ought, in fact, to have sat within fourteen days. Now, seeing the agitation of the public mind, if Kinton valued his office at a brass-farthing, he would sit at once.

Then upon this general excitement came Bracher, for ever shuffling around the town, whispering upon all sides that the diamond was missing; he was certain of it. It made him very uncomfortable to be in such a house, where so many things happened, so it did. "For if pore Miss Oswin hadn't spoke before her death, perhaps they'd be 'inting that I 'ad it myself," nodded Bracher, taking a gloomy view of the lengths to which human folly and injustice might sometimes stretch.

So it was no wonder that Lawyer Kineton should be irritable, and keep repeating that it was a very nasty affair all round. He also was fast coming to the opinion that something must be done.

He was sitting at his office table and John Rumblelow had come to seek advice.

"I speak as an old adviser of your grandfather," he said sharply, "and I say plainly that it has a very ugly look."

The young man winced, and his cheek reddened, but he answered calmly—

"The only thing I can suggest is that somebody who was aware of what had been said knew of the sliding panel."

"Who told you there was a sliding panel?"

"Miss Oswin herself. I opened it for her when she was ill."

"Why was that?"

"She wanted this very diamond."

"What was she going to do with it at such a time?"

The question was so unexpected and so direct that John Rumblelow hesitated, half inclined to refuse to answer it.

"I ask as a professional man," said the lawyer

quietly, all the while observing him narrowly out of his shrewd grey eyes.

"She wished to give it to me."

"So she said," was the brief reply.

"No doubt that very incident was running in her mind when she was delirious. It made the foundation of her statements," said John Rumblelow.

Mr. Kinton took up a quill that lay on the table before him and carefully investigated the hardness of the nib upon his left thumb-nail whilst he reflected.

"I will tell you what is said, and you will understand how it appears to others," began the lawyer, but his tone had completely changed, and his manner, whilst very precise, sounded quite friendly.

"It is believed by—by many people, that you intended to marry only from prudential reasons; that a—a partiality was afterwards discovered between yourself and a lady who shall be nameless, which led to her sudden departure; that you met and conferred with that lady on the evening of her departure; then it is openly stated that Miss Oswin died of poison after returning from Whorbury, and that you are now privately engaged to——"

"Died of poison!" interrupted the young man.

"Yes, yes. I am coming to that. That no doubt can be disproved. And now this other matter has arisen steps must be taken at once. Don't rise. Wait and listen calmly to what I have to say. All the rest is mere foolery, and will be disposed of. But this affair of the diamond admits of only one satisfactory answer. Every tongue is silenced when the trustees can say that the stone is in their possession."

"But what can you do to regain it?" cried the young man eagerly.

"I do not know yet what steps the trustees may deem it advisable to take."

The answer was very quiet but very firm, and as he finished speaking Mr. Kinton threw down the pen as if he had done with it, and rose from his chair.

"He also is suggesting that I can tell them where it is," thought John Rumblelow. But the interview was at an end. Mr. Kinton had clearly said all he had to say, and it was useless to reply to it by a repetition of denial. Without a word John Rumblelow turned round and went out.

"It must have passed completely out of his hands," muttered the lawyer, and he got up and followed him to the door

CHAPTER V

THE ONE CONDITION

“LET it be kept secret!” she cried, emphatically. “It can never be traced, and by-and-by it must be replaced. I shall not live at Oakleigh. Another stone must be found, so good that no one can hereafter be the loser, and when I have gone away the whole affair will soon be forgotten. It can all be arranged presently.”

But old Dr. Podymore made no direct reply. He stepped restlessly to the other corner of the window, as he had done twenty times during the last half-hour, drew his great silver hunting-watch from his fob, and said, half petulantly—

“I should have thought he would have been here by this time.”

They were waiting in the room from which the approach of old Squire Jack had been witnessed with so much surprise some months before, and they both looked anxiously down the empty drive, for Mr. Kinton was already an hour behind his time, and this unexpected delay begot misgivings that neither would venture to utter.

“I think, if you will excuse me, my dear,” suggested old Dr. Podymore at last, “I will just stroll down to the gates.”

Maggie Lane watched him, his head bent with care, as with hasty steps he walked towards the high-road. He seemed to have grown old during the last few days, and once or twice he tottered as if seized with a giddiness. In deference to public opinion something was to be done, and ever since the inquiry was determined upon, an air of uncertainty had rested upon old Dr. Podymore. This afternoon, Mr. Kinton having promised, without a moment's delay, to bring the report, his restless uneasiness had grown into a foreboding of misfortune.

In their suspense the girl also caught his alarm, and as the time passed there came upon her a feeling of apprehension so strong, that her mind was ready to accept it as a certainty that something unfortunate had happened. Old Dr. Podymore passed out of sight and did not come back. Surely it could not be possible that Hetty had been found to have died of poison after all. Against her reason the dread of this haunted her, and with it came a fantastic thought that in a madness of injured pride Hetty might have destroyed herself. Her imagination was so overwrought that her soul trembled under this overwhelming dread of impending tragedy.

During the last week the world had been turned upside down for Maggie Lane.

Before she could reach the house after parting with John Rumblelow her love reasserted itself in a tumult of wild self-accusation. She had wronged him, insulted him, when she ought to have stood by his side. Why was his word not to be believed? The old simplicity, that reposed unwavering trust in everyone around her, revived in its unshaken strength. Hetty did not know what she said. The thing *was* stolen. He was falsely suspected, and she had forsaken him.

Nothing was too improbable at that moment for her mind to accept, and she stopped on the path quivering with love, and breathless in the fear that it was too late for reparation. She only saw him borne down by adversity and deserted. She would run back to him—throw herself upon his forgiveness, and show that she was true in spite of all.

But at the gate there was no one in sight, and only solitude by the river bank.

She stood a moment by the tall rushes, where the pool was dark, and black, mysterious shadows hid the deeper water on the other side.

A melancholy crept into her heart, reminding her with sad certainty that Hetty was dying and had spoken the truth. It was not possible—it would be impiety to doubt. Death had so hallowed the memory of Hetty that only the recollection of her generosity remained. All her faults were on the surface, and she alone had shown disinterested goodness of heart.

Then Maggie had returned home, oppressed with a hopelessness that sank into the very depths of her soul—the hopelessness of an unwilling disbelief in the nobility of human nature in one who has formerly believed in everybody. She knew that for ever she must love John Rumblelow, just as she did not cease to love Uncle Jos. Yet she had been but a plaything to Uncle Jos, and, although he delighted in her, his affection was nothing to his pride in his great fortune. And her father who had forgotten her, she said to herself grimly, would come back now she was rich—just as her own people had half smothered her with attention during the past month. Nobody was to be trusted. Nobody's love was whole. Yet, in the midst of her bitterness, she would cry aloud that she loved him and must love him for ever.

But now Dr. Podymore did not return. No doubt, in his impatience, he would hurry on even to Bristlington in the expectation of meeting Mr. Kineton. In her restless anxiety she got up, walked into the window and stood leaning against the mullion, with her face close to the pane. But she was wrong. Away between the trees she could see him now, coming back rapidly, but alone. Her heart beat fast. She knew he must have seen Mr. Kineton, and was bringing the news, for he did not loiter and look back, but came on straight and fast.

Suddenly she gave a cry, and clutched the transoms tightly with both hands.

It was not old Dr. Podymore, but John Rumblelow who was coming to the house. He was still far away, but she could clearly recognise him. She quickly drew back from the window and stood out of sight, watching until he passed into the porch. His face looked very thoughtful and careworn. Yet why should he wish to see her, unless he could set everything right? A joy, as unreasonable and baseless as her fears, made the blood tingle in her veins. He must have discovered the explanation of everything. She held her breath and listened. Bracher was at the door. There were voices. He was coming in. In a moment he would be there.

She made an effort to control herself, and hastily sat down with the determination that she would appear to be calm. But the time whilst she waited seemed an age. And when she listened again every sound was hushed.

She got up and rang the bell for Bracher.

"Did I not see Mr. Rumblelow come up the drive?"

"Yes, miss. He asked if Mr. Kineton was here."

"And is he gone?"

"Yes, miss. He said Mr. Kineton had sent to 'im to

come to Oakleigh at once. He asked for Dr. Podymore too, miss."

"Did you tell him I was in?"

"Yes, miss. But he said he was sent for to meet Mr. Kinton and Dr. Podymore, on business, and he would come back. Mr. Kinton's carriage is in sight, miss."

"Very well," she said, and Bracher withdrew.

But all her hope and courage had fled. This sending for John Rumblelow in such haste could only be because something too terrible to think of had happened. She could control herself no longer. She ran out into the hall just as the two trustees were coming through the porch.

They came towards her in silence, and Mr. Kinton shook hands with scarcely a word. Old Dr. Podymore led the way into the great dining-room, and having carefully fastened the door, they went across to the further end of the room and stood by the fireplace. They were both very grave, but Dr. Podymore was shaking as if with an ague, and there was a half-scared expression in his eyes, as of an old man baffled and suffering from disgrace.

"What is it?" gasped the girl, for they looked at each other and hesitated to speak.

"You tell her, Kinton."

"You are aware," said the lawyer, in a voice only just above a whisper, "of the rumour that the—the late Miss Henrietta Oswin was poisoned, and that it was deemed advisable to—to make an examination. That examination has now been made, and—and has resulted in the discovery that——"

"That she *was* poisoned?" cried the girl, unable any longer to endure his hesitation.

"No," he said briefly; "they found no poison. They found the diamond!"

But Maggie only looked perplexed. She could not grasp it in the least.

"She must have swallowed it only an hour or two before she died."

"And it—it killed her?" stammered Maggie, more than ever confused.

"She was dying already. It had nothing to do with her death," said old Dr. Podymore, speaking for the first time.

The girl stood half-dazed and terrified, like one suddenly awakened from a dream, and gradually the full import of what she had been told became clear within her mind. She turned deadly pale, but she did not utter a sound. Old Dr. Podymore dragged forward a chair, but she gave no heed to it. She was too stunned even to feel emotion, until at last out of the depths of her horror came a cry—

"Mr. Rumblelow!"

"He knows," said old Dr. Podymore. "We met him by the door. He would not come until we had told you. He said he would wait in the garden."

Love, pity, contrition for having doubted him, and the longing for his presence and support, overcame her fears. There came upon her a passion to make reparation, a necessity for self-abasement. By one corner of the room was a door opening upon the terrace. Without waiting to hear more she hurried out into the open air, stood a moment to glance around, and then, with a certainty of finding him there, ran with quick steps to the old summer-house.

He caught her in his arms. They were again together; but they dared not speak of what had happened.

But they looked mutely into each other's eyes, and knew that no depth of sorrow, no fierceness of tribulation, nothing that life might hold in store for them, could ever shake their confidence in each other or lessen their love.

Only just as they were parting he said—

“But you have not told me the one condition.”

“There is no condition,” she answered quickly, and her cheek reddened—“only something that I very much wish.”

“What is that?” he whispered.

She hesitated a moment, and then the wish cried out from the bottom of her heart.

“I want to go away from here. I don't want to live at Oakleigh for years. It will take years—years of happiness—to blot out the memory of the past. I want it all to go, to make everything free. I want to do as we should have been forced to do if we had married before Hetty died.”

CHAPTER VI

SLIPPERS AND RICE

“**N**O!” cried Miss Keziah Crane, with the abandonment of one determined upon a daring step. “I ben’t no gad-about. But going down to church porch, please God, I be; an’ toss a han’ful o’ rice—but not anighst her face, mind—if I do live, I will. An’ throw a old slipper too—though not to hit, mind—if I do die for it, mean to I do.”

She had shut up her shop, and put on her “glassy” silk.

“An’ how do jt strike ee, Sally Hallett?” she asked, surveying her ample skirt with anxiety. “Do the roses in the bonnet seem to take off the mourning look like?”

“Sure they do, Aunt Keziah,” replied Sally Hallett with decision. “That is to say, wi’ the knot o’ pink ribbons to your throat so well.”

“I be glad o’ that,” reflected Miss Keziah Crane, with satisfaction; “for I should take your opinion, Sally Hallett.”

“An’ so should I,” said Dorothy Chick.

“An’ I too,” cried Mrs. William Cotching.

Sally Hallett had been conscious of a growing popularity, extending over many weeks, and she accepted this approval without being in the least disconcerted. She alone had been able to provide early

and authentic information of all that was said in Bristlington, so that now the village had got at the whole truth of it. They knew that the talk about poison was made up by Alderman Oswin, and put into the head of little Mrs. Oswin only to bring himself forward and make a fuss. They knew that poor Miss Oswin on her deathbed had said that if she thought that Margaret Lane was to marry the young Squire she could die in peace. They knew that old Dr. Podymore knew that poor Miss Oswin was light-headed, because as trustee he had got the diamond in his keeping all the time; and they had known she was not going to live more than twelve months from the very first when she came into the property. So nobody had been surprised at anything, and the only wonder in Oakleigh, and in Bristlington too, was that people could make up such ridiculous stories, or, to speak plainly, such downright lies.

But the trustees kept their counsel, and those only can know the hidden story of Oakleigh who read this book.

"But sure 'tis time to go down to the church," said Miss Keziah Crane nervously.

"An' so 'tis," said Hannah Jones.

"For certain must be," agreed Dorothy Chick.

"But la! Aunt Keziah 'ull be took for one o' the party—if not for the bride," cried Sally Hallett as they came close to the porch.

So they saw the ceremony, though Miss Keziah Crane, being emotional, and having refused six offers in earlier years, saw it blurred through weeping. And they admired the bridegroom; and Miss Margaret, as they all admitted when they watched her departure, "though Miss Margaret no longer—really looked like an angel—so she did."

Miss Keziah Crane, in anxiety to do no harm, let her shoe slip at the wrong moment, and tossed it over her head, but there was the rice on the churchyard steps sure enough.

"An' I don't blame her myself," cried respectable little Dorothy Chick, almost carried by excitement into unsound morality, "if she did catch a mind to the man afore 'twere time like."

"An' they'll be back to Oakleigh in no time."

"For she never can bide long away."

"Ah! An' she's 'Fortune's Darling' after all."

"An' have a-been all the time."

"An' that's because she do wear her shoes to a hole right in the very middle. An' that's a sure sign of a sound heart and an even disposition," cried Hannah Jones. And she was the cobbler's wife.

THE END

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