LITTLE HOUSES

A Tale of Past Years

GEORGE WODEN

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LITTLE HOUSES

A TALE OF PAST YEARS

BY

GEORGE WODEN

"Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before Kings; he shall not stand before mean men."—Proverbs XXII. 29.

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FIRST PART

CHAPTER I

PRIZES

THE year was 1882. In the public-houses the Phœnix Park Murders and the eternal Irish Question had been quarrelled over until those affairs had less importance than the progress of the local crops. There had been a fine patriotic glow, with awesome pride in the terrors of new warfare, at the news of the bombardment of Alexandria: warships riding from four to eight miles out, and pounding the shore batteries to rubble—wonderful! Spelling-bee winners had shored up tottering reputations with props of topical facts culled ruthlessly from the children's geography books and atlases; and certain reluctant admissions were heard in agreement with the authorities who forced children to school now, instead of allowing them to be driven to work. Selbridge, newly made a borough, had appeared with an anvil and tools upon its municipal coat of arms, and the motto "Strength by Labour," in English, capable of being read by common folk, shocking the scholars who talked of dignity, and delighting all who derided Latin scholarship because they hadn't any. Selbridge, indeed, was a stirring, progressive place, proud of the growing importance

of its manufactures, and confident of the future. Pedley Hill, its southern neighbour, was smugly satisfied with its uneventful municipal history; the present was comfortable enough; the future would bring changes, no doubt, changes for the worse, probably; the town had survived changes in the past, and would survive those of the future. Selbridge had sprung up round the pits in the early part of the Queen's reign, a place without history and without beauty, making money rapidly and spending it. Already its suburbs were spreading out like giant tentacles to clutch the surrounding hamlets. Only the hill shut out its offensive presence from its neighbour's eyes. Pedley Hill was not marked in the school atlases now, though Selbridge was. No matter—anyone could put a dot there to mark it for himself—but nobody could put Selbridge alongside Pedley Hill in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle. In the sixth century, date remote beyond imagination, Caewlin, King of Wessex, after his great victory at Deorham, came with his Saxon troops up the Severn Valley to the conquest of the West Midlands. Pedley Hill had been held by him, commanding the valley of the little river Sele.

To-day the town was enjoying its customary Sabbath doze, after the hot joints and vegetables, the pies and puddings, which marked the day. The July sun had glared upon the stones of the Bullen since five o'clock in the morning, and the air quivered in the radiant heat. Pigeons strutted lazily, pecking a grain here and there dropped in Saturday's market. The doors and windows of the "Bull" were wide open, letting out the smell of ale and the occasional clink of glasses. A dog slept at the yard door. Over by the Town Hall, in the cool shade of the arch, a tramp had taken off his boots and lay dozing. The clock in the

tower chimed the half-hour solemnly, waking other clocks to their duty. Gilded chanticleer of the vane was sound asleep.

The "Bull" closed its doors for the afternoon and the last customers drifted away. Presently came footsteps across the place, from Lesur Lane, George Street, High Street, Orchard Street, children in their best clothes, all making to climb the steep slope of Castle Street to the parish church. The prizes were being distributed at the Sunday school to-day. Parents had foregone their afternoon nap, had washed up the dishes quickly, and dressed in hot haste, in order to see their children receive their annual honours, bright-coloured books, with red and gold labels, for regular attendance on Sunday afternoons, safe out of mother's way. The little girls were prim and sedate, proudly conscious of their summer finery; the boys moved as though they were heartily ashamed of themselves, and deserved their uncomfortable punishment. The dog awoke—it was no longer safe to sleep. The tramp put on his boots, and shuffled across to Lesur Lane, for the Bristol Road and north to Selbridge.

The school bell tolled, calling the stragglers. A carriage and pair drove across from High street, and ascended the hill at a walk. The children gathered round as escort, for it bore Mrs. Kingsnorton, who was going to give the prizes. The two girls with the sunshades were her daughters. The elder, indeed, had now entered womanhood. The vicar came across from the vicarage to the school gate just in time for their arrival, much to the satisfaction of the children, who looked upon his courtesy as an amusing spectacle acted for their delectation. He remained bareheaded, holding his Master of Arts' cap in his hand, and little boys wondered how he could be comfortable with

such a thing when they detested theirs so self-consciously.

The bell ceased its ringing, and the last of the children began to scuttle into school. John Allday moved to follow the others.

"Aren't you coming, Sam?" he called out.

"There's plenty of time. You're frightened."

"I aren't!"

He was a sturdy brown-haired boy, neat in his Sunday suit, an ordinary healthy boy to view, with nothing to cause the glance to return to him with sudden interest. Sam Bloom, his companion, a tall boy with a mass of untidy yellow hair, caught the attention at the first glance. His clothes were old, but he wore them with a swagger, almost truculent, as though they were finery. His face was rather heavy in its expression, and the blue eyes seemed to sleep. The unobservant only saw the yellow hair, and the fine manner.

A girl came running down the hill, her face flushed by her anxious haste.

"Hurry up, Maggie, the vicar's been asking for you. They're all waiting," said Sam.

"You're a story!" she retorted. "I couldn't help it. Mother hadn't got my things ready."

Sam ran to the gate to prevent her entering, and there was a lively scuffle.

"I shall tell the vicar . . . No, don't! . . . Please! . . . Here's your grandfather!"

Sam turned to look, and she darted past him. John Allday followed her.

An old man with a white top hat was coming slowly up the hill. Sam looked a second time at the bent figure, and then strode quietly across into school.

From time to time the old man stopped, and turned, as though he had paused to admire the view, while his breathing made wheezy noises in

his chest. He had a small, shrivelled face, with long side-whiskers drooping. His gnarled fist rested on the silver knob of an umbrella. His whole costume was in keeping with himself, old, long out of date, and precisely neat. The school caretaker, who had come to the gate to take the air, greeted him in a tone which mingled familiarity and respect.

"Grand weather, Mr. Peacock."

"Ah!" was all the old man could spare, but his voice was deep and impressive, belying his years.

"Come to see the lad get his prize?" said the caretaker.

"Yes," said the old man proudly. "I promised his mother I'd look after him."

"Clever lad, Mr. Peacock," said the caretaker.

The grandfather's pride glowed.

"I've taught him myself."

He did not hear the other's comment: "And a bit o' help from Old Nick." His hearing was a trifle dulled, and he was making for the school door.

The caretaker looked up and down to see that he was unobserved by authority, and then he lit his pipe. He remembered the scandal of Mr. Peacock's daughter running away from home, and her return before the boy was born. She was married, it was said. He didn't believe that. She was no better than—than—well, no better than many another, was his invidious comment, and her father was a proud old fool. The boy was a clever young imp, like his father. The caretaker had never seen the boy's father, but that didn't matter. With gruff condescension he admitted that the old man's son, the one who had been killed on the railway, had been a fine young fellow. That was all there was to be said about the family.

Many more interesting scandals had happened since theirs; they had neither grown rich nor sought parish relief; old Peacock himself would never be noticed if he didn't wear that stupid white hat.

A soft gilded haze filled the valley. The southern hills, with the wooded clump of Selvalley Beacon, were only just visible. There was little movement in the town. Here and there a thin blue reek rose from a chimney, the last from the fire that had cooked the dinner. All the shop fires at Binnses were asleep. Beyond the town, over by Nickling, where the parish church had a mission, there was a tuft above the colliery stack, the only pit in this part of the valley, and an eyesore to the best Pedley Hill folk. The view north from the top of the hill was different—Selbridge factories, and workmen's houses, and pits beyond that, giant swellings of some earth disease. Cadby's old foundry had become a new works, "Cadby, Stoke and Company, Limited, Engineers and Iron-founders," only just beyond the boundary. Fortunately the hill hid these things, and the prevailing winds came from the west and south, across the hills and the rich meadows, unpolluted.

The Parish Church School was an old worn building, out of date these many years, condemned by the authorities, and patched up continually to make it last until a new one should be built. Nobody had thought of its being inadequate until the growth of the new schools born of the Education Act. Nobody thought of new church schools, either, except as an incentive to raise money for repairing the old. Where father had learnt his A B C, there should his children learn, sitting at the same scarred, ink-stained desks, looking at the same veined maps, and droning the same worn tunes of knowledge in drowsy chorus.

To-day the vicar and his Sabbath staff sat with Mrs. Kingsnorton on the platform at the end of the main room. Three classes studied together there during the week, shouting against each other. Now the stuffy school odour was streaked with scents of soap and best dresses kept with lavender. The prizes made a gallant show on the table where Mrs. Kingsnorton sat with her daughters in state, at the vicar's right hand. Decorous murmurs approved the vicar's oratory, while the bolder children shuffled, and munched sweets, and made faces at one another.

The superintendent of the Sunday school read the names of the prize-winners; his chief assistant handed each book to the vicar; the vicar handed it to Mrs. Kingsnorton; and Mrs. Kingsnorton held it out to be snatched timidly by the winner.

"Written examination in Religious Knowledge—first prize: Samuel Bloom."

Sam walked boldly to the platform, and saluted Mrs. Kingsnorton, while his heel gave a flourish to make his friends giggle. The vicar explained pleasantly that everybody couldn't get the examination prizes, but everybody who tried could win a prize for regular attendance. Name after name was called, faster and faster. John Allday came awkwardly to the table, his face very red, his legs weak, and his thoughts, so embarrassed that he forgot to salute. Sam Bloom had no prize for regular attendance—he laughed at the others. Neither had Maggie Wheatley; she sat alone at the end of a seat, and a little sniff from time to time would have told how near tears she was, but nobody heeded her. Old Mr. Peacock sat leaning forward, with his hand to his ear to catch every word, and his face wrinkled more than ever.

It was over at last, speeches, votes of thanks, the long hymn and the prayer. Out ran the children

into the sunshine. The carriage was waiting, and they stood about to see Mrs. Kingsnorton and her daughters, and the vicar, all part of the afternoon show. Down in the town the young folk were out to parade their finery before tea, in the High Street and the new Sele Park.

Sam Bloom and his friend lingered with the groups near the carriage, not to see the great lady drive away, but for Sam to tease Maggie Wheatley at not having a prize.

"I don't care! I don't want one!" she reiterated.

She had run up the hill towards home before the tears came. Sam couldn't follow her. His grandfather wanted to look at the prize, a Bible; and Sam had to stand while the old man held it out at arm's length, trying to read the boy's name, written with a flourish, on the fly-leaf.

"And what's yours, my lad?"

John Allday held his book shyly for inspection.

"Noble Lives," read the old man, and he tapped the Bible he still held. "This is the Book of Noble Lives."

"Will you hold it for us, grandfather?" said Sam.

He didn't wait for a reply, but ran off down the hill. John took his book, and followed. The old man did not seem to notice that they had gone so quickly. He stood for a moment without moving, his thoughts repeating the words "Noble Lives." His mind was slow in action, though clear enough and capable. Repetition for him had no monotony, for he lived in softened memories of the past. He was old. Those pressing eagerly forward to the future had no time and little sympathy to understand his slow recurrent moods.

"Let's have a look at your book," said Sam, as they came down to the Bullen.

They paused to glance at some of the pictures

together: Columbus, Palissy the Potter, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Robert Clive, George Stephenson, Maker of Railways. . . .

"'See how these men got on.' That's what they're always telling you," said Sam scornfully. "When folks are grown up they're always putting you off with sayings. When I asked my grandfather to let me go to the Grammar School, he told me the Apostles never went to a grammar school—as if that was any argument! 'Willie Benlow's going. Why shouldn't I?' I told him. 'What do you want to do there?' he said; and I said, 'Learn Latin and French and poetry,' and—you know you can't explain when anybody's angry like that and won't listen. 'What good will poetry do you?' he said. I told him, 'It's the language they speak in Heaven.' You remember Mr. Brownlee told us."

"What did your grandfather say?" asked John.

"I came out," said Sam. "He told me the next day I'd better get the idea out of my head; we were too poor. 'Why?' I said. 'It isn't any fault of mine. It's a shame.' But he wouldn't listen. He told me I was too young to understand, and he told me verses out of the Bible. They always put you off with something. He made me read one night about you getting anything you ask for if you pray hard enough. It says you can move mountains, you know."

"Yes," said John, although he didn't know.

"And I went to bed and prayed to go to the seaside with Binnses trip, that time your mother had offered to take me with you. My legs went cold, and my back itched all over—you know how you go. That was the night before my grandfather fell at the bottom of the stairs. He was in bed a fortnight, you remember, and I had to stay at home and run errands."

"I remember," said John. He was inclined to be shocked at Sam's story.

"Wouldn't you want to go to the Grammar School if you were me?" said Sam, eager for sympathy.

"I don't know," said John, his thoughts only slowly stirring. "Father says I might go to work at Binnses when I leave at Christmas."

"I don't want to go to work. Mr. Brownlee says, 'Stay at school and learn to play, learn to enjoy books and understand things.' When I was at the vicarage on Friday, getting a character, I had to wait in a room full of books—hundreds of 'em, all with leather bindings—lovely! If I went to the Grammar School I could read books like that."

"Father says I can go to the night classes," said John.

"Let 'em keep their night classes," exclaimed Sam. "I don't want 'em."

They crossed the Bullen and walked down the High Street towards the river. Sam had no more to say. His companion was occupied with his new growing thoughts.

The little river Sele, flowing east, divided the town into two unequal parts, and then swung to the south towards the funnel of the converging hills. Jack had lived royally in its waters, herons had loved its banks years ago, before the Selbridge factories had boiled it for mechanical power. Now it was a brown, muddy stream, effluvial when running low; and in place of the otters commemorated in the lane where Sam lived, off the High Street, the river only harboured rats. The bridge was a convenient place for loungers, who leaned daily over the parapet and spat in the water.

"I'm coming on a bit. The old un's got the key," said Sam.

They crossed the bridge together.

Further on, near the Toll, a cat darted across the way, with a terrier puppy after it, barking shrilly. The cat turned, in a gullet between the houses, and the dog stopped, and sprang back, startled. The cat's tail went up, its spine arched, and in a low noise, like a kettle simmering, made obligato to the dog's snappy bark.

"Go on! Good dog! Cats! Cats!" cried Sam Bloom, and the dog barked louder than ever. Then the cat sprang, the dog rolled over in fright, and the sport was over.

The boys laughed, and Sam picked up the terrier to pat it.

"I've got some string," said Sam. "Get a can—there's an ashpit round the corner."

John ran for the can, and they tied it with the string to the dog's tail.

"Hoosh! Go on! Cats! Cats!"

The dog refused to run. It had suffered in this sport before, perhaps. It turned slowly, put its paw on the can, and then lay down. When Sam pushed it with his foot it lay down again.

"It's frightened," suggested John.

Sam's mood changed. He patted the dog, called it "Poor doggie," and unfastened the string from its tail. When they went away it followed them. John tried to drive it away, but Sam patted it, and it licked his hand.

They parted at the Toll, and Sam walked slowly back along the High Street, and crossed the river again, the dog trotting at his heels. He seemed to have forgotten it, for he didn't turn to look, and at last, after mute glances of inquiry at the back of his head, the terrier hesitated, and finally sauntered away.

Sam had set the table for tea before he went for his prize. Mrs. Thomas, the housekeeper,

went out on Sundays after dinner, and did not return until Monday morning. His grandfather was in when he returned, and the fire was crackling under the kettle. He had to cut the bread and butter, and remembered his grandfather's repeated injunction not to spread the butter too thick. Then after the quiet meal he was not off duty until he had washed up the dishes, shaken the cloth outside for the sparrows, and put the cheese on for supper, the white mug for his own milk and the blue one for his grandfather's ale. The old man sat in his high-backed armchair, and smoked his pipe, the long churchwarden to-day.

"That's all, grandfather," said Sam at last.

"All right, my lad. See as you don't get into mischief."

The old man took a kitchen chair out to the little garden, and returned for his spectacles and the Bible with the big print. The gardens were marked off with low palings, and a ragged thorn hedge shut them off from the tiny slope of meadow which here made the river bank. The water swirled gently about the stones and debris which had gathered to make cascades; a pied wagtail sported to and fro. Beyond, across the stream, was the trim greenery of the new park.

Mr. Peacock was not a member of the Established Faith. He had been stolen from the flock by the teaching of a new apostle; but the nearest branch of the Catholic Apostolic Church was at Selbridge, and he didn't like Selbridge. He didn't like the minister, either. So gradually he had reformed his beliefs in solitude with his Bible. Years ago he had fervently believed that Christ's promise was about to be fulfilled; "I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you." Daily he had prayed that the morrow might dawn upon the

Master's coming, for he was ready with the elect. His daughter's folly, his son's death, his poverty—he had met these with fortitude, seeking strength in the Master's words: "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." Now, with the weight of full fourscore years, he found his faith was beset with misgivings, and he loved best to read of the miracles which only faith might deserve. "Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole." He read the verse slowly, and then looked into the face of heaven and repeated it, keeping his finger on the place. The miracles of the little garden, the bees humming over the marigolds, the white butterfly hovering, the thin drone of the midges—these he did not heed, but kept his glance fixed through his spectacles on the big print of the page, and then upwards into space, his thoughts fading to a nebulous beatitude.

Sam had until nine o'clock. At the bridge he met two other boys who had been waiting for him, and the three set off past the Toll, and along the Bristol Road to the south. A brook ran under the road here, and across the meadows to join the Sele. There was a little works, with a pool, and a disused water wheel. The flow of the brook was regulated for the pool by a hatch, and the hatch was tended by a man who lived in a cottage near by. His garden bordered the stream. Boys came out of the town with little nets, and pickle jars to hold the sticklebacks they caught; and when tired of the sport they were tempted by the water-hens on the pool, and the fruit in the garden. Sam and his companions were in their best clothes, and they knew they ought not to be playing near the muddy water; mischief was therefore all the more delightful. They threw stones where they would splash most, dared one another to jump from

bank to bank, and at last, after much elaborate spying and false alarm, they stole through a gap in the garden hedge and feasted on the ripe yellow gooseberries.

There was a wild scamper when the owner came on them unexpectedly, on his way from church. Sam, by calling directions for the others' safety, drew attention to himself, and was kicked, dragged to his feet after he had fallen, and knocked down again. His companions never turned to look. He refused to give their names and addresses, or his own, and only the presence of ladies on the field path saved him from a thrashing. His aggressor was hot and flushed, and had to save his dignity. So Sam suffered a rough dragging to the cottage gate, and loud denunciation of his wickedness, before the lady who had given him his prize in the afternoon. Mrs. Kingsnorton recognized him with shocked astonishment, and would have lectured him had he stayed.

He came back after she had gone, and the cottage tenant had disappeared indoors. He carried a big round stone, and he whispered repeatedly words which brought a vague fear upon his anger. Stealthily he moved beside the hedge, and swung the stone; he did not know what he was going to do. Already he dreaded to hurl it at the low window, as he had planned. There was a row of currant bushes in the garden and three hives; these caught his attention, and he calculated where he might best stand to throw. If he aimed at the middle one, there was a better chance of hitting one. A bee came past his ear, making for the hive, and he hesitated a moment to watch its flight. Others had gone past him before he recollected with a start that he had not thrown his stone. But now his anger was gone. He hurled the stone as far as he could into the pool. It

made a brave splash. Then he thrust his hands in his pockets, and walked quietly away. After a few yards he began to whistle—a subdued, tuneless little song.

At the Toll he met John Allday, and he recounted the adventure of the luscious gooseberries, without a word of the garden's owner, or of being caught. Even to himself, his humiliation was almost as though it had never been.

"I was talking to mother and father about going to the Grammar School," said John.

"You?" Sam asked. "What did they say?"

"I don't know yet," said John.

"I'm going in early. Grandfather will think I'm ill," said Sam.

His indifference was a great disappointment to his friend.

Dusk had fallen when he entered Otter Lane. A soft pink and primrose glow hung in the western sky; bats darted in erratic flight above the water, and little moths hovered. Indoors, Mr. Peacock had lit the lamp, and sat with his arm-chair drawn up, and his mug of ale, at the table in the sitting-room. Sam's Bible prize lay by his plate.

"Good lad!" said his grandfather. "A chapter out of your own to-night."

Sam finished his supper slowly, and sipped his milk.

The reading of a chapter on Sunday evenings after supper was as regular as the supper itself. Sam read, and the old man's lips moved as he followed the words in his own Bible.

"Then said He also to him that bade Him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee.

"But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind:

"And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just."

Sam paused.

"Grandfather," he asked, interested suddenly in his reading, "why don't people do this? We're poor. We don't get asked."

His grandfather took off his spectacles.

"Some people have to be rich, and some poor, my lad," he began, searching for a reply.

"But they don't do this, do they?" Sam insisted.

" 'Ye have the poor always with you; but Me ye have not always,'' quoted his grandfather.

"But why should it be us?"

"It's God's will."

"It wasn't God's will that my father was a villain."

The old man was startled.

"A what? What's that you say?"

"I've heard you say he was," said Sam, cowed by his own temerity.

"Finish your chapter," commanded his grandfather huskily; "and then ask in your prayers for the Lord to make you a better man than your father was."

Sam obeyed, and read quietly the parable of the great supper. His grandfather's finger ceased to travel to and fro on the page, and he looked up with a start when the chapter was ended.

Together they washed the few supper things, and after a while the old man pointed to the clock by the stairs door.

"Up early in the morning, lad!"

Sam understood. He wished his grandfather "good night," and went up to his room. The day still lingered faintly in the sky; voices murmured

across the gardens; then a door slammed, and silence came, with the soft whispering of the water under the white ribbon of mist. Sam undressed lazily, and said his prayers, his thoughts straying to the man of the gooseberry garden, to impossible plans of revenge, back sharply to his prayers, and away again, restless as moths fluttering.

He was asleep when the clock wheezed and struck eleven, and the stairs creaked. The old man mounted very slowly. His joints cracked in the stillness. The yellow candle-light seemed to deepen his wrinkles, and glinted in his moist eyes. He had been thinking of his son and daughter. But his head was erect. Each night he reminded himself solemnly that before sunrise he might stand in the Lord's presence.

CHAPTER II

HOME

JOHN ALLDAY lived in a little house by the Toll, where five ways met—the end of the High Street, two lanes branching, and the Bristol Road, going through on its way south. Three houses stood together in a terrace, with a strip of garden in front, and green palings. At the back the gardens reached the foot of the railway embankment, the Great Western line from Selbridge. There was danger of sparks on washing days, and smuts from the locomotives, and the great expresses made the crockery tinkle indoors. Newcomers, affrighted, felt their beds tremble o' nights, but they soon grew used to it, and presently declared they slept all the better. The first miniature foothills rose here from the valley, so that southbound trains passed over one lane and under the next. Thomas Allday had helped to lay the broad gauge track under the great Brunel, and naturally enjoyed an interest almost proprietory in the line.

The front window was open this afternoon. It had been shut when John went to Sunday-school, and the change roused him to a pleasant anticipation. The sound of voices came out to him across the gay lupins and hollyhocks—his father's cough, and talk, and then Mr. Merry. John smiled.

The visitor's presence meant fine talk to listen to, and good things to eat.

He went quickly round the back of the houses, and entered by the kitchen door. Tea was set in the sitting-room, with the best china out, and a glass vase of flowers. There was salad for tea—he knew—he had helped his mother to wash the lettuces and the young onions out of the garden, and he had been looking forward. Now he saw a small saucepan on the fire to boil for eggs. He looked round anxiously: one, two, three, four—yes, there was one for him.

Mrs. Allday came in from the kitchen.

"Mr. Merry's here, isn't he?" said John.

"Yes—in the front with your father. Is that your prize?"

John held up the book proudly.

"Run in and show them," said his mother. "Tell 'em tea's nearly ready. I'll see it after."

She wanted him out of her way. She would not trust him near the table she had been at such pains to prepare.

As she was near-sighted, and short and plump, and often looking up at others taller, she had a way of lifting her chin, and screwing up her eyes behind her spectacles, so that she had an air of whimsical good humour. She was approaching fifty years of age now. Her hair was dark, with no trace of grey in it, drawn straight back from her forehead; she hadn't much hair. To-day she was dressed ceremoniously, and was stiff in her movements; her best gold earrings dangled, tickling her face, but she was growing used to them. John was fond of his mother in an undemonstrative way; she had a happy knack of putting toffees in his pocket, and having dainties for his tea, to surprise him. The great things she had done for him he had not noticed, or had not understood; some

of them he had accepted as inevitable, like the sunrise or the rain. He was seldom disobedient beyond the ordinary disobedience of mischief. When she had threatened three or four times to tell his father he obeyed. He never dared to disobey his father, and never tried to coax him.

Mr. Allday was short, like his wife. He was past fifty now, and his light-brown hair was turning grey at the sides of his poll; it had disappeared from the top. He wore a velvet smoking-cap in the house. A sandy moustache, very bushy, came in a curve down to his jaws. To-day he had his best smoking-cap on, rakishly aslant, the one Mrs. Allday had embroidered for him before they were married, and he had smoked, in honour of his old friend's coming; but it had made him cough too much. His cough had been very severe the last two winters, and summer failed to banish it. He had been compelled to leave the heavy work of the rolling-mill at the Selbridge Iron and Steel Company's works, and take a smaller job in the warehouse.

He was coughing when John entered the parlour. Mr. Merry greeted the boy.

"Hallo, young un!"

John grinned. He knew he must not say "Hallo," because his mother had lectured him severely once for having said it; yet he was too self-conscious to venture upon the "Good afternoon" of ceremony.

Tom Merry was a tall lanky bachelor of ripe middle age, wearing the square-cut clothes of the seafaring man ashore. He was a ship's engineer. He had known Mrs. Allday since childhood, had taken her to school, and had been best man at her wedding. He never came to see his sisters at Selbridge without coming over to Pedley Hill.

"How's young John?" he asked pleasantly.

"All right, thank you," said John. "I've brought my prize."

This brought him naturally into the conversation. He liked Mr. Merry; he had sailed the seas, been in foreign lands, like the heroes of "Tom Cringle's Log," and Captain Marryat. He seldom said anything of his travels, but John was sure they were none the less wonderful for that. Sometimes, when his father and Mr. Merry were chatting, and he came in unobserved, or when he was not supposed to be listening, he heard fragments which, by the secrecy, must surely have belonged to marvellous adventures.

Mrs. Allday summoned them to tea. John ate diligently in silence. "Little boys should be seen and not heard," so he had been told. He would have liked to combat the value of the adage, but its reiteration quelled him. At the end of the meal, however, he was invited to talk.

"I came home with Sam Bloom. He wants to go to the Grammar School, and his grandfather won't let him."

"Why?" said Mrs. Allday.

"Can't afford, I suppose," suggested her husband.

"Willie Benlow's going, and Sam says he ought to go. He doesn't want to go to work."

"A lot o' boys want to go all right, but they don't want to work," said Mr. Allday, and chuckled until his cough stopped him.

"Would you like to go to the Grammar School?" said Mr. Merry.

"I don't know," said John. "I think I should."

"They get better chances than we ever did, Tom," said Mr. Allday. "I was only eleven when I left school. I can remember the day as well——"

They understood the pause which followed. They knew the story, one of his favourites; it was one of John's favourites too. Mrs. Allday always

humoured him; she had her own worn stories, and by a pleasant little convention they were always enjoyed as new. Mr. Allday explained sometimes to friends, "My father never told more than three stories in his life, to my knowledge, and two of 'em were *his* father's; but I often think of 'em, and enjoy 'em, because he told 'em. A good story is like a top hat: it may go out of fashion, but it'll stand a lot of decent wear." In practice he followed his own maxim, and brought out his team of stories only on feast days. Then always the enjoyment of the day gave zest to the story.

"He was a clever man, I believe, a very clever man."

There was no need for elaborate exordium. John understood that his father meant his old schoolmaster. The hearers' pleasure was in greeting the prompt arrival of the expected.

"Very well liked, he was, by the farmers and the gentry round about—he was such splendid company. Many a night he'd be invited out, and drop by the side of the hedge on the way home, and somebody get him along. The drink that man could carry was something astonishing, I believe. We lads always knew when he'd had one of his special nights, he was so crabby the next day. Less than a word would set him off——"

The story was safely on its way. John never asked himself why he enjoyed this one so much. It was too great a task for his imagination unaided to understand his father's having been a boy like himself. But the story he understood; he saw his own self acting in it.

"I never did like geography. We had to come out to the floor, and point to places on the map—Europe it was. Many a time I knew, only I couldn't get the place fast enough, and down I went. I went down that time, I tell you, flat, with the

wooden pointer whacked across my head. He never intended to do it, only for his temper, and the drink hanging on him. I dare say he was as much frightened as I was hurt. It was the blood that frightened me. He sent me out with another boy to wash my head at the pump, 'and then I'll put some plaster on,' he said. But I wouldn't go in again. 'You get my books at playtime,' I said. 'If ever I go in there again, I'll murder him.' And I tell you I meant it. I never hated anybody as I hated that old devil."

John grinned. His mother frowned at him.

"Off home I went with my books. 'What's the matter?' said mother. 'I've left,' I said, and I threw my books down and showed her my head. She was for going off at once, only there was father's dinner to get ready. Oh! he was in a fine temper when he came. 'I'll take you back, and make him apologize,' he said. But I wouldn't go back. I meant it. A coach and four couldn't ha' dragged me. Before my father was back from his work at night I'd been up to Jenkins's farm three miles off, and got a job minding cows—a pound for six months, and all found. 'You'll get back to school, mind, in the winter months,' my father said. But I knew well I shouldn't.

"They were putting the line down that year. I used to go and watch the gangs. As soon as my six months was up, and I'd taken my sovereign home to mother safe in my boot, I went off and found the gaffer. 'Do you want a sharp lad, mister?' I said. I'd practised that over and over a hundred times or more. I was that anxious I told a lie about my age. He took me on as a nipper, handing spikes and cushions to the platelayers, and going to the blacksmith's with tools.

"I never harboured evil against anybody but the one man. 'When I get your size,' I vowed many

a time, as though I'd got him already, 'I'll lay you out over the head just as you did me.'

"Poor fellow, he was got lying in a ditch half full o' water—some tinkers found him. And a clever man, mind you, only for the drink."

John was enjoying himself, and not content that the story should end here. He wanted full measure now.

"But you did go to school, father, didn't you?" he exclaimed.

"I did, my lad," said his father, delighted at the effect of his story, "in a barn, fifteen of us at the start, a penny a night, and find our own candles, and paper, and ink, and books, and everything. Three winters I had. Mr. Horden let us have the barn and benches for nothing, and old Thomson, the Scotch gardener on Parland's estate, taught us; he'd been a schoolmaster in his younger day, so they said. He was a scholar. He taught us up to long division of money, and counting weights. We used to get the *Times* to read after the people in the big house had done with it. I bought that 'History of England' through him, so much a week. I know I was a good while paying it off."

John thought proudly of the row of black leather covered volumes in the parlour bookcase. He looked at the engravings sometimes on wet Sunday afternoons. He knew some of the names from his school lessons. He knew decimals, more than his father had ever learnt; yet there was something splendid in the story of his father's simple education which roused his pride.

"Ah, the young folks don't value education nowadays. They get it too cheap," said Mr. Merry.

"Is it cheap at the Grammar School?" asked John, with boyish irrelevance.

Tom Merry laughed.

"He's got it on his mind, you see."

"The point is," said Mr. Allday, "if we were to scrape a bit and send him, would he value it?"

"I should, father!" said John enthusiastically.

"It's for gentlemen's sons," said his prudent mother.

"I'm a gentleman," said Mr. Allday. "I pay twenty shillings in the pound."

He pushed back his chair, and the others rose with him. John glanced at each in turn, but did not venture to say anything. When his father and Mr. Merry had gone to the parlour, he lingered, hoping that he might coax his mother into his own enthusiasm. She refused to listen, and sent him after the others while she washed up the tea things.

Mr. Allday did not attempt to smoke again. John listened intently at first, in the hope of hearing another story, but the talk was politics, and then engineering technicalities, and he lost interest. He looked at his prize, turning the pages at haphazard, and reading here and there where a paragraph caught his attention. He was for a moment interested to learn that the great Doctor Livingstone had gone to work in a cotton factory when he was ten years old, and had taught himself Latin in his spare time, and studied natural history. Then he was attracted by the story of Thomas Edward, the naturalist. Into his memory came the picnics and holidays he had enjoyed with his father and mother. At first he had accepted as quite natural that his father should be able to name nearly all the flowers and birds, and find the nests so easily. It had surprised him later to find that others didn't know, and in the zest of this esoteric knowledge he had striven for reputation among his playmates.

The last paragraph stirred him to wonder.

"He did not make his love for natural history an excuse for neglecting his work. As a shoemaker

he was both skilful and diligent. His is indeed a noble life, which every boy should read and imitate as far as he can. Few men in any station have done better than Thomas Edward; and in the course of time people came to understand his high character and great ability."

John did not understand why Thomas Edward was alongside men like Livingstone and Columbus. He suspected the moralizing, and thought of Sam's words: "They always put you off with sayings."

His thoughts drifted. A few days ago he had believed that after Christmas he would go to work at Binnses. His mother had known the second Mrs. Binns from her cradle, and Old Gentleman Binns always stopped to speak. Now, however, all his ambition was for going to the Grammar School. Vaguely he felt that it might be the threshold of a great career; its vagueness enhanced it mightily, for near at hand his quiet nature would have shrunk from the sudden thought of change.

They had supper early. John was allowed to have two slices of cold mutton, and a pickled walnut, on a plate of his own. Truly he was growing up. Afterwards he went out for a while, and met Sam going home. He told all his new aspirations in a burst of confidence, so sure he was of sympathy. Sam's indifference hurt him acutely, and his enthusiasm waned. Fortunately his pride was roused again by the honour of being invited to go with his father to see Mr. Merry off by the bus to Selbridge. The three of them went into the "Bull" for a farewell glass; John had shandygaff, and the barmaid chaffed him about the fine head she put on it for him. He blushed. It was good to be growing up to dignity.

Ten o'clock had struck when they returned. John went straight to bed. He said his prayers without hurrying, but his thoughts slipped away

from the words. He recollected what Sam had said, doubting prayer, in the afternoon, and he felt that he ought not to think of that. When it refused to be pushed away he fought it with a memory of his own childhood: he had once prayed for an engine as a Christmas present, and sure enough he received one. He did not think how he had prayed at his mother's knee. The recollection pleased him; it proved well the efficacy of prayer. All this time his lips had shaped the words of his own prayer, and he was at the end. There he hesitated an instant, and then added resolutely: "And, please, I should like to go to the Grammar School. Amen."

Five minutes afterwards he was sound asleep, without having given another thought to his request.

Downstairs in the sitting-room his parents stayed to talk over Tom Merry's visit before they went to bed, and their promised few minutes grew towards the hour.

Mrs. Allday was a cottager's daughter, brought up in the country on the slopes under Selvalley Beacon. Her father had been well off for a labourer, and a lucky chance had brought him to favour with his employer, Mr. Horden. He had carried Miss Horden nearly a mile across the fields when she had been thrown from her pony and had hurt her leg. She was Mrs. Kingsnorton now, married to a prosperous iron merchant, living in a big house on a knoll above the Bristol Road. She called regularly on Mrs. Allday in her parish visits: "Very nice and pleasant—quite the lady." Sometimes she brought her daughters, and on those days Mrs. Allday was roused to greater admiration and garrulity afterwards. "It's nice to see anybody so nice," she explained to friends impressively.

Thomas Allday had met his wife Susan while he was a railway worker. Acquaintance had been very slow in ripening to quiet courtship—he was no ladies' man, and she was without guile. Then he had gone to the Selbridge Iron and Steel Company's works, tempted by the high wages to be had. It was heavy work in the rolling mill, working stripped at the furnace, wielding the great tongs, snatching the bars, a-sparkle along the iron floor, to the clanging rolls, and away again, sweating with the labour, and racked by piercing winter draughts. But the money was good. Every week he went to the bank as regularly as he took his pay at the office window. The puddlers made the most money. Many a story was told of their adventures in the great days when the railway first came. "Where's the next train go to? I'll go there." They took their hats to hold their money on pay-day, so went report. The most famous of them was still alive in the Selbridge workhouse. Thomas Allday had sworn by Brunel's broad gauge and his disc and crossbar signals, and was yet convinced of his innate superiority. To-night he had to talk of all these things in turn as recollections rose.

"No," said he, at his wife's suggestion that John might go on the railway. "We might get him into Binnses—if he don't go to the Grammar School."

"We could afford it, couldn't we? There's scholarships," said Mrs. Allday.

"If my boy goes he shall pay," said Mr. Allday proudly. "We'll have no charity."

"He will go then?"

"It might do him good."

"It would be nice to think of him not having to go to work at six o'clock of a morning."

"Ah. I think we'll let him," said Mr. Allday,

quietly. "I don't suppose we shall ever regret it."

He rose to go to bed. His wife went to see that the back door was safe for the night; she always did this now, since his first winter illness.

When she went upstairs with her candle she paused at John's door. If he were awake she might tell him the good news. Very cautiously she turned the knob, and the candle flame threw a shaft of light across the patchwork quilt, her own work thirty years ago. Her son's breathing rose and fell steadily in the quiet darkness. "Bless the lad, he's asleep," she thought, and smiled as she shut the door again. Her mind saw him still a tiny baby, as he had lain, sleeping innocently in his cot. Her first boy had died before John was born. Fidelity was her husband's claim. Her son now bore all her hopes.

CHAPTER III

BINNSES

JOHN always found Saturday to be the most interesting day of the week; it had so much variety. His mother always insisted on his getting up early, so that she might get on with her work; but that was on Friday night, and he generally managed to steal an extra half-hour on the following morning. On rare occasions, if he had a cold, he had breakfast in bed—those were memorable days. Dinner was a makeshift, but the day was pay-day, and there would always be something good for tea. In summer they had occasional picnics and fishing excursions. His father was an indifferent angler, but the flowers and birds never failed, nor did mother's store of dainties. Father always made the same joke, wherever they went for tea: he felt faint, and had to have brandy or rum, only a "thimbleful," in his second cup. They came home together in the warm dusk, tired and happy, and slept soundly into Sunday morning. In winter, father sometimes took his old muzzle-loader and had a half-day's shooting, especially when a crisp frost followed snow. John was not often allowed to go, and was all the more eager when opportunity came. He never forgot the first time he was allowed to shoot, creeping with his father behind a hedge, to where

rabbits were sitting out. He had assured his father he knew exactly how to do it; he had had ha'penny shots down the tube galleries at the Pie Fair. But now in his excitement he forgot all his proud knowledge, and all the advice. The gun kicked his triggerhand against his nose, bringing tears and imaginary blood, and a bruise on his shoulder which he exhibited proudly at night to his image in the looking-glass, for the rabbit was killed, its body in the brown stew jar, and its skin hanging on a nail waiting for the rag and bone man.

His father had lost much of his gaiety since his illness, and Saturday's procedure became more fixed. Dinner was easily prepared, then the biggest saucepan was put on the fire to heat water for father's bath, and clean underclothes decked a chair-back before the fire. Out came the same joke every Saturday: "I see you've got my slippers to warm; it's a sign it's pay-day." He handed all his money to his wife—John often wondered how much it was—and then received his week's pocket money, "for being a good boy." After dinner he sat by the fire with his jacket off, and smoked, even now a whiff or two, or strolled to and fro in the garden. Then the saucepan was emptied steaming into the bath on the hearthrug, and John was sent out to play. At half-past four his mother had the tea ready, and he was sent upstairs to call his father. When they were first married she would go and wake him with a kiss. She always sent John now.

The dreadful necessity of being in early from play, the bath on the hearthrug, a clean nightshirt, sausages for Sunday morning breakfast: all these in John's memory were inseparable from thoughts of the week-end.

This autumn there was a big crop of haws in the

lanes. "I hope it won't be a hard winter, for my husband's sake," said Mrs. Allday. The long summer had not taken his cough entirely.

It was Saturday, the fourth of November. Guy Fawkes celebrations were being held a day early. Mrs. Allday had no thought for these. There had been a damp fog for several days, and she was anxious about her husband's chest. "It's a good job it's Saturday. It will give him the week-end," she declared. There had been a light hoar frost at dawn, and a white mist. By breakfast-time the frost was gone, leaving water drops among the cabbages, and on the Michaelmas daisies, and hanging from the black twigs of the hedge and the wooden railings. Starlings clucked and whistled quietly in the ash at the end of the gardens, looking like round tree growths, and magnified by the mist. The last nasturtiums were bedraggled, the soil black and sodden. At midday the red face of the sun looked down for a while.

John was out all the morning at work. Old Gentleman Binns had stopped to speak to Mrs. Allday one Sunday morning after church. John was with her.

"He's getting a big lad," commented the old gentleman. "You'll have a job to keep him out of mischief, I know. Still at school, isn't he? We could do with a handy lad o' Saturdays. You might send him around, missus. . . ."

So John went to work every Saturday at Binnses. His mother would not even think of opposing the old gentleman's suggestion. His wish was law, not only to her but to the best part of the town. She explained to friends that she was doing it to oblige Mr. Binns. When John went to the Grammar School he would be at school on Saturday mornings. He had had an offer of Saturday work from Mr. Peckle, the grocer, but his mother wouldn't

hear of her boy's working like that, at a grocer's. For Old Gentleman Binns it was different, of course.

When Mr. Binns was young he had received the courtesy title of Gentleman Binns. He was seventy-four years old now, and had become Old Gentleman Binns, the town's leading citizen, an alderman, twice mayor, and the model of honest gentility. He was not a native; he had come as a young engineer and had married the daughter of the owner of the Orchard Works, now "Binnses": All descriptions of Wrought Iron Fittings for Gas, Steam and Water. Galvanized Tubes and Fittings. Brass Fittings, Stocks and Dies, etc. Unpretentious and old-fashioned, it was a model works. The old gentleman knew every man on the premises; all were bound to him by a personal loyalty, and he was always ready to receive the least of them, to listen to any grievance or any suggestion concerning the trade. They made fun of his eccentricities, but they respected him. Many were devoted to him. In the works, and on the magistrates' bench he was a terror to idlers and vagabonds. He had a wonderful memory for faces; it was his boast that he never forgot one he had once known. He had one son, a general favourite. His wife died soon after the boy was born. When the son grew up and married, he stayed in the big house with his father. He was killed in the hunting-field, and all Pedley Hill was out at his funeral. His widow died, and the old gentleman was left with his grandson alone. At sixty-three years old he married again, choosing a cottager's daughter, and sending her abroad to a convent school for a year before the wedding. She was only twenty-three. It might have been scandalous in another, but Pedley Hill accepted Old Gentleman Binns's choice, and great public festivities marked the wedding. Now he was a widower again. His

grandson was in London, estranged from the old gentleman, it was believed, and seldom heard of.

Everybody knew him. In local politics he was a privileged leader, despotic, yet kindly. At seventy-four he still showed all his six feet of height, with no sign of drooping. It was obvious even now that he had been a dandy years ago. His top hat shone; his coat was closely buttoned to his figure; he always wore gloves out of doors, and carried a gold-headed cane. He had a good-humoured, ruddy face, a prominent nose, and white side whiskers; and when he spoke it was in a loud, clear voice, unnecessarily loud, one of his deliberately exaggerated eccentricities. He was still a member of a good club in London. Congratulations and presents poured in for his birthday, and the works celebrated it with a dinner and smoking concert. The town worthies shook their heads and prophesied a poor future for Binnses when he should be gone.

To-day John came home in high enthusiasm for dinner.

"The bonfire's laid, with bricks all round, ever so big," he explained, with suitable gestures, to his mother. "I've seen the guy in the time-office, and the fireworks—boxes of 'em. Mr. Evans says I can go."

"You'll have to come straight home," said his mother.

He didn't like to be reminded of his bath.

The annual bonfire had been inaugurated by Mr. Binns as a treat for his son and the boy's friends. Later it had been for his grandson. It was held still as a treat for the young folk of all the better families in the district.

John's father was late in coming for dinner. When at last he arrived he had to stand by the door and fight for breath, gurgling and wheezing

in his windpipe, while his neck and face changed colour to a dark crimson. John was afraid.

"You'll go straight to bed after your bath," said Mrs. Allday.

In a moment he recovered, and sat down.

"I'm all right," he said. "I'm going out."

She was startled.

"You won't have your bath, then?" she suggested.

"Yes, I shall," said he.

"Not and go out after?"

"I shall see."

"Are you mad?" she exclaimed, horrified.

"I shall see, I tell you."

She understood that argument was useless against his obstinacy. Nevertheless, she tried it; she couldn't sit silent. When he rose and took down his gun to examine it, she attacked him passionately:

"Going shooting with a low, wicked lot o' fellows—on a day like this, above all—and that cough on you—it's suicide. Don't come to me. I shall say, 'You deserve all you've got' . . ."

John guessed where his father was going. He was afraid to ask. There was to be a big pigeon-shooting match at the "Heron" to-day, and a sweepstake, and this evening a big pigeon-pie supper. It was one of the sporting events of the year.

All the way back to work he thought of the shooting match, and the sport he might have if he were only a little more grown-up.

Binnses was the only works of importance in Pedley Hill, and was accepted as an integral part of the town, although it was comparatively of modern growth. The name, Orchard Works, and Orchard Street, told of an orchard which was still within the memory of old men. The present landlord of the "Bull" had married the daughter

of the last tenant of Orchard Farm, before the land had been sold at the breaking-up of the estate. Fifty years ago the town had not extended on this eastern side. In the private parlour at the "Bull" a lease was still preserved of the Orchard Farm, dated 1804. It was difficult now to believe that it was less than eighty years old, with its guarded privileges of feudalism, its rights of venery and hunting for the landowner, "his followers and retinue, with horses and dogs, at all times of the year, there to hunt, hawk, fish and fowl, at his free will and pleasure, without restraint."

These things had no interest for John—their phraseology repelled him. Binnses as he knew it was a whole country of adventure. His duty was to run errands and make himself useful for the household, to help the donkey-boy, sometimes to drive the donkey and little cart himself. Several times he had been in the big house, and he was able to wander in the gardens, the paddock, and the stables, to steal potatoes from the pigs' store and roast them at the harness-room fire; and on Saturday afternoons he had wonderful adventures alone in the empty works. Before midday all was busy, the boilers hissing quietly, the great flywheel spinning against the whitewashed wall of the fitting-shop. The engine-house was full of the hot smell of grease; John loved to watch the sliding rods, and the fussy governors spinning. In the smithy the men sang at their work; the tongs hissed in the water, the breeze fires glowed in the draughts of the bellows; up and down swung the sledges, as though they had no weight at all, and tap, tap, went the fitting-makers' hammers, busily. But in the afternoon the quiet was awesome, unnatural. Water trickled eerily in the troughs; crickets chirped on the warm hearths The air bore odours from the breeze-loads, from

the rusty iron, the milky galvanizing water, the grease, with an added undefinable odour of busy humanity. A wonderful place in the stillness of Saturday afternoon.

The regular donkey-boy was ill, and John had to take the donkey and cart alone. Some things had to be delivered at a warehouse in the Bristol Road. John was looking forward to the trip, which was soon magnified to an adventure, with the responsibility adding zest to the fine independence of it. When he was summoned to the big house and told by one of the maids that he had to go to Sele House and bring a parcel back, he was exultant in rejoicing, for Sele House was on the other side of the railway line, not far from the "Heron." By fetching a wide curve on his return he might have a few minutes among the pigeon shooters. Better still, he might see them first; dusk would fall very early to-day, and the sport might be over if he waited too long. The rain was falling now in a thin, shifting drizzle of mist, very uncomfortable to those who had no grand sport like pigeon-shooting to see.

He took the boxes to the warehouse, and soured the watchman's temper with his loud impatience. Then he set off for the "Heron," calling encouragement to the donkey, louder and louder as he passed under the railway bridge and came near. The adventure was like a merry sort of truancy. He tickled the donkey into a jerky gallop with the butt of the whip—experiments had taught him the futility of whacking.

The "Heron" was a famous old inn near the river. The railway cut it off from the town, and its custom still depended on its sporting fame won in the cock-fighting days. The walls of the low rooms were decked with pictures of famous pugilists, cock-fighters, rabbit coursers, pedestrians,

ratting dogs, racehorses, jockeys, and personages with similar claims to immortality. All the sporting gentry of the district, prosperous and ragged, made it their resort. Its kitchen still maintained Pedley Hill's high reputation for meat-pies. There was a great pie supper on Pie Fair Saturday, and another on Boxing Day. To-day's sport and supper rivalled those of the other great days.

John saw the crowd long before he was near enough to see the sport. He heard the shots, but saw no pigeons, and his eagerness grew and grew. A group of loungers laughed at the donkey's gallop, and John grinned merrily at them in return.

The crowd was assembled in a field beside the river, at the rear of the public-house. It was impossible to approach near enough with the donkey; nothing was to be seen even by standing on the seat of the cart. John drove beyond the public-house and pulled up in the lane. There was no danger of the donkey's running away; he had left him many a time before; besides, there was nobody about, they were all at the shooting. He stroked the donkey, and told him very emphatically, "Whoa!" Then he gave an unnecessarily stealthy look round, slipped through the thin hedge, and trotted across the field. If anyone asked his business he would say he had come for his father.

The "Heron" held sparrow shooting matches and sweepstakes every Saturday throughout the season, and often on Saint Monday afternoons, when the workmen generally took a half-holiday. Sparrows were cheap—a penny each. A pigeon cost sixpence. The shooters couldn't afford to let a pigeon escape, and fly back home when they had paid sixpence for it. That wouldn't be right. Besides, what about the pigeons for the famous pie supper? Were they to be bought twice over? Certainly

not! The sportsman therefore stood at his mark, just in front of the puller, and on both sides of him in the rear was arranged in an arc the huge congregation of his brother sportsmen. "Ready?" . . . "Ah!" . . . "Pull!" Over went the trap, up went the pigeon with a clatter, and the gunner had both barrels at it. If the bird didn't come down with a thud or topple, badly hit, then it was every sportsman's duty to see that it didn't escape. Bang! bang! went the guns, like the fusilade of a company of volunteers at rifle practice. Sometimes the bird wouldn't rise when the trap came over. It would stare about, bewildered; if it pecked at the ground there were roars of laughter at its cheek. Stones and lumps of turf were thrown to startle it into flight. Then the gunner had the right to refuse it as a sitter, and demand another bird. All the congregation thereupon advanced to the charge, and blew it to pieces as it rose. Nobody had a helping of pigeon pie without a few pellets included. It was a proud boast that last year there had been seven dozen birds, and only two got away. One of those was fetched down with a broken wing by a man waiting on the other side of the river, and caught after a chase by some boys, who ran away with it. Thus were combined sport and economy with general satisfaction, except that of the man who had sold the pigeons and had counted on half a dozen escaping, at least.

John managed to wriggle into a good position in time to see his father miss his bird in the sweepstake. A great howl rose from the crowd, and a furious discharge roared from the other guns. The wretched bird turned a somersault, struggled to its balance again, and collapsed—hit again. A dog started out to retrieve it. The men took it in turn with their dogs. Only one pigeon had

got clear away—one had been retrieved from the river; to-day was going to see a new record. John enjoyed himself lustily—there was so much noise.

He had no idea of the time. There was always just one more bird to see. When at length an interval came, he had a hazy dread that he had stayed longer than he had intended, longer than he ought to have stayed. He trotted back across the field and crawled through the hedge again. The donkey was gone! He had a nasty empty feeling inside, and for an instant he looked round, dazed, asking himself if this were actually the place where he had left the donkey. Then he ran, but stopped after a few yards. Perhaps it wasn't this way the donkey had gone; so he turned and ran back. Perhaps it wasn't that way. He stopped again, and his nose tingled with starting tears. "Have you seen a donkey, mister?" he asked the first man. But the man had been with his week's pay in the "Heron."

"Ah, lad, hundreds of 'em in my day. Have you ever seen a dead un?"

John anxiously explained that he was looking for a live one.

"Any fool can see a live un! It's the dead uns you never see."

The last words were bawled at him as he ran away. Several men stood joking before the inn, and they all had seen the donkey go. "Yes—down there!" . . . "Run, my lad!" . . . "No, not that way, down there." . . . "Ah!" . . . "No!" . . . John saw they were making a fool of him and he was ready to cry with vexation. If the donkey were lost he would get the sack; he dared not go back without it. If the donkey had run off home alone, he would get the sack too, for certain.

A girl with a blue pinafore was walking quietly along the road. At a second glance John saw she was Maggie Wheatley, and his hopes danced.

"Yes, I saw some boys driving it up there. I think they turned into the little lane."

John ran without waiting to thank her. He hesitated for a second at the turning, and then put out all his speed. Beyond a bend, a quarter of a mile away, he came on the donkey, grazing quietly at the hedge-bank. The boys had disappeared. John was near tears again with his relief. He jumped up into the cart, and called to the donkey: "Gee up, laddie!" But the donkey was fractious, from bad treatment, and John had to get down again, and stroke and coax him. More time was wasted.

Maggie had come up the lane to see.

"I've found him," cried John triumphantly. "Thanks! I was in a terrible way."

She smiled.

"I thought it looked like Binnses' donkey!"

She turned with him as he led the donkey back.

"I've been out nearly all morning with another girl after blackberries," she explained. "I know they're all over, very near. She saw her father and went off. I was talking to Sam Bloom; he went into the 'Heron.' He thinks he's a man now."

"I'm going to Sele House. Would you like a ride?" said John.

She jumped up. He sat beside her, and coaxed the donkey into a trot.

"Like the seaside, isn't it?" said Maggie, enjoying herself.

"Rhyl," suggested John.

"I've never seen the seaside," said Maggie, wistfully.

The maid at Sele House told John that the parcel had been sent; he was too late.

"I shall tell 'em the donkey was obstinate—got frightened, eh?" said John to Maggie. "I'm going back for the bonfire after tea. It's a whopper."

"Is it near tea-time now?" said Maggie. "I'm hungry. I haven't been home since after breakfast."

John stopped at the first huckster's shop, told Maggie to wait a minute, and came out with a ha'porth of biscuits wrapped in newspaper. They were his favourite biscuits, the shapes of all the capital letters of the alphabet. E could be eaten into F, and O into C, and there were other games. Maggie accepted them shyly at first, but her hunger was ravenous, and presently John began to regret his generosity. Nevertheless, he forced away his mean thought, and atoned, when Maggie was going.

"Would you like to come to Binnses' bonfire to-night? If you're there about seven o'clock, outside, I can get you in. You can slip in easy in the dark. It'll be grand."

"I should like to," said Maggie. "Perhaps mother won't let me out, though.

"I shan't wait after seven," said John, with dignity.

"I'll try."

She ran away up the hill, and after a while turned to wave her hand. In that gesture were all her unsaid thanks, all her shy gratitude. John smiled. He had made somebody grateful to him to-day; it was only Maggie Wheatley, but there was a fine satisfaction in his heart.

His father had not returned when John arrived for tea, and his mother was worried. He said nothing; it would not be wise to say he had been near the "Heron"; his mother would be

vexed, if not angry, he knew, and he dared not risk anything which might lead to his being forbidden to go to the bonfire. It was ablaze now. He had been present at the lighting ceremony. Old Mr. Evans the coachman and Spence the gardener had taken the guy from the time office, and lifted it solemnly into its place on the fire, while the maids giggled approbation. Then the match had been applied, and the first flames rose crackling. To John the ceremony was of the nature of a sacerdotal rite. There was no other bonfire in the district to compare with Binnses'. Thin columns of smoke had been rising here and there from backyards since midday, and premature squibs and crackers had been let off by youngsters who couldn't wait. Bands of urchins had paraded the streets in fancy costume, with real guys, and shrill chanting:

> Remember, remember the fifth of November,
> Gunpowder, treason and plot.
> I know no reason why gunpowder treason
> Should ever be forgot. . . .
> A penny roll to feed the Pope,
> A pennorth o' cheese to choke him,
> A pint o' beer to drink his health,
> And a faggot o' wood to burn him. . . .

John had sung the whole twenty lines over and over, last year, in procession, and had fought in a pitched battle with a rival band, to their utter discomfiture and the loss of their guy's race. But those days were past. He wasn't among the common street-boys now; he was going to Binnses' bonfire, among the gentry.

His mother kept him a long time after tea, and he grew impatient. He had plenty of time, he knew, but his eagerness was beyond control. In thought he called his mother stupid, and accused

her of keeping him on purpose to annoy him. He could not have understood that she was seeking in his companionship the means to quell her anxiety. When he managed to slip away he ran until he was out of breath. The afternoon's wet mist was rain now. That didn't matter. No rain could put out the great fire at Binnses'. There were tar barrels on it. And in the time-office roman candles and squibs, and baccarappas, and big crackers, and little crackers, lay in rows on the floor and on the table, all ready. One in each hand —whoo!—whoo! there'd be some fun before nine o'clock.

The big gates were open. Now and again the flames spurted with a flare, and the whole buildings sprang out yellow from the darkness. Guests were arriving quickly now. John suffered a little disappointment; there was nobody to talk to. He had forgotten that he wouldn't know these boys and girls—they were not in his circle of acquaintances. He saw Willie Benlow and his sister; but Willie Benlow scarcely knew him in the street since he went to the Grammar School. The Kingsnorton girls were there, who had been with their mother at the prize-giving in the summer; they didn't know him. One was a lady quite grown up, of another world than his. He went out to look for Maggie Wheatley, and waited about until he heard that the fireworks were going to start. Then he blamed Maggie for all his disappointment. "Here, young un, you might slip up to the time-office and help," Mr. Evans told him, and he ran away into the darkness towards the smithy, obstinately determined not to help. He dared not go further alone; it was so dark and mysterious. The boilers hissed gently near at hand, and bogey noises came out of the night.

The shriek of the first rocket startled him. It

was as though a fiery sword had torn the darkness, leaving a trail of scintillating shreds. Then the rocket burst with a terrific detonation, scattering a shower of golden sparks. An interval followed; then one after another a shrill company of rockets mounted the heavens, and exploded softly in fountains of green stars. The whole world was filled with pallid light. Another series followed, and objects showed in lurid silhouettes as the crimson stars trailed down to earth, and died, leaving the night inky black.

"What do you think you're doing here?"

The gruff question gave John a horrid start. When he turned he saw Sam Bloom and Maggie.

"I thought that would frighten you inside out," said Sam. "You're a nice gentleman, to promise to meet a young lady and take her out for the evening, and then run away."

Maggie giggled.

"I didn't run away," protested John. "She wasn't there."

"Well, the least you can do is to get her a few squibs to dry her tears up."

Sam was greatly changed since the summer. He worked at a drilling machine at Cadby's new foundry, and had now a jocular, off-hand manner, carefully modelled upon that of the best workshop hands. He could smoke, and swear, and talk horse-racing, and calculate odds. John felt instinctively that there was something awry in this sprouting manhood, something missing perhaps—he did not know. He had always liked Sam, and he did not attempt to find fault with him. Indeed, he had little opportunity; they saw each other very seldom. John's friends were still at school. With Sam it was a point of etiquette not to be seen with a schoolboy.

John fetched a handful of squibs and three

roman candles, and for the first time in the evening he began to enjoy himself thoroughly. Maggie kept close to him, and lit her squibs from his. Sam walked up boldly to the fire and lit his at the blaze, despite the fierce heat beating on him. "It's nothing to our smallest furnace," he explained.

Cheers, and merry laughter, and shrieks of excitement filled the air, accompanying the din of the fireworks. Folk at the market in the "Bullen," and in all the district round, even over beyond Nickling, glanced at the flare in the sky, and said, "That's Binnses'." Old Gentleman Binns himself was indoors, watching the fireworks occasionally from a window, and holding a reception of a few of his old friends.

The fun was nearly at an end, and John was alone. Sam and Maggie had disappeared. The crackers in the guy had exploded and his carcase was hanging in glowing shreds. Two girls were walking slowly to and fro, their glances fixed on the ground, searching for something.

"It *was* here somewhere, I'm sure."

John's curiosity was roused. He looked about near where they were searching, but dared not question them; they were the Kingsnorton girls, beings of another social world. He would have been too self-conscious to talk intelligently, even had they deigned to speak to him. It would be almost impossible to find anything among the dead fireworks scattered, he decided, and presently he wandered away. The fun hadn't lasted long; no fun ever lasted long enough, and somehow he felt it hadn't been so grand as he had hoped.

Then he saw Sam and Maggie again.

"Bit o' luck," said Sam. "I've found a silver brooch.

"I found it," said Maggie.

"Who picked it up?" demanded Sam.

"That's because you pushed me away."

"There's a girl lost it," said John. "They're looking for it over there."

"Who?"

"The Miss Kingsnortons."

"How do you know they've lost this? Did they tell you?"

"No, but I saw——"

"Very well, then. Find it keeps."

"But it's theirs, I tell you."

"It's ours now."

John was still arguing when Mr. Evans called him:

"Just have a look round and see if you can find a silver brooch lying about anywhere. Ask if anybody's seen it."

John was worried. He couldn't tell about Sam and Maggie. He couldn't persuade them—they had gone. It was a difficult problem to solve.

He was pretending to search near the fire when Maggie ran to him.

"Here it is—quick! I snatched it off him," she exclaimed, and ran away.

John walked to the time-office, and explained to Mr. Evans that he had found the brooch by the fire.

"I knew it couldn't ha' got far," said Mr. Evans, who was always in the right.

He wouldn't let John escape, and the boy had to suffer the thanks of both girls and of their parents. The younger, whom her mother called Barbara, said to him, "Thank you very much indeed," and smiled with so much pleasure and dignity that he was acutely impressed, and blushed crimson. Mr. Kingsnorton turned as he was about to go and gave him a shilling, "For your money-box, my lad." Mr. Evans crowned the episode from his store of wisdom: "That's the style, young man. Keep

honest, mind your p's and q's, and watch your manners—you're sure to get on." Yet all his wisdom, and even the shilling itself, had not the lasting effect of the little girl's smile and dignity.

The guy had collapsed and lay a mass of grey ash on the top of the waning fire. Most of the people had gone. John clasped the shilling in his fist, and put his fist in his pocket, and prepared to run home to his mother.

Sam and Maggie were in the road outside.

"Have you given the brooch back?" said Sam . . . "Good boy! Did you think I wanted to steal the blessed thing?"

"Mr. Kingsnorton gave me a shilling," said John, avoiding the question.

"Fourpence apiece, Maggie," said Sam gleefully.

John was startled.

"Don't take any notice of Sam's nonsense," said Maggie.

"I will share it, if you like," said John, unwilling, but fearful of appearing mean.

Maggie pushed Sam back.

"No, you keep it. It's yours."

"I don't want your bits o' shillings," declared Sam loftily. "I earn plenty. You won't come to the 'Bull' for a drink, I s'pose, now you've come into a fortune."

He stalked away.

"He's jealous," said Maggie, seeing John's humiliation. "He thinks he's a man."

"I don't care!" exclaimed John. It was a hard struggle to disdain. "We've got the shilling, haven't we, and he hasn't." He was hurt by Sam's humour, and suffered the schoolboy's envy of his elder's incipient manhood. The thought of the shilling, however, and the glint of it as he held it to show Maggie brought him triumph, and generosity followed.

"It's yours, really. You found the brooch, I didn't."

He put the shilling into her hand, and her fingers closed on it before she realized what he was at. Then she tried to give it back, and a merry scuffle followed. He told her, "It's yours," when it dropped to the ground, but she ran after him with it. At last he accepted it again; she gave him no peace.

They had moved away from the works into Orchard Street, the wrong direction for John.

"You're going straight home, aren't you?" said he.

Maggie laughed at him.

"*You* are. I know you've got to hurry. It's your bath night."

"I needn't be in early unless I like," said John, stung in his pride.

"I'll dare you to come up the hill with me."

"It's raining," he protested.

"I told you you were frightened."

"I aren't!"

He thought of his mother, waiting for him now, and watching the clock, and he was intensely worried, but not an atom of his trouble must he show before a girl.

"I'm going round Mount Street," said Maggie.

He walked with her doggedly. Very soon she had forgotten how she had teased him, and in her own volubility she did not perceive that he had no talk.

"This time next year I shall be in service," she told him, growing more and more confidential. "Mother says she's going to send me away, get me into a big house somewhere—London, perhaps."

"I shall be at the Grammar School," said John, roused.

"You'll be a boy at school. I shall be ever so grown up," she declared enthusiastically. "Mother's got a book in the house—the Countess of Somewhere—I forget her name—she was only a poor girl in the country, and went to London. All kinds of rich gentlemen wanted to marry her."

In her ardour she forgot for the moment that she was talking to a boy.

"I'm reading 'The Pirates of the Prairie,' Gustave Aimard. That's the kind of book to read," said he.

"This is a true tale, though," explained Maggie. "It's written by the lady herself. There's one gentleman she was very fond of—he comes to the cottage when she's a poor girl, and gives her a shilling for a glass of water. He promises to marry her, and they break the shilling in two, and wear it round their necks. When he dies she puts her half on his grave and covers it up, and puts flowers on."

"She couldn't ha' spent it anyhow. It was wasted," said John.

Maggie resented his practical view.

"I shan't tell you any more. You're only making fun."

"It *was* wasted," persisted John. "Would you break a good shilling in two?"

She had to say "No!"

He put the shilling down the back of her neck, and laughed at her while she tried to shake it down.

"I'm going home now," she declared at length, and she came close to him. "Do you know what she gave him for his shilling?"

"No—what?"

To his utter astonishment she put her face up to his. He drew back, startled, and her kiss was placed on the end of his nose. Before he recovered

she was running away up the hill. For a moment he hesitated. Then it was too late to give chase.

"Good night!" she called out.

"Good night!" said he.

She laughed merrily, and called "good night" again and again.

He was at the bottom of the hill when he discovered the shilling in his coat pocket. He smiled in all the satisfaction of both generosity and possession. There was a queer, uncomfortable sensation at the tip of his nose, and a lightness in him, a joy . . .

It was a full minute, or more, before he recollected that it was his bath night. Then he ran.

"I thought it was your father at first," said his mother, when he entered the house.

She had been sitting alone with her anxiety, and the boy's coming relieved her for a while. She forgave his lateness. John perceived nothing of his mother's thoughts. He rejoiced in his having escaped censure, and wondered how much longer he might have stayed out if he had known.

"It's raining hard now," he told her.

He was puzzled by her silence. A basin of bread and milk stood on the hob, and a jug of herbs for his father—horehound and honey and liquorice, and certain secret herbs bought from an old woman at Nickling, who was supposed to concoct the mixture at the full of the moon, as her grandmother had taught her—a famous brew. John's mother put the basin on the table.

"Get your supper now," she commanded. "You'll have your bath another time. I haven't got the saucepan on."

John was pleased, but his perplexity marred his pleasure somewhat. Saturday night and no bath, and his mother at home, in good health—it was unprecedented. He began to talk about the glories

of the fireworks, but failed in his descriptions—his mother was not listening. He was glad to escape upstairs.

He was in bed before he remembered that he hadn't told his mother about the shilling. All the way home he had rehearsed this story to begin as soon as he entered the house, and catch his mother's interest before she could complain of his being late.

Presently he heard a sound of coughing in the road, and footsteps passing very slowly by the houses. He thought he recognized his father's cough, though he was not sure, for this was much worse. Then he heard the back door open, and the coughing again in the sitting room. There seemed to be no end of it. Frightened at length, he crept out of bed, and on to the landing at the top of the stairs. His mother was talking.

"Thomas! Thomas!" he heard her say. It was years since he had heard her call his father "Thomas." When the coughing ceased a while he heard his father's breathing, although the door was shut at the bottom of the stairs. It was cold up here, with bare feet on the oilcloth; John trembled, and in bed again he couldn't get comfortable. Presently his mother and father came up the stairs together. Then his mother went down, and up again, and down; a crackling noise told him there was a fire lit in the bedroom. Except for his father's two short illnesses, there had only been one fire in that grate since they came into the house—one winter day when his mother was ill. When his father ceased coughing he lay tormented by the anticipation of his recommencing. Formless terrors stalked in the darkness.

His father was coughing when he awoke, and he wondered if the coughing had continued all night. His mother came to get him up.

"You'll have to go for the doctor after breakfast," she told him quietly.

When he was ready to go downstairs he saw that the other door was ajar, and he went on tiptoe across the landing to peep into his father's room. The blind was still down, and the air stuffy. There seemed to be a mountain of clothes on the bed. Then he saw that it was his father, lying face downwards, with his knees doubled under him, and gasping horribly for breath. He always wore a white nightcap since his first serious attack of bronchitis; now it was awry, and its whiteness made the dark crimson of his neck seem gruesomely unnatural. The air made bubbling and wheezing noises in his chest, and he had to fight for every breath. John felt his throat choking, and a mist of tears blurred his vision as he stole away and waited a while, listening, on the landing before he went downstairs.

"Shall I go for the doctor now?" he said.

"No. You had better have your breakfast first," said his mother.

He didn't enjoy his sausages. While his mother went upstairs he squeezed his nose with his fingers, and shut his mouth tight, till he couldn't hold his breath another second. Then he tried it again, allowing only a tiny passage for the air, and he wondered how his father could keep alive, fighting for breath, hour after hour. He was frightened.

Rain had fallen heavily all night. Now the pavements were drying, and the warm sunlight glinted on the puddles. The air was still, and filled with all the peace of Sunday morning. A thrush sang a few loud notes, over and over, from the ash. The river bridge looked so clean, it might have been scrubbed in the night.

Doctor Rubery lived in a big house near Binnses.

As John approached, he recollected the bonfire and the shilling. He hadn't told his mother yet. Breakfast was late at the doctor's. The maid's mouth was greasy, and there was a luscious smell of ham frying. John felt vaguely that things had no right to be as usual, when his father was so ill. At home again he helped his mother in the house, both of them working mechanically. The joint of beef had to be cooked before the fire in the kitchen; it was John's duty to watch that it was kept turning. They had no jack; a twisted rope of worsted performed the same office, with a skewer through it to wind it up every few moments. The joint must not be allowed to spin too fast, and it had to be basted with the same iron spoon mother used for burning the sugar in the fire to brown the gravy. John loved to stay at home and watch the joint, but to-day it was a monotonous task.

The doctor came at midday. John listened at the kitchen door while his mother talked, after they had been upstairs.

"I thought he'd ha' died in the night."

"Oh, I'll have many a bill out of him yet, never fear."

The doctor laughed heartily and John rejoiced.

He was allowed to go upstairs. His father sat propped up, with clean clothes on the bed, and his nightcap on straight. He asked John about the bonfire, and the joint downstairs, and the boy's gaiety returned.

He had dinner with his mother in the kitchen, to save trouble, and he told her of the shilling Mr. Kingsnorton had given him.

"Maggie Wheatley found the brooch really," he explained.

"You might give her sixpence of it; and you

can put your sixpence in your money-box," advised his mother.

He was disappointed. It was fair enough to give Maggie half, but putting his own sixpence in a money-box was like throwing it away.

As soon as dinner was over, and the water hot for washing up the dishes, his mother put the big saucepan on the fire: "For your bath in about an hour's time," she explained.

"Aren't I going to Sunday school?" objected John.

"Cleanliness is next to godliness."

It was the only time she smiled all day. John didn't smile at all. It was a miserable Sunday. Even the big volumes of the History of England failed to interest him.

Monday morning was no better.

"Your father had a very bad night. He's dropped asleep now," said his mother.

He was glad to escape to school. Maggie Wheatley was late, and he had no chance of speaking to her. "If I don't see her, I can't give her anything," he thought, and resolved to keep the whole shilling. The resolve lived until the afternoon, and then he repented after school. Maggie was going away up the hill alone. He couldn't go to her before the other boys, they would torment him for weeks, but he could follow her.

She had disappeared round the back of the house when he arrived, and he told himself, "I shan't come up again."

She must have seen him, he understood, for she reappeared lower down the hill. She had run down past the backs of the houses and so come into the street again.

"Hallo!" she said, calmly.

He was disconcerted.

"I thought you'd gone in the house."

"Didn't you want me?"

"Yes."

"I'm here."

His embarrassment grew. She wasn't like other girls, shy and giggling, always waiting for the boy to make the talk. He went into a little shop and got two sixpences for his shilling, and she ran to spend hers at once. He had hoped faintly that she would refuse. She shared her nuts and brandy balls with him, a pen'orth of each, and he wasn't even tempted to spend his sixpence. He told her it was for his money-box.

It was nearly half past five when they parted.

"I'm going to spend the rest to-night. Shall I?" said Maggie.

"I don't know," said John.

"Won't you come out?"

She tempted a promise from him.

He was in such good humour that his mother's censure took him unawares.

"I couldn't help being late," he explained. "I was giving Maggie Wheatley her sixpence."

"I've got enough without you worrying me. Get your tea. I want to clear away."

He had no means of understanding that her mood was the result of her own mental disquietude. He thought she was stupidly angry. When tea was over, and the things put away, he was afraid to ask to go out, and he was afraid to go out without asking. His father coughed intermittently upstairs; and then fell into a doze. His mother darned stockings. He thought of Maggie waiting impatiently for him, and eating the sweets herself, and she would be angry, too—scorn him, perhaps. His thoughts slid down into a dark gulf of misery. When he asked to go to bed before his usual time his mother thought he was unwell, and threatened him with medicine.

Maggie Wheatley wouldn't look at him the next day, nor the day after that. He told himself resentfully he didn't care, and avoided her.

At the end of the week the doctor had a long chat with Mrs. Allday. Her husband was out of danger for the present. The future for the patient depended on his taking great care of himself, and staying indoors during the severe weather. "There's many years of life in him, with reasonable care. He won't be able to do any regular work, I'm afraid—not this winter, anyhow."

Mrs. Allday explained to John: "I don't suppose we shall starve, even if he never works again. We've got a nice bit put away, thank God; but we shall have to scrape."

Friends were allowed upstairs to see Mr. Allday, and John found he could play football after school, and come in late for his tea, without his mother's growing irritable. Only one thought troubled him at all, "If father never goes to work again, we shall be ever so poor, and I can't go to the Grammar School."

His great resolve came on the Sunday after his father came downstairs for the first time. He kept it timidly till after supper, when he said "good night" before going to bed:

"Please, I don't want to go to the Grammar School. I'd like to go to work and earn some money instead. I could go to Binnses."

He didn't wait for a reply. His ears tingled as he undressed, and he smiled in a fine glow of pleasure which he made no effort to understand. It would be splendid, being grown-up, and working at Binnses. He understood that he was making some sort of sacrifice, but he had no idea of its magnitude; he only felt the joy of it.

His father said, "God bless the lad!" and there

were tears in his eyes. His mother lay awake long after her partner had begun to choke and gurgle in sleep. She didn't wish to sleep yet—she wanted to enjoy her happiness in full measure.

SECOND PART

CHAPTER I

THE PIE FAIR

THE year 1893 was a very good year for The Trade. Every true Briton knows that there is only one trade in the United Kingdom—that of the gentry who never refuse a welcome to a stranger with money to spend on ales, beer, wines, and spirits. From New Year's Day onward there was never a public-house without its orator, and never an orator without his argumentative audience, all busily occupied with what is more important than work, and more stimulating than play—politics, in which persistence will triumph over mere reason, and thirst over both. Mr. Gladstone had brought in the great Home Rule Bill. Everybody was for it, or against it, to the death. Some people even understood it, but they gained nothing by that; indeed, they invariably lost their tempers because they couldn't make other people understand it. Various profiles, encased in Mr. Gladstone's famous collars, appeared on school-children's slates, sharing popularity with the immortal bogeyman. Sundry horse-races and local affairs demanded attention during the year; Chicago celebrated its World's Fair; Nansen set out in the "Fram" on his famous attempt to drift across the

Pole, according to Professor Mohn's theory. But these things were no more than mere parochial affairs. The Home Rule Bill was the thing. When September came, and the Lords threw it out, every newspaper struggling for huge circulation said that public feeling was at fever heat. Nothing could have happened more opportune for the success of the Pie Fair.

For twenty miles round the countryside folk flocked to Pedley Hill for the annual fair. Selbridge was a greater town, and threatened soon to swallow Pedley Hill and still feel hungry; yet, despite its greatness, it was not able to boast of a fair anything like so good as its neighbour's. Nobody asked why. It was perfectly natural that it should be so, because it had always been. No reasonable person has any right to inquire the why and wherefore of established custom until it is extinct.

Nobody else could make pies like those baked in Pedley Hill. The famous steak and kidney pies might be equalled here and there, perhaps, on fortuitous occasions; the pigeon pies might occasionally be equalled; but the pork pies—never. No recipe for them had ever been trusted to paper. Even though it might be written, and you might pay pounds and pounds to the thief—for only by theft could such a treasure be obtained—it wouldn't do you any good. You had to be born in Pedley Hill to make the real pies, and you had to have the pie genius. There was history to prove it. There is history to prove anything, of course, except that better pies have ever been made in Selbridge. King Charles had praised the pies he ate in Pedley Hill. He must have done, for he was a gentleman, and therefore more appreciative of the high art of pie making than any close-cropped Roundhead could be. His actual words

had not been preserved, unfortunately, but it is well known that he slept in Pedley Hill during the opening days of the Great War. Queen Elizabeth slept once in the town, too. It's a poor town indeed which never bedded one or the other of them.

Most houses had a long garden, and the garden nearly always had a pigsty at the end. The air was filled with the most luscious squeals at feeding-time. Pig-killing was a trade in itself, hereditary. Home-cured bacon, lard, brawn, chitterlings, scratchings, sausages, black puddings, pies—a good housewife had to be expert in the preparation of all these dainties. Every pig was cut up, each part allotted to its new owner, and gloated over, before it was coaxed gently to the spot where it might sing "good-bye" to its assembled friends.

The marvellous excellence of the pies was not in the pastry alone, nor in the meat, nor the jelly—it was everywhere. You couldn't tell exactly where it was or what it was, and you could no more copy it than you could fit a pair of trousers on a will-o'-the-wisp. The pastry had to be made with boiling water, milk, and lard, in delicately adjusted proportions with the flour, all by instinct; no mechanical weighing would do it. When the meat was packed in layers of fat and lean your troubles were only just beginning; the crust had to be raised. If the temperature went down all the bad language at a Selbridge football match wouldn't help you—the pie was ruined. You had to have the dexterity of a juggler, and all the skill of a Pedley Hill cook, and even a little more was needed. Perhaps you had to say a prayer to some benevolent saint—perhaps Saint Giles, who brings in the pork season. Nobody knew exactly—at least nobody told exactly.

The Church calendar and the moon fixed the

old feasts, and the old folk still reckon the Pie Fair in the proper way. As an actual fair it is gone now. The pies aren't so good nowadays. Any of the old people will tell you so.

The origin of the Pie Fair is lost in the mists of antiquity, as the historians explain, when they are fairly stuck in their investigations. The Fair was originally a great market, and the sideshows which came to be its real attraction came originally because there were the buyers and sellers with money to spend after marketing. Business shrunk to haggling of no importance; the hiring of farm servants ceased; yet the country folk flocked in just as before. Custom dies hard with country people. Every local antiquary has shut himself in his room to wonder over these things, when he might have had more fun on the wooden horses at a penny a round. One indeed, at Pedley Hill—though he was a Selbridge man—wrote long, unpaid articles in newspapers explaining how it hadn't been a Pie Fair at all, but a *Paille* Fair, a sort of general harvest grain, and perhaps stock market. He was so proud of himself that he spent the rest of his life in weaving history for the place, and cutting it up into readymade suits. Selbridge accepted his theory, and quoted it in the directory every year. Pedley Hill retorted, "You can't make pies with straw—well, perhaps *you* can," and went on enjoying the Fair the same as ever, until it went out of fashion, killed by modern restlessness, or education, or travel, or something according to your own pet theory.

It was Pie Monday, and Pedley Hill was on holiday all day. In the great days the Fair had been held in the Bullen and on the waste grounds along Orchard Street. Gingerbread and pie sellers had stalls to-day in the Bullen, but the Fair Ground was on the other side of the railway, adjoining

the "Heron." The better classes of the district often went away to the seaside at the Fair holiday now, and the workers were following them in increasing numbers every year. The Fair might be a relic of the town's brave forefathers, but it was scarcely a respectable relic. Some blamed other people's forefathers, and some blamed other people direct. The young folk went to the Fair and enjoyed it.

Maggie Wheatley had come home on Saturday evening, from Gloucestershire, where she was in service. A telegram had announced her mother's illness, and summoned her. Maggie had not been home for five years, and then only for a short stay. During that time she had seen her mother three times, once at her sister's in Yorkshire, and twice at the seaside when she had paid for her mother's holidays. She was doing well now as housemaid, in a very comfortable place, with a chance of going to the Mediterranean in the new year, and as she journeyed home she felt resentfully that her mother had fallen ill at the wrong time. It couldn't be helped, of course, but it was unfortunate and annoying.

She was what many a man would have called "a fine-looking young woman," of medium height, round of face and of figure, plump now in full rich curves, but threatening to be fat some day. A first glance at her face gave the impression of sleepy good humour, with a hint of inner laughter. Most of the expression was in the eyes—grey, with heavy lids and long lashes; their corners seemed to be sunken slightly and filled with lurking shadows. At times, when they opened wide, there was a gleam of something alert below their sleepy calm. Her hair was of dark brown, and inclined to be curly, low over her forehead. Her nose had only just been saved from being a mere knob. It was the

nose which helped to give the expression its good humour, as well as the dimples at the corners of the lips, which were of a vivid red against the matt complexion. In profile the face was not so attractive; the chin fell away slightly, and the nose struggled to turn up. Maggie was not at all beautiful, but she was in robust health, and graceful. The men always looked at her a second time.

Her married sister Alice let her in at the front door. Maggie scorned Alice in her inner self, because she was common, and Alice accused her sister of being selfish. Only their mother's illness brought them a common bond of sympathy. Mrs. Wheatley had had a stroke a week ago. Mrs. Onions next door had sent for the elder daughter immediately. Mrs. Wheatley had lost the power of speech, and Mrs. Onions couldn't find Maggie's address. Alice was angry when she came to find that Maggie wrote home so seldom her address couldn't be found. She herself had left a husband and three children in Leeds—there would be another baby next year—and her life was filled with continual household worries. Maggie had no sympathy for these things, because she never forced herself to understand. Alice should not have got married; she knew what she could expect. Maggie had avoided everything serious in life up to the present, so that now at home she was uncomfortable. She was acutely disturbed by her mother's illness; she was sorry for her, though she resented being stirred out of her usual placidity.

Mrs. Wheatley had always been a dilatory, easygoing woman. Her husband had left her a little money, and she had added sufficiently to her income by occasional dressmaking; she went out to sew at certain big houses in the district. She had been a sewing-maid when she was young, and she had a nice manner, so that she was well

treated. At times she could be persuaded to lend a hand at house-cleaning and washing, but not often—the work was too hard. Her own home was clean, though generally untidy, and Maggie was often late for school. She was like her mother. Alice loved to tidy up when her mother was out, and had no patience with what she called Maggie's laziness. Fate had been unkind to her; she deserved a better lot. She didn't complain. Often she consoled herself with the hope that maybe one of her children would reward her for all her devotion.

Alice was going back to Leeds to-day. The sisters had tea early before going to the station. They had little to say now, and made conversation with formal remarks on the coming journey. Maggie was glad her sister was going, although she felt that she ought to strive against her thought. Alice's mind was divided between the pleasure of seeing the children again and her fears for her mother.

"Let me know every day how she is, especially if there's any change," she said. "Doctor Rubery won't say what he thinks. That's why I'm so anxious."

"Perhaps he doesn't know," suggested Maggie. "Some of these doctors——"

"You'll let me know?"

"Oh, yes."

At length tea was over, and they went upstairs together. The furniture of the room was old and worn, and the wall-paper was faded, but it had memories which always called the girls to reverence.

"I'm going now, mother," Alice called out.

Mrs. Wheatley's eyes gleamed, and she made a husky sound in her throat, all that she had of speech. She was a pale, faded woman; her youth

had been her only beauty, and that was gone long ago.

"You'll be all right. Maggie will look after you. I shall perhaps come over at Christmas if I can manage.

Her mother's eyes filled with tears. Maggie's emotion seemed to rise into her throat, and she slipped out of the room.

Alice's eyes were red when she came downstairs. She had nothing to say, and the sisters set out in silence for the station.

Maggie was glad when she had waved her hand for the last time, and the train was growing to a tiny black square along the line. For several years no serious anxiety had disturbed her, and she was resentful under this sudden agitation. Everybody came to die some day, and mother was like all other folk. She had been ailing for a long time, Maggie knew by her letters. She felt that she ought to have been prepared for this; she ought to have written home oftener. Her mother had been ill and lonely—the suffering always turns instinctively to solitude—and a letter each week would have given her so much pleasure. Maggie suffered now in contrition. She had been her mother's favourite, yet Alice had shown more love. Maggie was angry with herself now, and unconsciously she turned her anger upon the others also.

As she mounted the station bridge to cross the line she saw the Fair Ground. The whole district resounded with the din; the ground was filled with people, like a swarm of great ants, quivering in movement. Maggie wondered how many of her old friends were there. She had seen none since she arrived. Yesterday she had been at her mother's bedside nearly all day. The figure of John Allday came before her mind; she hadn't seen him for many years, since they were children.

She might not recognize him, she thought, and then she assured herself eagerly that she would, for sure. She hadn't seen Sam Bloom for a long time either. He might not be in Pedley Hill now. There were more boys than girls in her gallery of memories. She had found them better companions—she was no flirt. For a long time now she had had no companions at all, and had no central interest in life. It was this being abruptly brought face to face with life itself which caused her present humour.

When she returned, her mother was lying just as they had left her. She shook her pillow, shut the window for her, and gave her a drink, and then sat a while talking of Alice. The shadows deepened in the corners of the room, and came out stealthily. Outside in the deep cutting, a London and North Western train snorted, louder and louder, and then faded softly on the ear. There was no other sound, until the next train came.

Maggie rose at last.

"I'm going to the doctor's, mother," she announced. "You'll be all right, won't you? You won't want anything? I shan't hurry. Mrs. Onions is coming in, isn't she?"

She went down Mount Street. A boy and girl were coming up the hill together, eating gingerbread out of a paper bag. The boy reminded her of John Allday, and she turned to look at him again, and smiled at her own memories.

The doctor's surgery had two entrances, one for patients who paid their bills six months or so after their illness, the other for club patients, whom the doctor took, ill and well, at a fixed price, wholesale. The gentry, that is to say, those who paid their bills, or owed them, were allowed to sit on horse-hair covered chairs in the waiting-room, and look at old copies of magazines. The club

patients had to perch on wooden benches against a bare wall, bring their own bottles, and take them away with no paper around them. Mrs. Wheatley was a club patient, but Maggie did not go along with the common people. The dispenser intended to tell her that she had come in the wrong way, but he was a young man, and her manner was so impressive that his courage failed him.

There was no need for her to go home yet. Mrs. Onions would be going in to see her mother. Nothing more could be done for her; the doctor had said so. Maggie strolled along to the Bullen, and glanced at the stalls. She hadn't tasted gingerbread since she was a girl. Now and again she saw a face she recognized, and she was pleased. One woman stopped her to ask about her mother, and as she was going she said, "You'll be going to have a peep at the Fair, I suppose?" Maggie had not intended to go, but the words filled her with desire. Everybody was at the Fair; it wasn't far away, the hoot of the roundabout engines was quite loud here; she might easily walk round once and come away again. Already it was vividly present through her memories. She couldn't resist.

In outer show it was exactly as she had imagined it. There were the penny wooden horses galloping round for ever, and the little ones for the children at a ha'penny, and the very little ones, with an old villainous-looking man pushing them round while the mothers held the children on, and solemnly marched round. The usual cocoanut shies, and Aunt Sallys were there, and shooting galleries with balls on water-jets, and clay pipes and bottles to be smashed, and three-card-trick men still thriving in quiet corners. Before the boxing show a black giant was offering four penn'orth of brandy at the "Heron" to anyone brave enough to don a

pair of blood-stained gloves against him, and a weedy man who looked as though he hadn't room left inside him for four penn'orth of anything was clamouring to fight for love. Painted clowns and fairies who looked as though they had rheumatics in their spare time, were performing in the platform before the London Ghost Show, while the Ghost gave the spectators a full two penn'orth of thrill inside. The crowd laughed and chatted, and ate all manner of stuff without nourishment. The children blew noisy trumpets, and cried; the organs ground out a cacophony of airs. Bells, gongs, and steam-whistles tore the air with sound, and everywhere hung the smells of trampled turf and paraffin, sawdust, vinegar, sausages frying, and hot humanity.

Maggie was disappointed. It was all as she had seen it when she was a girl, yet it was all so different. She did not seek to understand that the change was in herself. She had no means of plunging into this whirl of merriment now that she was outside it, and looking on, for the first time.

She was standing bemused when Sam Bloom spoke to her.

"I don't believe I should have known you, Maggie, if it hadn't been for John here."

John Allday asked how her mother was.

"I don't really know," she explained; "they only sent for me on Saturday. I was taken by surprise——"

"How's Maggie?" interrupted Sam.

"How do I look?" she said, with a touch of her old gaiety.

"Lovely!"

She blushed. She had asked for a compliment, but hadn't been ready for Sam's blunt style.

"You're coming round with us now, aren't you?" he said.

"I haven't got long."

"Oh, you won't get off that easy now we've got you, will she, John?"

She glanced rapidly at each as they walked together. Sam was the same in manhood as he had been a boy, with the same heaviness of feature in repose, the same quick smile, and swagger in his gait. John Allday had changed. His manner was very quiet, and his dress neat. He had a sandy moustache now, and looked older than Sam, who was clean-shaven and boyish.

"You've grown up a lot," Maggie told him as his glance caught hers.

"Yes, Maggie," said Sam. "We're men, and between you and me it's a much overrated business. I used to be proud when anybody called me 'my man.' I like 'em to say 'my boy' now."

"Are you dissatisfied with life?" she asked.

"No—disillusioned."

"Sam's fun," said John.

Maggie laughed. She was beginning to enjoy herself.

Sam insisted on taking them on the wooden horses, and then into the Ghost Show. Then he had to throw at Aunt Sally, whose skirts flew up when she was knocked over, and the girls screamed. Sam couldn't hit her, and grew red in the face and exasperated. Maggie tempted John to try, and over went the old lady, with her bare legs in the air, at his first ball. He protested that it was by a bit of luck when Maggie praised his skill, and he chose a rosette for her to wear instead of accepting the cigar the man offered him. Darkness had fallen, and the lamps were all flaring. The best fun of the evening had begun.

They stood for a moment watching the crush. Near them was a dilapidated show booth, with a gaudy sign above its paraffin flares: THE FATTEST

LADY ON EARTH—ALIVE. A huge painted canvas was covered with a faithless portrait of the lady, a monstrous being in an outrageously indecorous costume, bare arms and shoulders, and a skirt of schoolgirl length, though its width might have suited an elephant on its hind legs. Several gentlemen, including a doctor and a comic-opera general, stood gazing at her legs with expressions which suggested a sort of mental paralysis, although the artist may have intended it to be admiration. A man with a hooked red nose and greasy curls under a top hat stood at the entrance, and slapped the legs of the lady in the picture with a long cane. Behind him a faded young woman in tawdry finery slaved at the wheel of a hand organ, and then came forward with a bell. The crowd seemed so pleased with the fat lady's portrait that they had no desire to see the lady herself.

While Sam was joking about the lady's proportions, two well-dressed young ladies slipped out of the crush and passed the curtains which hung over the entrance.

"That the Miss Kingsnortons, isn't it?" said Sam.

"Yes," said John. "I shouldn't have thought they would go in a place like that."

"Curiosity, my boy, and mischief, because they know their mother would be horrified. Come along, Maggie."

Sam took Maggie's arm, and drew her forward. John followed them inside.

The Fat Lady was not so fat as she was painted, and Sam told her so. She admitted that it was hard to live up to reputation, but she declared that she was quite fat enough, and how would he like it? When he wanted to pinch her leg to see if it was real flesh under her red stocking she threatened to knock him down and sit on him. He feigned terror,

sheltered behind Maggie, and then ran, dragging Maggie with him.

"It's a swindle. Most of these shows are, of course," he said, when they were outside.

"Where's John?" said Maggie.

"I don't know. Wasn't he in front?" said Sam.

Maggie turned back to look, and was caught in the stream of people. She had some difficulty in pushing her way back to Sam. There was no sign of John anywhere. Sam insisted that it would be useless to go back into the show. They saw the Kingsnorton girls in the crowd, but John had completely disappeared. Maggie lost Sam again, and then lost several valuable moments in finding him.

"Don't let me lose you," he said, and took her arm. "We shall never find John in this crush. Goodness knows where he's got to, the rascal."

She gave in to him at last.

"It's no fault of ours," he explained. "He's lost the fun—we haven't. Two's company, Maggie, isn't it?"

Maggie assented. She was angry with John. From one of Sam's remarks she suspected that he might have had some reason for slipping away. Perhaps he had seen some girl he knew."

"He couldn't have waited, or we should have seen him, shouldn't we?" she said.

"It don't look as if he waited," said Sam.

It was not the answer she wanted.

The fun was rowdy now. Sam had to fight his way through the crowd where he found himself against the stream, and Maggie found it hard to cling to him. The smell of trampled turf was stronger than ever. In the main ways the dust hung in a golden mist before the flaring lights. Maggie wanted to go home now, but Sam insisted on trying

to knock Aunt Sally over, and she had to drag him away. At the next stand, where wooden balls had to be thrown into boxes, he managed to win a tiny china dog.

"Something to remember the Fair by, anyhow," he said when he gave it to Maggie.

She carried it in her hand, along with a bag of gingerbreads he bought her.

He insisted on taking her for a glass of wine before she went home. She was disquieted, but she assured herself that she couldn't have refused. The "Heron" was packed with folk, and all the benches outside were filled. They had to go into a marquee which had been erected in the field, and the waiter kept them impatient a long time before he returned with their drinks. Maggie did not enjoy her wine. The air was close, reeking of tobacco and beer fumes, and the odour of turf.

"I'll see you on your road home," said Sam.

She was happy again when they set out.

"Hurrying won't make three minutes' difference," he assured her, and she was content to go at his pace. The wine had flushed her pleasantly.

The medley of the steam organ's tunes, the whistles, trumpets, shots in the shooting-galleries, all blended into a softened canorous whole behind them.

The moon was up, in its first quarter, giving a thin clearness to the night, and there was a pure freshness in the air, delightful after the stenches of the Fair. A faint white mist lay on the fields, softening the blackness of the shadows. The lane was quiet; it was too soon for many folk to be returning, and this was not the main way. Here and there pairs of lovers were blotted against the hedge bank, and standing at every gateway. Sam made jokes about them. Maggie wondered if John Allday had come along the lane in this way,

or if he were still among the crowd and hoping to find her. She had very little to say—she was anxious to get home, and her mood influenced Sam. They agreed that the Fair was not quite so big as usual, and not so fine as it had been years ago, when the shows were all wonderful, and the Fat Lady was the fattest lady on earth, and the boxers all world's champions, and the cocoanuts luxuries. They lost their spontaneity in talk, and gradually fell to silence.

Maggie felt a little thrill when Sam took her arm and put it in his. She forgot her previous uneasiness at being so long away from her mother. Once she glanced up at Sam as he was glancing at her, and they both smiled. This was better than formal conversation. She was comforted by the pressure of his arm. He was a handsome young man, and had left the Fair specially to bring her home. She was proud of that.

"I'm tired," she said.

"You've had a hard week-end, of course," he said sympathetically. "I'm sorry your mother's ill. Still, I'm glad it's brought you back."

He squeezed her arm, and smiled.

"It's the same old place, you see," he told her, "some of us grown up, and some of the old folks gone, that's all. You have to live like my grandfather to see the great changes. Aren't you glad to see it again?"

"Yes, it's nice," she said.

"I'm a restless sort of creature, in my mind," said Sam. "Often I'm as miserable as can be—curse everything and everybody. I've been for going abroad two or three times. Yet somehow I don't go. I don't like to leave the place—it's friendly. If I went I should be that homesick I couldn't rest; and there's nothing to hold me here, really, only that something in my blood. It's funny.

John's like that too. We're different in everything else. A fine fellow, John is."

Maggie liked him for that.

They passed under the railway and entered the town. Sam chose the quiet ways, and presently they came into Castle Street.

"I'll run up now," said Maggie.

He clasped her hand.

"It's 'good night' then, not 'good-bye.' You won't be going away yet, will you?" said he.

"I don't expect so."

"That's the style. I hope your mother goes on all right. I shall come up to ask."

"Thank you."

He smiled, and there was a little silence.

"Good night, Lady Margaret," he said, and before she was aware he swung off his hat, bowed over her hand, and kissed it gallantly. Then he turned and went striding down the hill. She was utterly astonished. It had been so unexpected, so unreal, yet so like Sam. She could never imagine John doing that.

When he turned she waved her hand to him, and he raised his hat with a gay flourish. Then she went hurrying up the hill, smiling as she went.

She was approaching the crest, and another moment would see her in the house, when a woman called to her from a doorway:

"Is that you, Miss Wheatley?"

"Yes. Do you want me?" said Maggie, impatient at the interruption.

"I thought I'd better tell you as you come up—your poor mother's gone!"

Maggie shrunk, with a sharp physical hurt.

"Gone?" she repeated.

"Yes, poor soul—very peaceful, though, I believe. Mrs. Onions' girl Sarah ran for the doctor.

He's just been an' gone, and I must say he was very quick."

Maggie ran round to the back of the house. The door was open, and Mrs. Onions was talking with two of her daughters and another neighbour in the sitting-room. They ceased abruptly when Maggie entered, and she crossed the room and mounted the stairs without a word being said. Mrs. Onions rose quietly and followed her.

She was out of breath when she reached the top, and she had to put her hand on the jamb of the door to steady herself. Then she pushed the door and walked in. Before the bed she stopped, as though her limbs had of a sudden become rigid, incapable of movement. She had no tears, no thought; her distress was all within her corporeal self.

Mrs. Onions crossed the room and turned up the gas. Mrs. Wheatley always had a candle, for economy, and it was still burning on the chest of drawers, very low in the candlestick now, and flickering.

"She hasn't stirred, you see," she said gently; "might ha' just fell asleep."

"I didn't know! I didn't know!" said Maggie.

"You couldn't ha' done anything," explained Mrs. Onions, in sympathy. "She passed away, as you might say, imperceptible. I was talking to her, and I saw she looked like dozing. She went very quiet. I felt her go, more than I could say I saw her—like a little fluttering—wings, you might say. My little Willie went like that—peaceful. Good soul, she's safe at rest."

Maggie's tears came in a flood. Sobbing, she fell on her knees at the bedside.

"That's right, my dear," said Mrs. Onions, and patted her gently on the shoulder. Then she went downstairs. "She's having a good cry, poor

dear," she announced to the others. "I like to see 'em having a good cry—it's a good sign. She's young, and you can't be old first. I never knew what my mother was worth till I'd got my own children."

Mrs. Onions was a woman of much experience. She had buried her father and mother, and her husband's father and mother, and three children, and had more tales to tell of christenings and weddings and buryings than any other woman at Saint Peter's Mothers' Meetings. She went upstairs again after a while. Maggie was still kneeling at the bedside. When Mrs. Onions touched her she rose and suffered herself to be led downstairs. The two neighbours left her there while they performed the last rites for the dead. Maggie heard their footsteps to and fro. Mrs. Onions' girls had gone home. Bread and butter and cheese were on the table, and there was a glass of milk poured out. Maggie sipped a little, and then began to eat mechanically, until she found that she was hungry. Her gingerbread had been turned out on a plate; she ate some, and her thoughts went to Sam Bloom. Her mother had been dying while she was at the Fair. She shivered, and looked round furtively as though she were guilty of some awful deed, and some one might be watching her. But as yet her sorrow was like a great heaviness upon her, and her thoughts scarcely moved at all.

The two neighbours came down again.

"Been eating a bit, my dear?" said Mrs. Onions, kindly. "That's the way. We've done all we can till morning. She's safe with the Almighty now. Ah! that's the great comfort."

They stayed half an hour, in their kindness keeping Maggie company, and ate all her gingerbread. She had no interest in their talk, and

wondered feebly when they would go, that she might weep in solitude.

When they had gone her thoughts seemed to wake from torpor, and held fearsome revelry. She wished she had accepted Mrs. Onions' offer to let the eldest girl sleep with her. It was too late now. A desire came to her to look at her mother again, and although it filled her with dread, she knew that it would drive her upstairs at last.

She was trembling when she stopped on the landing outside the door. A horrid feeling told her she was not alone—the same kind of feeling which had frightened her in the dark when as a child she went down to the cellar or into any other dark place.

She opened the door; the gas was burning very low, a mere glimmer, and the room was full of shadows. Then she went hurriedly across and turned it up so high that it sang with the pressure. The light gave her courage again.

Her mother's face had grown softer, and had lost its tired, listless air—she looked younger, Maggie thought. She had been fond of her mother, as most children are—no more. Now she began to understand how much more she might have done to make her mother happy. It was too late to make amends. Nothing—nothing could alter the past, no repentance could touch it. This thing only was left, this thing she was afraid of; for it was her mother no longer, only a shape.

She accused herself bitterly.

Presently the feeling came again that she was not alone. There was some intangible being watching her in the room. She fancied she heard a faint rustling sound. As she strained to listen, she heard her own heart thudding, louder and louder, till the blows filled the room. Then came the rustling

again behind her. Her heart gave a great leap of terror. She faced about, and at the same instant she understood; the noise was at the window, a moth perhaps, attracted by the light. She pulled up the blind, and opened the window at the bottom. Her legs were tottering, and she had to sit down. The cool air came in, reviving her, and bringing the soft odours of flowers and grass, and the indefinable freshness of September night. Lights twinkled on the little island platform of the station below, and here and there beyond, up to the low shapes of the hills. Stars, in bright multitudes, filled the sky.

She left the gas low when she went. She had not the courage to leave herself entirely in the dark, and she had also a vague feeling that it wouldn't be right to leave her mother without any light at all. Downstairs she sat in her mother's arm-chair, and slowly her thoughts strayed through her memories, sad pilgrims, with heavy lingering feet. The fire sank to its last feeble glow, dying in a buff mass of ash. Midnight had struck soon after Mrs. Onions went. One o'clock struck while Maggie was still awake. Her eyelids smarted, and little night shivers caught her from time to time. Her thoughts sank in weariness. Slowly her head dropped, and she roused herself with a jerk, but her head drooped again and again, until at last she fell asleep.

She awoke in the grey of dawn. Her limbs were stiff and cramped, and she was very cold. Wearily she went upstairs to her room, undressed, and got into bed. At eight o'clock, when Mrs. Onions let herself in with the key, she found her sleeping soundly, and slipped away again quietly downstairs without waking her.

"See what it is to be young!" she said to herself, as she bustled about in preparation for a busy day.

CHAPTER II

THE FAT LADY

JOHN ALLDAY was more attracted by the two young ladies who had slipped hurriedly into the show before him than by the Fat Lady herself on her dais. One glance at her had been enough. While Sam was chaffing her, John stood at the rear and watched Miss Kingsnorton and her sister. They were enjoying themselves merrily, laughing at Sam, and quite unaware that anyone was watching them.

When Sam ran out in pretended terror, the Fat Lady turned to the rest of her audience.

"There now, my dears!" she exclaimed in an aggrieved tone. "How would you like to have to stand that sort of thing, come day, go day, God send Sunday?"

"I don't know," said Miss Kingsnorton.

"Of course you don't know. None of you know—and you don't try to know!" said the Fat Lady, more aggrieved than ever. "You've got the tears in your eyes with sympathy for a dog on three legs, or a tired horse, but never a ha'porth for a poor creature like me. How'd you like it, sitting 'ere exposing your flesh for money? Eh? An' they come complaining I ain't fat enough! Look at them for legs." She lifted her skirts to show the full grandeur of her red stockings. "Feel 'em—solid flesh." The girls shrunk away. The Fat Lady

perceived John, and chuckled. "You've had more than your penn'orth, sir," she told him. "I was just agivin' my feelings a bit o' hairing to the young ladies."

John was embarrassed. Barbara Kingsnorton had stepped back and was at his side; he heard her gurgles of suppressed laughter. Her glance caught his, and her laughter burst out.

"Ah, my dear, it ain't a laughing matter for me," said the Fat Lady with a mournful gusto which showed that she was getting some sort of enjoyment out of the sound of her own woes. "I've got to do this for a living. There's my daughter to keep, and her two babies—and her 'usband an' all, the good-for-nothing, idle vagabond he is, an' I don't care if 'e 'ears me say it—'im smoking his cigar at the door there."

She raised her voice aggressively.

"I daresay it's hard," said Marian Kingsnorton.

"Hard, my dear! It's cruel 'ard! Do you believe me, I was as slim as you are when I got married—well, very near. I don't know how I come to blow up like this. We had a nice little business, doin' well, an' I kep' it on a good while after my poor husband died—a firewood business an' ladies' wardrobe—only for my infirmity—I got as I couldn't walk about. An' then my daughter Emily took up with this Jew feller; I never could abear him. 'You mark my words,' I says to her many a time, I says, 'he'll Isaac yer afore you've done.' An' I never said a truer word. As soon as ever they were married he started goin' into 'is tantrums. There was me with Isaac on my back, an' his wife, an' the two babies, one after th' other in no time. It was him got me persuaded into this business. What can you do? If I 'ave 'im up in front of the magistrates they laugh at me, an' they just say to 'im, 'Now, Isaac, my lad, you'll

have to behave better than this.' The ol' fools! The last time I had him up they fined him ten shillings an' costs, an' I had to pay, for the children's sake. He laughed at me. 'How can one man earn enough to feed 'er?' he told 'em, and they laughed an' all. I see 'em as plain as could be. There's Isaac for you!"

Barbara Kingsnorton looked at John, and smiled.

"Can't you take your daughter away?" suggested her sister.

"That's the worst of it, my dear," said the Fat Lady. "She thinks she's fond of him."

"Can't *you* run away?"

The Fat Lady looked down at her legs and smiled.

"I should look well running, shouldn't I?" she said dolefully. "This ain't th' only show, my dear. There's the cocoanuts—that's mine—and th' Aunt Sally. It was my idea to dress her so well so as her clothes fly up when she's knocked over. It makes the young folks laugh. Business, my dear. I want the children nicely settled, out o' the show line altogether. If it wasn't for Isaac's carryings-on——"

She broke off suddenly, and asked the girls very eagerly, "What would you do?"

John caught Barbara Kingsnorton's whisper, "Diet."

"I should starve myself too thin for this business, and make him work," he suggested.

The Fat Lady shook her head.

"No, sonny, not at my time o' life. I couldn't do it. I've got too fond o' my victuals."

A party of sightseers came into the tent, Isaac leading them and explaining in his best style:

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen, twenty stone is the lady's weight, as you can test by lifting her—any gentleman who cares to try. None of your human

pincushion, stuffed with bran and sawdust—real flesh and blood, like your own, only more of it."

The Fat Lady stood up, and donned her professional smile.

"Any gentleman like to take me on his knee a minute?"

Isaac led the laughter discreetly. Barbara Kingsnorton smiled to John, and then went after her sister from the tent.

There was a curtain at the back covering another exit. John pulled it aside, and slipped out. The girls had disappeared in the crowd, and he pushed his way forward some distance, hoping to catch a glimpse of them. Then he recollected Sam and Maggie, and began to return. He thought he saw Maggie's hat, and he went some distance out of his way in pursuit before he discovered his mistake. Back he came again, hurrying. A friend stopped him for several moments. Then he saw the Kingsnorton girls again, and he had to watch them awhile. When at length he was by the Fat Lady show neither Sam nor Maggie was to be seen. John was disappointed, and inclined to be annoyed. He knew he had wasted time, but he said they had not waited long enough.

He walked slowly away, and after a while he saw Miss Kingsnorton and her sister again. They were standing out of the main stream of people, talking to young Benlow—Willie Benlow, whom John had known at school, now become William Benlow the musician. "Five feet in height and fifty feet in importance," Sam Bloom called him. Sam would not forgive him for having gone from the Parish Church Schools to the Grammar School, when he had been forced to go to work. Benlow had been studying in London. The whole town had been discreetly reminded from time to time by paragraphs in the local paper. He had already per-

formed at several provincial concerts, and there were hints of a grand début in London. His concert at Pedley Hill had become an annual. John had not known him since his schooldays until this year, when they had been reintroduced at Binnses' works' dinner and smoking concert. John had been one of the singers. Willie Benlow had been at home on holiday, and had played the piano "for the workmen to talk to." That was his own expression to John. Actually he had played for the workmen to talk about. It was all advertisement—and there was a good fee too, for a young man on holiday.

John watched the three talking, and when at length Willie Benlow was alone he went up to speak to him, scarcely knowing what he would say, and not expecting any sort of welcome. Vaguely he felt that as Barbara Kingsnorton had just been chatting with young Benlow he would in some way be approaching nearer to her.

He made a show of jocularity.

"You haven't come to get inspiration from the Fair music, I suppose?"

"Hallo, Allday," said Benlow, with good-humoured condescension. "I should have thought you'd be on the roundabouts with your best girl."

"I see you didn't take the Miss Kingsnortons on," said John.

"It isn't quite in our line."

John laughed at the other's dignity.

"They've been with me seeing the Fattest Lady on earth, if they haven't been on the wooden horses."

The story gave an excellent excuse for staying to talk.

"I know Barbara's full of mischief," said Benlow, growing much more friendly now. "I've met her in town occasionally—in London, you know."

"She's very clever, isn't she?" said John. "I heard she could make her fortune on the stage if only her parents let her go."

"She might," said Benlow, and he tapped John lightly on the chest. "There's a good many people might, but, somehow, they don't."

"It's hard, I suppose?"

"My dear fellow, it's the devil!"

His emphasis seemed to exhaust his stock of conversation. John began to feel that he ought to invent some excuse for going. While he was still hesitating, a girl's voice close by exclaimed, "Here's Willie!" and he saw Benlow's sister with her father and mother.

"You said you weren't coming round," she said.

"Oh, I changed my mind," said Willie. "I'm just looking on."

"We've come to enjoy it," she told him emphatically.

John was embarrassed, and wanted to retreat. He was about to slip away when Mr. Benlow spoke to him.

"Mr. Allday's son, isn't it?"

John stammered. Willie Benlow introduced him, and they all shook hands.

"Didn't I meet you at the Grammar School sports in the summer," said Willie's sister?"

John felt himself blushing.

"It wasn't me. I wasn't at the Grammar School," he explained.

"You *were* going, though, once, weren't you?" said Willie, catching a recollection.

"Yes, I was; but father was ill—and—well, I couldn't."

Mrs. Benlow soothed his humour.

"I believe I remember your mother telling me. I never see her now, hardly. I never get out, you know. You went to Binnses, didn't you?"

"I'm still there," said John, struggling to pride.

"I'll tell you where you've seen Mr. Allday, Elsie," said Mr. Benlow to his daughter—"at the little church at Nickling. He sang the solo that day Wilkins was to go and was ill."

"He knew I happened to know it, and sent for me," explained John, delighted.

"I wasn't there that Sunday," said Elsie Benlow.

John was enjoying himself now. Once he wondered if he ought to go, but decided against it; the others seemed pleased that he should stay. He liked Mr. and Mrs. Benlow. There was something homely and hospitable about them which appealed to him. He admired Elsie's frank manner, and accepted it as a special graciousness to himself.

Mr. Benlow was a short, pompous man, with a protuberance upon his figure as though half a plum pudding had been fitted neatly under his waistcoat. He was a painter and decorator, and lived in an old-fashioned house in the Bullen, the house covering his own showroom and several other shops. The yard was at the back, and reached through a covered entry. His wife was shorter than he, and fatter, and very unwieldy in her movements. John liked her instinctively. He did not seek to understand how his liking had grown out of her speaking of his mother as though they were old friends, and her memory of his going to work after his father's illness. It came as a most delectable surprise—Mrs. Benlow seemed to have been interested in him for a long time. Others might be interested too. His new feeling of importance brought him confidence, and he chatted more freely.

"The Fair's a grand place when you're youngsters." said Mr. Benlow. "When you begin

to find it rowdy and common, it's as sure as rheumatism you're getting old."

"I'm afraid I'm an old man, then," said his son.

"You're a humbug, Willie. Isn't he, Mr. Allday?" said Elsie.

"You know best," said John, enjoying himself.

"Come on!" said Mr. Benlow. "Nobody's eaten any gingerbread, or rock, or cocoanuts yet. It isn't the Fair that's changed, it's the young generation, mother."

They were standing near a tall wooden erection, with a bell at the top. A group of men stood before it, and one after another took a long-handled heavy mallet, gave it a mighty swing, and brought it down with full force on a wooden anvil. Up shot a pointer, soaring towards the top of the scale, then hesitated, stopped, and slid down again, and a dirty-faced man caught it on a pad. Occasionally the pointer struck the bell at the top—not often.

"Remember how I won you the pair of gloves, mother?" said Mr. Benlow.

He looked up at the bell, and swung his arm.

"I wouldn't try, Joe, now," said Mrs. Benlow.

"What—am I too old?" He laughed, and pointed with his thumb to Willie. "I can shame that young gentleman yet."

He punched Willie in the chest, and told him gaily to come along. Then he went to the dirty-faced man and demanded the mallet.

"Knock the bell right off the top, Mr. Benlow!" said a man in the crowd.

Mr. Benlow swung the mallet to and fro to free his arms, and then heaved himself for his great effort.

The pointer climbed reluctantly about halfway up the scale. Mr. Benlow was surprised,

and resented the proffered encouragement. He took off his coat for the second try and turned back the cuffs of his white shirt. Willie was disgusted.

The pointer shot up this time, but lost its momentum a long way from the bell. At a third try it climbed higher—at a fourth no more than half way. The crowd cheered. Mr. Benlow forgot his disappointment in Willie's discomfiture when he thrust the mallet handle against his chest and invited him to try.

"Show him how to do it, Allday," said Mr. Benlow.

John took the mallet. He had used a sledge hammer at the works for fun, and he knew how to swing the mallet. He knew, too, that he was strong. It was not entirely strength which was needed, however; there was a trick in bringing the mallet down. He was anxious, afraid of failure. Quietly he prepared, striving to hide how he put out all his strength, so that the feat would look easy. Mrs. Benlow and Elsie were watching him.

The pointer flew up to the bell and hit it with a great clang.

Mr. Benlow patted John on the shoulder, and the crowd applauded. John felt his ears burn.

"Every man to his own tool," said Willie Benlow.

John didn't like the tone, but he was pleased with himself, and said nothing in retort.

"You don't work with hammers that big, do you?" said Mrs. Benlow.

"No," said John. "I'm a fitter—an engineer, you know."

"I *thought*——"

John enjoyed himself splendidly. He used the word "splendidly" to express his satisfaction when he met a friend on his way home, and he repeated it to himself afterwards. He thanked

the Fat Lady for all his pleasure. If he had not been to see her, he reminded himself, he wouldn't have seen the Miss Kingsnortons, and then he wouldn't have stopped to speak to Willie Benlow. The Benlows were very nice people—very nice. Willie was full of his own conceit, but he couldn't help that; it came from living in London, no doubt—he was a musician, and wore his hair long, and he had to be different from other people. His sister was a nice girl. She knew the Miss Kingsnortons well; she had been to school with Barbara, she had told him to-night. He might be introduced to them some day—it wasn't impossible. His fancy soared, and he began an imaginary conversation with Miss Benlow and Barbara Kingsnorton, and then chatted with Barbara alone, reminded her of Binnses' bonfire and her silver brooch. This brought his thoughts to Maggie Wheatley and Sam Bloom, but only for an instant. He reacted fragments of his evening, shaping them anew, decking them with pleasant might-have-beens. There was a fine satisfaction in recollecting how he had sent the pointer rushing up to the bell, and in how the others had complimented him. He had knocked over Aunt Sally with his first ball when Maggie Wheatley had persuaded him to try; he had enjoyed that, and had believed it due to his own skill, although he had assured her it was luck. Now he did not even remember it. He wished that Barbara Kingsnorton had seen him with the mallet. Elsie Benlow might tell her. It was absurd, of course, to think so, utterly absurd, and deliciously absurd. John held his head high, and put his walking stick down each time with a prod—like Mr. Kingsnorton when he went to church, he thought, when he noticed what he was doing. He held his broad shoulders square, and made the most of his five and a half

feet of height. John Allday, for the first time in his life, felt that he was as important as the Mayor, and far more interesting.

He was one of the best fitters at Binnses now, and trusted. Ambition had grown in him very slowly, and he had been quite satisfied with his progress; his wages were good, and his wants modest. Already he had saved a small sum, and had invested it, some in the brick-making business beyond Selbridge, and some in a small scrap-iron yard. His father advised him, and kept an eye on the affairs. John left all the initiative to his father. The old man was still able to get about in fine weather, and had a keen business perception. During the years since he had not worked he had managed to increase his small capital by careful investments in local affairs which he understood.

For years John had been to evening classes in Selbridge, first to the ordinary night school, and then to the engineering course at the Technical Institute. He had begun because his father insisted, and later he had continued because there was more amusement in the classes than in public-houses and club-rooms. The classes were not particularly interesting in themselves, but there was some definite aim in going. The train journey was pleasant—the waiting on the platform, the coming of a locomotive, the travelling. Selbridge was a busy city after Pedley Hill. He didn't care for billiards, and his head couldn't stand much beer. He was not a ladies' man, and had never ventured beyond the ordinary flirtations of youth. From what he had seen of his friends it seemed that a young fellow walked out with a girl for a bit of fun, and walked in with her for a bit of supper, and the door closed behind him like the door of a mousetrap. His father kept a store of advice for the society of young folk: "It does

a man good to get married and have a family. It shows him what a young nuisance he was himself. . . . A woman may be very unhappily married, but she can always boast she isn't an old maid. . . . It's only married folk can be really happy, because they know what worry is." At the works the married men chaffed the bachelors, and the bachelors chaffed the married men; nobody could be quite sure how much of the others' joking came from imagination, and how much from experience.

To-night John's thoughts all bowed down before the image of Barbara Kingsnorton. He admired her as he might admire a lovely picture in a gallery, without covetousness or any thought of possession. Like Willie Benlow, she had been in London for several years. She was studying elocution, or art. She was travelling abroad with Mr. Kingsnorton's elder brother and his family. These things were spoken of from time to time, without appearing in the paper, like Willie Benlow's astute paragraphs. The Kingsnortons went to London every year in June for a holiday with their relations. Mrs. Wheatley went there to sew, and always had a store of fashion gossip to give her acquaintances when the Kingsnortons had returned. Thus John heard fragments from his mother, who met Mrs. Wheatley occasionally on market days.

John decided that he would go on Sunday mornings to the little church at Nickling; it would be a nice walk on fine days. Mrs. Kingsnorton was interested in the little place, and Marian sometimes played the organ for morning service. Barbara would be there sometimes, for sure. John had sung there in the summer one day that George Wilkins was to sing; he had sent for John at the last minute to take his place. The Kingsnortons were not there that day, but he might get himself asked again, and they would be there.

Singing and cycling were John's recreations. He was not a member of the new town bicycle club, though Sam Bloom was. It did not satisfy his idea of recreation to rush in dusty file along the lanes on Saturday afternoons, in extraordinary costume, with buglers in front and rear, and a football to be blown up and kicked in a field adjoining some public-house. He had learnt on a high ordinary which he had bought second-hand, and he had been very proud, coasting down the hills with his legs cocked up over the handle-bars. Now he pottered about on a safety, stopping when he had a mind to watch the scenery, or to gather nosegays of wild flowers to deck his mother's Sunday table. The birds and flowers were always friendly; they always had something to show him, because he stopped to look; they never had anything for those who had to be shouted at to have their attention roused. His bicycle was a heavy one, with cushion tyres, not the new-fashioned wind-filled sausages that were becoming all the rage. Sam Bloom had been one of the first to have pneumatic tyres on his machine. John was suspicious of new-fangled things. He sang at the bicycle club's annual dinners to please Sam.

He had attended music classes at Selbridge Institute as a recreation from his engineering work. For a long time he kept it secret from his friends, for fear they might laugh at him. At the classes he was very shy at first, for the students were mostly young ladies; he never guessed that they liked him for his shyness. His father had been an enthusiastic member of a glee club in his young days. His mother had no idea of song whatever, but she liked a hymn o' Sundays, especially if she didn't go to evening service. John sat at the harmonium he had bought, and they all sang together. His mother generally complained that the tune was a bit high,

or a bit low, or her throat was a bit husky, but she always said she enjoyed it, and blushed if they praised her singing. She gave them something special for supper afterwards.

Sam Bloom came sometimes. He always explained he hadn't come to stay, he had only popped in to see how Mr. Allday was, but he always stayed to supper when they asked him. Mr. Allday brought out all his best stories, and Sam never seemed to be conscious of having heard one of them before. John wondered why Sam showed so much liking and respect for his father and mother. Mrs. Allday explained that it was because he had never known father and mother of his own, and had never known what it was to have a good home. John agreed that it might be the true explanation—he was not sure. He couldn't understand life without home, or mother and father. Certain people existed without them, of course, but he made no serious effort to understand them; he had not yet tried to understand himself. It was very pleasant to be alive—there was always something to look forward to. Sometimes his father said to him, "Ah, my lad, you don't know you're born." He thought it was one of his father's feeblest jokes.

A host of stars decked the southern sky before him—"the old man with the watering-pot, the fish with glittering scales." John smiled gently to himself, and his thoughts jigged to a merry vulgar tune picked up at the Fair.

CHAPTER III

THE GLEE SINGERS

JOHN'S father and mother had finished their frugal supper when he arrived, and were enjoying one of those interminable fireside conversations, where nothing of importance is ever said, and the pleasure is all in the kindly feeling of companionship.

"You haven't seen Tom Bevan, have you? He's been here after you," said John's father.

"No—what does he want?"

"They want you in the glee singers," said Mrs. Allday, eager to tell the good news. "Mr. Wilkins has gone to Yorkshire—he's got a better job in Middlesborough—it is Middlesborough, isn't it, father? He recommended 'em to ask you."

"They look like having a busy season, according to what Tom Bevan says," said Mr. Allday. "Miss Kingsnorton's doing something with 'em, he didn't say exactly what it was. He'd been up to see her."

"She wasn't in," said John. "She was with me seeing the Fattest Lady on Earth."

He laughed at their astonishment, and told them of his evening's adventures.

They sat up much later than usual, talking about the glee singers, and pushing John gaily up an imaginary social tree. His mother had to relate all her anecdotes of Mrs. Kingsnorton, "Miss

Horden as was," and of Mr. and Mrs. Benlow, too. John was interested in them as he had never been before, and his attention so stirred his mother's memory that she recollected several things which John had not previously heard. Her father had sold eggs to Mrs. Benlow's father, and she remembered Mr. Benlow when he used to go courting. It was wonderful how she remembered things; John and his father told her so until she blushed with delight. When she didn't exactly remember, she knew what she had been told by somebody who remembered. The details sprouted in all directions, and grew up like mint stems for lustiness. If they hadn't let the fire out through being so enrapt in her stories, and if the nights hadn't begun to have a chill in them, Mr. Allday assured her she might have talked the sun up. Nevertheless, she was awake as fresh as could be at half past five to call John so that he should not lose a quarter at his work. When she recollected that he had not to go till after breakfast it made her extra rest all the more enjoyable.

The Selvalley Glee Singers were Pedley Hill's especial pride. Selbridge had music classes at its Institute, and big concerts, the biggest organ for miles round, the best organist, the best brass band. Selbridge had a choral society which sang Handel, and Haydn, and Mendelssohn, and other great foreigners, but Selbridge had no glee singers like those in Pedley Hill to sing the gems of Doctor Cooke, Webbe, Sir Henry Bishop, and the other great English glee writers. Therefore, Selbridge was just a big, sprung-up place, conceited about nothing. Pedley Hill was old and conservative, respectful of traditions, and now in a swiftly moving age was struggling doggedly—some said absurdly—to press back the invading host of progress, or decadence, or newfangled fashions,

or whatever the orators liked to call the new wine which was bursting the old bottles. Pedley Hill enthusiasts stated rightly that glee singing was as truly English as the great anthems, and was becoming a lost art, alas! in a country where musical art was weak, because the people ran after strange gods; and it was all true, but nobody listened except the enthusiasts, who only listened to one another. Selbridge grew more modern and aggressive every year. Its football team attracted half Pedley Hill on winter Saturday afternoons, it was so good. That, however, did not prove much in Selbridge's favour. None of the players belonged to the place, and the limited company which hired them didn't pay a dividend. The Selvalley Glee Singers were Pedley Hill men, who sang for the love of it, working men, some of them, upon whom a social prestige was conferred by their art. They had sung part-songs in Welsh competitions, and would have won prizes if there had not been so many Welsh singers against them. It wasn't of any use trying to beat Welsh singers in Wales; a man might as well try to look dignified in a donkey-cart.

Binnses was the last works in the district to keep the old Pie Fair holiday, and even at Binnses it had shrunk from a week to a single day. A few men would come in after breakfast on the Tuesday morning, and most of them would knock off at midday. A few would stroll as far as the works' gates to look at them, as a schoolboy delights to see the empty schoolyard in the holidays. All the steady men would be in on Wednesday.

John woke early, from habit; the daylight was peeping in beside the blind. Then he dozed again, enjoying a drowsy content, his thoughts lingering still in the land where no shape is clear, and reality is not real enough. He was going to

be one of the Selvalley Glee Singers—he had no fear that he might fail when he came to trial. He would see Tom Bevan to-night, for sure; that meant concerts, social position—oh! wonderful things.

The bacon was frizzling in the Dutch oven when he went downstairs, and the whole place was filled with the rich smell of it. John lit his pipe after breakfast, and strolled out to work, like a gentleman going for his health after the streets had been well aired. He did not know that his mother went to the front window to watch him pass, because she was so proud of him and happy this morning. At the works the holiday was still in the air—no serious work was done. One of the men asked John if he had fallen in love, he was so merry, singing away to himself.

When he went home for dinner his mother's news caught him like a sharp pain.

"Have you heard Mrs. Wheatley is dead?"

"What, Maggie Wheatley's mother?" he exclaimed.

"Yes; she died last night. You knew she had had a stroke. It was you told me, wasn't it?"

"I saw Maggie last night at the Fair. I was talking to her."

"Last night?" said Mrs. Allday, horrified. "Why, her mother died before nine o'clock. She's a fine sort of daughter, only just home, and out at the Fair while her mother was dying."

John was roused.

"No, it won't do to say that about her, mother. She didn't know how ill her mother was; she couldn't have known. Maggie isn't like that."

"You didn't tell me last night you'd seen her."

"Didn't I? I forgot. She was with Sam Bloom —well, we met her.'

John was uneasy. For a moment he was attacked

by self-reproach. His thoughts had so neglected Maggie that he had not even remembered to tell his mother that he had met her. And then came awe. While he was enjoying himself at the Fair, Maggie had gone home to find her mother dead. He had thought of death; he had heard often of people dying, but these things had kept afar off. Now, of a sudden, death had come very close, almost touching him, rousing something in him which had slept. He was disquieted. All his morning gaiety was gone.

"Somebody ought to write the poor girl a letter of condolence," said Mrs. Allday, as they were finishing dinner. "I don't feel equal to going up and seeing her. I knew her poor mother so well."

"Yes, there ought to be one sent," said Mr. Allday. "You might do it, John. You were with Maggie last night, and she'd think more of it, perhaps, coming from you."

John shrank from the task.

"Do you think I ought to?"

"Yes," said his mother. "To-night will do."

"All right," said John, reluctantly.

He dreaded the ordeal of writing the letter, and the procrastination gave him no aid. As he went to work he told himself several times that it was his duty to write. Memories troubled him—the day when he had lost the donkey, and Maggie had found Barbara Kingsnorton's brooch at the bonfire, the rendezvous he hadn't kept with Maggie, and meetings afterwards, when they were growing up. He was sorry for Maggie; his imagination pictured her last night, sitting alone in the house, in the sitting-room, perhaps, and the dead upstairs, in the silence for ever and ever. His thoughts seemed to be in his throat, and tingling below his blurred eyes. He had to swallow hard.

He was glad to be at the works again, busy among the men. Gradually his sadness rose from him, and he sang softly to himself, choosing sentimental ditties.

Four o'clock came. The few men left in the fitting-shop were only hanging on till five, so that the sound of the door banging, and the timekeeper's entry, attracted every one's attention.

"Allday, you're wanted up at th' 'ouse!"

John was astonished.

"Old Gentleman Binns has sent down for you. They're awaiting for you in the drorin'-room—afternoon tea—introjooce you to the ladies. It's right, my lad."

The men laughed. John felt himself blushing. What could he be wanted for up at the house? It would be at the office if it was about his work. While he was putting on his coat he wondered if the glee singers had anything to do with the sudden order. When he asked again, the timekeeper laughed and suggested an offer of partnership, or an offer of marriage, and the men added rough jokes. John hurried away from them.

To his increasing astonishment, a maid showed him into the drawing-room. Old Gentleman Binns was there, in his easy chair, with Miss Kingsnorton and her sister on the other side of the hearth. John stood hesitating at the door.

"Come in, Allday," said the old gentleman. "Miss Kingsnorton has come to see me about you."

John blushed, and felt utterly miserable, but he did not call it misery afterwards. He understood vaguely that Miss Kingsnorton had seen Mr. Bevan, and that now he was accepted as a valuable member of the glee party. Then his pride stirred.

"I called and saw your mother this afternoon," she explained. "We were coming along, so I

thought I might see you at once. We're having a rehearsal to-night at home, and we want the full glee party. We're having a town concert in December, you know. My sister is going to help. Mr. Benlow has written a kind of toy opera—I've written it for his music. We want to give that—and—well, it'll be something quite new."

John caught a glimpse of Barbara. She was smiling, he thought, ever such a little smile, and he wondered if she were thinking of the Fat Lady. Surely she recognized him. He was quite cool now, in thought; only a little fluttering remained of all his agitation.

He told the men when he went back that Old Gentleman Binns wanted him to marry his eldest daughter. The men thought it was an excellent joke.

His mother had been up to High Street and had bought a pork pie for his tea, she was so elated.

"They were very nice," she explained about her visitors, "sat themselves down and chatted—just like their mother when she was a girl, I told them. A lucky thing it wasn't my wash week! I don't know what I should have done."

She made John describe twice over the interview in Old Gentleman Binnses' drawing-room.

"I don't believe she recognized me being in the show with 'em last night," said John. "Her sister did, I think. I fancy her eye twinkled."

"Yes, Barbara did," his mother assured him. "She recognized your photograph. I told her as you'd seen her, and she laughed. Marion told me, 'You know, Mrs. Allday, it was an education to me. I hadn't really thought as these people were human.' Oh, she enjoyed it. That's what I like about her—she's so nice—nothing sprung-up about her."

John was exultantly happy. When his father reminded him that he had to write the letter of condolence to Maggie Wheatley, he was annoyed, and he put it off until after he had washed and changed for going to the rehearsal. The thought of it disturbed his pleasure.

"I don't like this job. You never know what to say," he complained.

He spoilt the first sheet of paper, and his mother warned him that she hadn't much more. So he had to straighten out the spoilt sheet, which he had crushed into a ball, and make a rough draft to copy from.

"I should say you wished to express your sympathies," said his father—"our sympathies would be better—in her affliction, and we trust, sincerely will do, that she will be strengthened to bear this dark and mysterious dispensation of Providence. It's a nice way of putting it. I always put that."

"Yes, yes—I'd forgotten that," said John, eagerly.

His father and mother read it when it was completed, and decided that it would do very nicely. When the letter was sealed and stamped, John felt that an unpleasant load had been taken off his mind.

He posted the letter at the Toll, and fifty yards beyond the pillar he had forgotten it.

The Kingsnortons' house, Ridgeway, stood against the slope of a knoll overlooking the Bristol Road where the road swung away to Nickling and the funnel of the Sele valley. It was very imposing for its size, which was not great. An avenue of tall hollies led to it, curving to make a long approach over a short patch of ground. The house itself was planned on a sort of terrace before the slope curled up to the summit of the hill. There were flower and kitchen gardens, and a strip of

meadow for the two horses, and for the hens to stray down. Mr. Kingsnorton had driven tandem when he was younger, and had ridden to hounds. He had once been second in a point-to-point steeple-chase—"two runners, of course," was the local way of ending the statement. He was a bluff, hearty, whiskered man, who smoked cigars after breakfast and drank brandy before going to bed. "A gentleman of the old school," said those who liked him. "A bombastic, obstinate old tory," said those who didn't.

Mrs. Kingsnorton was a little woman with a pleasing, ugly face, dominated by a large aquiline nose, the only possession of all the inheritance which her great-grandfather had not been able to sell for ready money. She was a lady, a born lady, so she didn't need to tell anybody—her eccentricities were accomplishments. She gave generously to charities—"not to feed secretaries," she explained to friends—to her own charities, where administration cost nothing. The poor suffered her to browbeat them with the greatest gusto. The hens were her own pets, and she sold their eggs at the highest rates in the district for cash, and boasted of how she made them pay. She was interested in the little mission church at Nickling, though she didn't often go. She told the vicar publicly that she liked to keep her church-going among her pleasures, and not let it become a mere habit.

Barbara resembled her mother. She had the famous nose, which now had become more delicate, though still pronounced, and giving the features an expression of pride, almost of disdain. The eyes were grey, with long lashes; and sometimes when she was seated she seemed to have her eyes nearly closed, as though she were musing, and in this mood her mouth drooped slightly at the corners,

adding a greater coldness to her pride. When she was roused her eyes opened wide, and her lips parted. Her laughter was merry, mischievous even. Her hair was very abundant, brown and shining. John Allday always thought her tall, although his impression was gained rather from the slim gracefulness of her figure than from her actual height. Her mother would sometimes explain to confidential friends that Barbara had always been delicate, and had been spoilt. She was eight years younger than her sister Marian. "The more you get, and the more easily you get it, in this world, the more difficult you are to satisfy, I think," was always her mother's explanation in her defence. Barbara was her mother's favourite. Perhaps her mother, in excusing Barbara, was only excusing her inner self. Perhaps it was all due to Barbara's having inherited the famous nose. To John she was the perfect embodiment of that sensitive aristocracy upon which no Englishman can gaze without respect, or without that scorn which is respect perverted. John, of course, had no experience to make him critical. He did not guess that her high disdain went with shyness, as it often does. Few guessed that. But he knew and rejoiced that she could laugh as merrily as he. To his new fervid imagination the knowledge was like a secret shared between them.

When he arrived he was shown into a room which Miss Kingsnorton called "our den," a room wonderfully crowded with books, pictures, papers, writing things, far more than John had time to notice. She told him she had forgotten she had asked him to come half an hour before the time arranged for the arrival of the glee party. "It doesn't matter, you know. You can help us, perhaps," she said, and her charm banished John's embarrassment.

Marian was said to resemble her father, because

she hadn't her mother's nose. At a little distance, in certain lights her features had a harmonious balance which attained to beauty; a close examination showed them to be rather coarse. She was very good-natured, and much more popular than Barbara. Her mother's poor liked her to visit them, because she listened so well to their interminable woes. There, indeed, was the secret of her popularity—her sympathy seemed to be inexhaustible. She was always spoken of as "a very clever young lady." She had had poems printed in magazines, she sketched, sang a little, played the organ sometimes at the little church, and was famous in the district as an organizer of entertainments.

She took John into the drawing-room. Barbara and her mother and father were there, and Willie Benlow with his sister Elsie. John had not to strain at making talk; all seemed ready to help him.

"You're audience with me now, Mr. Allday," said Elsie Benlow. "That's always my part. Oh, I'm a good audience. I can keep awake through anything."

To John, Barbara was beautiful—Elsie Benlow was nice. He liked Elsie and enjoyed talking to her, even permitting himself the flattery that she seemed to enjoy his talking. She had light brown hair, rather wavy. Her eyes were blue, and John found that she had a way of opening them wide and smiling, which pleased him immensely. She was short, like her mother, and plump; she would probably grow very stout. When she spoke she had to look up to John. He liked that, for it had been one of his secret worries in earliest manhood that he couldn't pass five and a half feet. He did not seek to understand Elsie's charm; she seemed to have a way of placing him at his ease, and making

him feel some of his own importance—a manner not so fine as Barbara Kingsnorton's gracious dignity, but exceedingly pleasant. He would have laid all his treasures devoutly at Barbara's feet; to Elsie he would have shown them so that she might admire them with him.

He was sorry when the glee singers arrived and the serious business of the evening began.

Refreshments were served before they left. John had wine. He could have ale in any tavern, or at the works, where they sent the boys out for it in stone jars, especially in the hot weather. Mr. Kingsnorton gave him a cigar, and he lit it at once, as Mr. Kingsnorton did his, although it was a formidable torpedo of a cigar, which threatened to grow stronger and stronger as it shortened. The other men put theirs in their waistcoat pockets to keep for Sunday, except Tom Bevan. They would probably smoke half, and cut the rest up for their pipes, as the foremen did with the cigars Old Gentleman Binns gave them.

The men rose to go at last. Tom Bevan stayed behind for several moments, talking to Miss Kingsnorton, and John stayed with him, for Miss Kingsnorton had asked his advice. When they were outside together the others were standing in a little group in the shadows of the drive. John had descended the steps after Tom Bevan when Elsie Benlow called after him:

"Is Willie there, Mr. Allday?"

John turned.

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"What a nuisance! I've hurried ever so."

John hesitated. He did not know whether to stay with her or join the other men.

"He may be in front," he suggested, and moved towards the drive. "Shall I see?"

"No!" said Elsie, emphatically. "He knows

his way home. We'll walk slowly. He may be indoors yet."

She came down the steps, and walked at John's side.

"You know, Mr. Allday, I'm a dreadful person," she said gaily. "I feel—well, I could enjoy a merry-go-round at the Fair after all this. My feet have both been asleep, one after the other."

They stopped by the gate. The men saw that John was with Miss Benlow, and went on. Willie Benlow came down the drive, and the three of them walked down to the Bristol Road. John began to feel awkward, but Elsie kept the conversation from lapsing, and saved him from confusion. When he had said "good night" at the Toll, he repeated to himself several times that she was very nice. All his worship was at another shrine.

His father had gone to bed, and his mother was sitting close up to the dying fire.

"I thought you wouldn't be very late," she said. "How did you get on?"

"Splendid! Splendid! They were as nice with me, I might have been one of themselves, almost—Mr. and Mrs. Kingsnorton, all of 'em. Yes, mother, I'm one of the Selvalley Glee Singers—your son, John Allday."

He made her a bow, as before a concert audience, and then danced a shuffle on the oilcloth. His mother's eyes were moist as she smiled proudly at his gaiety.

He talked all the time he ate the supper she had kept for him. The fire was nearly out when at last he went to see that all was safe for the night.

"Your father went to bed early," she told him. "Before you came in I was sitting thinking about poor Maggie Wheatley—her mother gone, poor soul, and her in the house alone. It isn't so bad in the daytime, there's something to do all the

while, but at night—I know when my poor mother died——"

She shook her head. John felt something start in his interior. When he kissed his mother "good night," a ceremony only observed on great occasions, he suffered a keen emotion. Upstairs in the quiet of his little bedroom it became an impression like that of fear, and he hurried to undress, as a boy in the dark will hurry to seek the shelter of the bed-clothes. And then his disquietude softened to pity. For a while his thoughts went out to share Maggie's sorrow; but as he grew drowsy they drifted back to his own evening, to Elsie Benlow and Barbara Kingsnorton, and catching fragments of music to make him happy again, till they sank quietly to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

CAROLS

SEVEN—six—five weeks to Christmas—and December in and the days galloping. The Christmas numbers were stale already. Gay paper garlands and greenery began to appear in the shops, even in the little shops where corned beef, spools of cotton, toy pistols, and Christmas cards with their prices on them in hard pencil, all jostled one another on the end of the counter. Little boys and girls called up the chimney to Santa Claus, while big brothers and sisters smiled in the superiority of great wisdom, but wanted presents from Santa Claus all the same.

Pedley Hill had observed the great feasts of the Church Calendar with due solemnity, years ago; there were books gathering dust in the Free Library which told of its ancient glories. Progressive councillors never forgot to speak proudly of the beauties of the old town when they proposed to modernize them out of recognition. Old customs were going fast. There were no mummers now at Christmas to play Saint George and the Dragon in the inn parlours and in the kitchens of the great houses. Sam Bloom's grandfather had been a notable Saint George in his youth, and there were much younger men who remembered the playing. The brass band had taken the mummers' place. It was called a prize band because it deserved prizes, although it had

not actually won any. Everybody smiled at the joke, because everybody made it, and so had a parental interest in it. Twice a week, in the evenings, the band practised in the club-room of a tavern near Binnses. On Monday the groups of critical listeners would assemble in the tavern; on Thursdays the money was scarce, and they stood outside if the weather was fine. They were much more critical on Thursday evenings.

Steelyards were carried up back entries; men in blue striped aprons came; squealings and snortings tore the air; neighbours gathered in little groups to talk about spare rib, and loin, and other tasty parts to be enjoyed by the elect. Huge pigs hung in the butchers' shops, bearing prize cards won at the local shows. Everybody paused a while, with mouth watering, before the mountainous pork pies and festoons of sausages. At home there was mincemeat to be chopped, puddings to boil, floors to scrub, clean curtains to go up; and the thud, thud, of the dollies in the washtubs resounded across all the back gardens. On Monday mornings the rent man had to dodge under the clothes hung across the yard and seek mother in the steam of the "brew-house," which was only the wash-house now, for nobody had brewed in it these many years. Ladies brought the Church Almanack, nearly a square yard of it, to the front door, and refused to go away without the penny. Folk grumbled at the ruinous cost of Christmas boxes, and wondered what they might count on getting, and everybody was genial and full of good wishes, but not perfectly satisfied.

Nobody missed the market in the Bullen on Christmas Eve. It had to be held a day early this year, because Christmas Day fell on a Monday, the most awkward day of the week for housewives, and the best for shopkeepers. The market was at

its busiest in the afternoon, although in the evening the crowd was greater, when people came to meet acquaintances and gossip, and the poorest and meanest came to haggle over the bargains left. The Bullen became a town in itself for the day, like a sort of canvas gipsy town, with narrow lanes and alleys, filled with noise, the cries of the stall-keepers, the clucking of fowls in baskets, screeches, barks, the blare of children's penny trumpets, the clatter of crockery, and the murmur of the talk running through it all, never-ending, like the babbling of a brook in a stony channel.

John Allday and his father always helped in the housework for Christmas—it was to bring good-luck. Holly had to be put over the pictures when all the rest was done, and mistletoe in a bunch where Mr. Allway could catch his wife underneath and kiss her, with laughter and blushing, and the solemnest of gaiety. John had once thought it was rather foolish to keep up such a ceremony—his mother and father were so old for that. He knew better now. This year he enjoyed it thoroughly, and his mother was doubly happy. When his glance rested on the bunch of mistletoe, and there was no one by to see his smile, it wasn't his mother he caught underneath.

They had only one anxiety this year. Old Mr. Peckle, their grocer ever since John could remember, had retired, and his son, a weedy, mean sort of man, had not sent the usual Christmas box. They counted on a fruit cake or a bottle of wine. Mrs. Allday had to go to the shop and ask right out for it. Fortunately, Old Peckle was there himself, and the Christmas box was better port than ever. "But it isn't the same when you have got to go and ask for it," said Mrs. Allday. Mr. Peckle had been a model grocer. Every Thursday afternoon he had driven round, and sat down like an old friend.

his top-hat on the floor with a red silk handkerchief in it, his head as bald as a ham, and his sandy beard sticking out all bristly. When he receipted the bill he licked it solemnly, and his pencil made rich, purple marks. "One of the real old school—they're all going, one by one," said John's father, sadly. John could not share his father's regrets; his own thoughts were pressing eagerly to the future; but in the present they understood each other well. Mrs. Allday was proud to see them on summer holidays, walking out like friends together. "It's nice in these days," she told them both; and she thought of other fathers and other sons, bitterly misunderstanding one another.

Men had been thinning the plantations above Nickling, and John had got a young spruce for a Christmas tree at the Church Sunday School. He knew the men well; he was often out there alone. His name would be duly announced in the parish magazine as the giver of the Christmas tree. The idea was his mother's; she gave some greenery, and was invited to help in decorating, along with Mrs. Kingsnorton and her daughters. "It's a fine thing to have a son you're proud of," said Mrs. Kingsnorton, and Mrs. Allday put the saying among her treasured memories. The concert had been a great success; the glee party's season was at its busiest. John knew many more people, the best people, when he strolled in the town, and he had had to spend more money on clothes to deck his new importance.

"You'll let me touch my hat to you when you're Lord Mayor, won't you?" Sam Bloom had said.

John accepted it as a joke. Mr. Allday said nothing when he heard; he waited till he was alone with Mrs. Allday.

"I'm very sorry, Sam Bloom's jealous of John—

he's getting on, you see. Sam's got no need to be jealous; he ought to have a greater character—he *has* a greater character, only somehow he don't seem to use it right. He might have been something out of th' ordinary—he might. I'm very sorry."

"He doesn't come here so much as he did, anywhere near," said Mrs. Allday.

"No. I'm very sorry. I like Sam."

The Saturday before Christmas was a bright, mild day. John came home at dinner-time, and in the afternoon he went with his father for a stroll as far as the market. Mr. Allday had been fortunate—he was not yet laid up for the winter. That would come probably with the first wild days of the New Year, and then it would be April before he was out of doors again.

They met a man who had been in the rolling mill at Selbridge with Mr. Allday when they were young men, and the three went into the "George and Dragon" together. John did not often go in the "George." It had been a famous hostelry, half a century and more ago, but it was sadly decayed now. A great singing and stamping of feet came through to the smoke-room.

"It's young Mr. Bloom," explained the barmaid, smiling. "He's always up to some fun. They've got a sing-song in the back."

The noise grew to an uproar.

"There's a fine lad throwing himself away—absolutely throwing himself away," said Mr. Allday to his old friend.

The other remembered a similar young man, and they fell to reminiscences.

As they were going home they met Sam's grandfather in the High Street.

"You haven't seen Sam, I suppose, have you?"

he asked. "He hasn't been back from work yet."

"We haven't exactly seen him. We've heard him," said Mr. Allday.

"Drunk?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that, Mr. Peacock. He was enjoying himself in the 'George.' We're only young once, you know."

"Ah, that's true. We're old a good while, though, some of us."

The old man shook his head mournfully.

"He's a fine lad, Mr. Peacock. Don't make any mistake Got his faults, I dare say——"

"I've got mine, he says," interrupted the old man. "When you get old they tell you you can't understand. They're sorry for you because you can't understand. And then, when you're gone, it's too late then, it's their turn to be told."

"Never you mind, Mr. Peacock," said Mr. Allday, cheerfully, tapping him on the chest. "Here's another Christmas in, and we'll wish you a happy one."

"A happy one to yourselves, Mr. Allday."

He shook his head again as he turned away, and they heard him say, "I'm thinking it's too many Christmases I've seen."

"Poor old fellow!" said John's father. "He was a wild, harum-scarum young chap at one time, I believe."

"I should never imagine it," said John.

His father chuckled quietly. John wondered what he might be thinking of, but he didn't ask; his thoughts were busily speeding on a happy mission of their own.

Sunday was a slow, quiet day. "It's Christmas, and it isn't," said Mrs. Allday. "It bothers you so to provide, with the shops shut three days." John and his father declared at once that she managed

always wonderfully. Then she said, "I do my best," and looked modest. That was her rôle. They acted this kind of tiny interlude over and over at every holiday, and it was so enjoyable it never grew stale.

They had a log on the sitting-room fire on Christmas Eve—it was the custom. This year it was put on early, when they sat down to tea; John had to go out this evening. After tea they sat round the hearth and talked about the Christmases years ago, when John was a baby, when he was first walking and talking baby-talk. They never had any difficulty in finding their own quiet happiness at times like these. John enjoyed listening, but after a while he began to fidget, stirred by an inner eagerness.

The glee party met at the "Toll Inn" at nine o'clock. John was there first. They set out together to Ridgeway, up the drive, and on the lawn before the lighted window; then they sang the carol, "Good King Wenceslas." Mr. Kingsnorton himself came to invite them indoors. There they sang again, and enjoyed hot punch, and mince pies, and cigars. John heard Tom Bevan say to Barbara, "It was Mr. Allday's idea to surprise you. He said you would like it better." After Barbara had shaken hands with him, and he was on his way towards the town, he still seemed to hear her voice wishing him a merry Christmas.

They went to Benlows' next, and had a noble welcome, with more hot punch and mince pies, and more cigars. Then they went to sing for Old Gentleman Binns. Their calls were few, and very select, and they accepted no money—John had insisted on that, and won over strong opposition. They would not be out to-morrow. The glee party was much too big to compete with common carol singers.

The parish church bellringers had stopped, and it was Christmas Day when John made his way home. The streets were empty, hollow to his footsteps. His head buzzed, and his legs gaily swung of their own accord, independent of him. He sang to himself, unsteadily.

"A merry Christmas, mother!" he called upstairs.

He had heard her moving. In a moment she came down, with a flowered Paisley shawl about her shoulders.

"I hope you haven't had too much to drink," she said, when he had kissed her.

"No, no—oh, no!" he assured her, and he frowned to show her how serious he could be.

She laughed.

"Plenty, all the same, I can see."

He lit his candle, and went upstairs to see his father. The old man was sitting in bed blinking, his nightcap pushed back, and his knees drawn up.

"Ah, lad! It's well to be young!" he said. "Hold your candle straight. It's dripping on the carpet."

John laughed merrily. His father joined him, for he had been young, and his memory was good. They both shouted together when Mrs. Allday came up:

"Merry Christmas, mother!"

* * * * *

John awoke early in the morning. His head ached, and his mouth was parched, but he had not drunk enough to put him into a bad humour. He had stayed late in bed on Sunday morning, and now he was not sleepy. So he rose and dressed, cut a piece off the pork pie at the cellar head, put it in a paper bag, with a chunk of bread, took a long drink at the tap, and went out.

It was a bright morning, and very quiet. A milk cart was driving in from the country. From along the High Street came the thin sound of boys carol-singing early. The sky was pale grey, with little bands of clouds, tinted rosy as the sun came up. A chill wind rustled the laurels. John strode lustily, walking along the ridge which looked across the valley. It was a dull winter countryside, with no other bright relief than the white dots of distant farms. The summer's green lingered, no more than a suggestion now, among the brown withered grasses, the buffs and reds of the distant hills under the first pale sunlight, with the black woods in their folds. John saw the beauties of the fresh dawn, for he saw them through his own cheerfulness.

The pork pie was gone, and the bag blown up and burst, when he met Sam Bloom and another man with guns.

"You're up too early for an honest man," said Sam.

John laughed, and they exchanged seasonable wishes. When they had parted, Sam shouted after him:

"Are you coming to the 'George' concert to-night?"

"Oh, I don't think so," said John.

"It'll be special. You ought to come."

"I'll see."

He smiled complacently to himself. At home he told his mother, "Poor old Sam must have thought me hard up for a bit of amusement."

"I'm sorry for Sam, and for anybody with no proper home to enjoy Christmas in," she said.

John wasn't sorry for anybody.

He went to morning service at Nickling—"to see our decorations," he told his mother. There he met Barbara Kingsnorton and her sister in the churchyard, and they wished him "A merry Christmas"

over again. He sat behind them in church, where he could see Barbara. In the hymns he listened for her voice.

Mr. Benlow and Elsie, driving in the dogcart, overtook him as he was walking home. Elsie called out, "A merry Christmas, Mr. Allday!" and her father invited him to jump up.

"Yes, I drove home in state," he told his mother and father, with exaggerated dignity. "And that isn't all either. I'm invited out for this evening."

"To Mr. Benlow's?" exclaimed his mother. "My word! You *are* doing your Christmas proper!"

It was the best Christmas dinner they had ever had, they were all agreed. Mrs. Allday went to bed in the afternoon to "drop off for half an hour." Mr. Allday dozed in the easy chair before the fire. John had a library book, but he had no wish to read; he sat looking at the coals, and his thoughts straggled capriciously, like starlings on a sunny lawn. When his mother came downstairs at last, thirsty for a cup of tea, she found both of them asleep, and the fire sunk low with only a tiny intermittent tongue of flame.

"You're a nice pair of old fogeys, snoozing your Christmas away!" she told them.

They made a great joke of it while they helped to set the tea.

"I expect there's plenty o' folk would be glad to sleep their Christmas away—folk with no homes to enjoy it in," she said.

"Plenty," said Mr. Allday. "It's Christmas makes the old bachelors wonder if they've done the right thing. An old bachelor on Christmas Day is like a tough old goose—a disappointment all round. You can't make everybody happy."

"That don't say you shouldn't try a bit," she told him.

Her sympathies were moved.

"John!" she said suddenly. "Did you send Maggie Wheatley the Christmas card you were going to?"

She saw at once that he had not sent it.

"No—I forgot," he said reluctantly.

"You said you'd get one on Saturday afternoon, when you were out, and post it."

"I forgot," said John. He had no mind to seek excuses.

"It can't be helped," said his father, coming to help him.

"It's a pity," said his mother, thinking only of Maggie. "She'll be so lonely. It's just the thought of the thing. I know how I should feel."

"I don't know what made me forget. I meant to—I—I forgot."

John struggled to finish his explanation with a gesture.

"I should have called myself, if I'd known you were going to forget," said his mother.

"It can't be helped, mother—send one at the New Year," said Mr. Allday.

He saw that John was already suffering, and he talked rapidly to leave the incident behind. Mrs. Allday soon forgot it, but John had very little to say throughout the meal. They did not know how much he had to reproach himself. A few days ago he had met Maggie in Selbridge, and he had said to her, "I shall be coming to wish you a merry Christmas." He had not been to see her. "That doesn't matter," he had told himself on Saturday. "A card will do. It's the good wishes." He would explain later, if necessary, that he had been very busy—it was true, he *had* been very busy; it needed the repetition to convince him. Now he had forgotten even the Christmas card—

he had no excuse for that. He accused himself bitterly, explaining that he liked Maggie, and that he *had* wanted to send the card. All his explanation failed. She would be expecting a card at least. He was lacking even in common courtesy. For a while he detested himself, and atoned in some measure by resolving to go straight to Maggie's before he went to Benlow's for the evening. It was the least he could do.

His mother unconsciously added to his suffering while they sat at tea.

"I can't understand why Maggie Wheatley should have stayed, keeping her mother's house on. She was doing so well in service, by all accounts."

"She's doing well in Selbridge—a good situation, in that what-do-they-call-it Emporium—it's a big place," said Mr. Allday.

"I dare say. All the same——"

She left her sentence unfinished, as though some new thought had interrupted her.

"Some attraction hereabouts?" suggested her husband.

"Is there?" she said absently.

"I don't know."

He looked at John, and she looked, but John said nothing; he was relighting his pipe. He had gone out when they returned to the matter.

"Oh, I reckon John knows something about it," said Mr. Allday. "There's a something. I wouldn't say, I'm sure."

"I did think——" began Mrs. Allday, and ceased.

Her husband shook his head sagely, and she sighed, a though she were contented. Neither explained, and they sat silent a long while. When they spoke again it was upon another topic.

They had their supper early; the cloth only

half way across the table. They did not sit long afterwards.

"It's quiet without John," said his mother.

"It's very comforting, though, to think of him getting on," said his father.

They said it several times, and then they went to bed. John had a latchkey.

"It's been a nice Christmas, Susan," said Mr. Allday gently, when she had come to bed and blown the candle out.

"Yes, Thomas—very nice."

He kissed her solemnly.

In a few minutes their breathing rose and fell in sleep, the one wheezing and broken, the other sighing rhythmically.

* * * * *

John left the house early, hurried along the High Street, across the Bullen, and up the hill. "I shall just have time, without stopping a minute," he explained to himself. He had started from home with a feeling of shame at having neglected a duty, and with high resolution to atone for it; but his hurrying made him uncomfortable, and there was a light rain falling. Before he reached the parish church he was angry that he had had to come, especially against his own carelessness in forgetting to send the card—it would have been so much easier than having to tramp all up here.

There was no light in the front window at Maggie's. He had not expected any in the front room. He knocked. Nothing stirred within. He knocked again, and listened, and looked in at the front window, and knocked again. The house was dark—Maggie was not in. John swore. It was a nuisance. He wondered for an instant if he should go round to the back, and decided that she

would surely have heard if she were in. He might perhaps push a card under the door, or a slip of paper to tell her he had called. When he began to feel in his pockets he recollected that he was wearing his best clothes, and he had no card, no pencil, no scrap of paper, even. "Waste o' time!" he whispered savagely. There was a bright light next door—they were having a party, perhaps. It was of no use disturbing them with a message for Maggie.

He turned away, and walked slowly down the hill. His mood was softened; he was sorry that Maggie was not in, since he had come up specially; he would have to call again and tell her. It would be nice to show her that he had not actually broken his word. The clock of the parish church chimed half past seven, and he began to hurry, pushed by a new eagerness of his thoughts. Benlows were expecting him. As he crossed the Bullen he saw the bright lights of the "Bull," and of the "George and Dragon," and he recollected Sam Bloom's invitation to the concert. Poor old Sam had nothing better to go to. John smiled. He turned in at the covered entry which led to Mr. Benlow's, and stood, with a little fluttering in his interior, as he made the bell jangle on the floor above.

* * * * *

On Boxing Day morning his mother had to wake him.

"Breakfast-time?" she exclaimed, in answer to his sleepy question. "It'll be dinner-time if you aren't quick. You haven't half had something to make you sleep."

She wanted to know all about his evening when he came downstairs.

"There's a Mr. Hurst staying there from London,

a friend of Willie's," explained John; "a big nob, I suppose he is, in his way—a gentleman, right enough, and clever enough——"

"But you didn't like him," divined his mother.

"Well, I can't say as I did."

"Wasn't there anybody else? You've only been talking about what you had to eat and drink."

"Only those I've told you. Barbara Kingsnorton came, and stayed about an hour. Willie and this Mr. Hurst went to see her home—took a good while about it, too. This Mr. Hurst knew her in London, so Elsie told me."

"Was her sister with her?" said Mrs. Allday. "I'm inclined to think Mr. Benlow would like his son to have Barbara Kingsnorton. I've heard——"

"He never will!" said John emphatically. "She doesn't like him well enough."

"Oh! She only came for an hour, you say. What was it then——"

Mr. Allday interrupted her.

"Woman! Woman! Curiosity!"

He shook his head, and then laughed at her when she blushed.

CHAPTER V

CHRISTMAS DAY

MAGGIE WHEATLEY was tired long before evening came. She had been on her feet since before nine o'clock in the morning, and had been busy all the time, serving the Christmas Eve shoppers. The Saturday was more like Christmas Eve than the Sunday would be. The intervals for dinner and tea had been curtailed to-day, business was so heavy. She was in charge of the tobacco and fancy goods department in the Royal Emporium, the biggest and most popular linen drapery and general store in Selbridge. The air was hot and stuffy, the ventilation was always bad, and the store had been filled all day with shoppers. Children swarmed everywhere, dragging at their mothers' skirts and getting in everybody's way. It was one of their annual treats to be taken to the Magic Cave, in the Royal Emporium cellars, where Father Christmas reigned in state, with dolls as courtiers, and toys of every sort as riches, to be exchanged for cash. It was wonderful for the children, and excellent for the shareholders in the Royal Emporium, Limited, but for the shop girls, their feet sore and swollen, Christmas had brought no fun yet.

Maggie was very busy. Most of her customers were of her own sex, buying presents for their

menfolk, and they were very difficult to satisfy. She was an expert saleswoman, however, and the foreman smiled approvingly on her from time to time. He told her it was splendid how she kept so fresh. "It's Christmas in the air," she explained. At every few moments she glanced under the counter at a little box of cigars tied with red silk ribbon. Other boxes, similar to this, stood on a shelf at the back, but with no ribbon in them. Occasionally she glanced eagerly along the slow-moving stream of shoppers, and her glance became more eager and agitated as the night drew on.

John Allday had stood at her counter here, a few days ago, and he had told her, "I shall be coming to wish you a merry Christmas." She remembered the words exactly, and the tone of his voice. He would be coming to-day, she knew, very soon, or it would be too late, and he had said he was coming. The little box of cigars was her Christmas card. She wanted to wrap it up quickly when he came, and slip it in his hand with his own parcel, in his pocket, perhaps, and watch his surprise and his pleasure—he would blush, maybe—he did sometimes. She would, she was sure. She had rehearsed the little scene a score of times, and now her eagerness was growing fast, tightening about her thoughts.

The crowd became more dense, pushing anxiously as the time came near for closing. Maggie's smile vanished; weariness crushed her at last, and she worked mechanically. She looked about yet from time to time, though not with hope—he had forgotten. An accident might have prevented him—it was possible. Hope gave a tiny flutter. No—he had forgotten.

"Very tired?" asked the foreman kindly, as the crowd began to drift out.

"Knocked up!" said Maggie.

When she was ready to go she hesitated for an instant. The cigars were of no use to her. Should she leave them? Then while she stood, a sudden joy sent the blood surging up to her face. It might be to see her at home that he was coming. It wasn't Christmas Eve till to-morrow, and Christmas the next day. She wrapped up the cigars quickly, and hurried out to catch one of the open wagonettes that plied between Selbridge and Pedley Hill on Saturday nights. There was no train convenient at this hour. The cold air was bracing after the stuffy shop, and she was happy. Of course John Allday would be calling to-morrow, or on Christmas morning. "I should have been stupid to leave the cigars behind," she told herself. She went right into the Bullen in the wagonette, for she did not feel tired now, only hungry. The bustle in the market amused her, and she lingered over her shopping—a few luxuries for the week-end, and a spray of mistletoe, because it was Christmas. She carried the spray carefully so that the berries should not drop, and she smiled to herself all the way up the hill as she went home.

Mrs. Onions had a fire made for her in the sitting-room, and the kettle boiling on the hob. Maggie made tea, and ate a piece of pork pie off the paper to save washing up. John would not come to-night, of course. It might not even be to-morrow, Christmas Day would be the nicest, in the morning, though it was a long time away. She put the cigars on the mantelpiece ready to her hand. The mistletoe was best on the gas, in the middle of the room; close against the table, she could stand under it.

She hummed a carol as she undressed for bed.

The next morning she lay and had a second sleep. Then after a quick breakfast, she put on her best clothes and went to morning service at

the old parish church. John Allday was not there. She was disappointed, and stayed indoors the remainder of the day, irritable and restless, settling to nothing, yet with no inclination to go out. She was glad when the darkness came.

She went to bed early, but Christmas Day was in before she fell asleep.

The carol singers woke her, long after daylight, and her first startled thought was that John Allday was knocking at the door. She knew at once that it was not he; there were children's voices. Still, he might come early, she reasoned, and she must be ready for him. She told herself while she dressed that it was ridiculous to excite herself in this way. John might not come at all—he might not be able to come. Yet she was happy.

She put on her dressing-gown. She looked nice in her dressing-gown, she knew; it was a good one, perpetually rousing Mrs. Onions' admiration, for that good lady had always intended to have one, she explained—it was a luxury for the rich, but all the same she meant having one, only one thing and another: and a long recital of misfortune followed, half an hour of it in the telling.

Twice as much firewood as usual went to light the fire in the sitting-room, and the charred bits shot out of the grate into the Dutch oven, threatening to ruin her kidneys and bacon. She had to take them away until her fire burned up better. If John came she would be having breakfast; he might sit down and chat with her; she might give him another breakfast—a cup of tea, at least. It would not be proper, and was no more than a ridiculous fancy, probably—oh, for sure, it was ridiculous. Nevertheless, her whole mind went out in hope.

She had finished breakfast, and was sitting in reverie, when a sharp tap, tap, on the front

door set her inner self all fluttering. She did not stay to question who the visitor might be—she knew it was he who filled her thoughts. She jumped up, and turned to the high mantelpiece where she had put the box of cigars. In her haste she caught the edge of the box against the little china dog which Sam Bloom had given her at the Pie Fair, and it fell on the fender; the head rolled into the middle of the hearthrug. She was startled. Then she saw that it was only the china dog which had fallen, and she uttered an exclamation of impatience—it couldn't be helped, and it didn't matter. She hurried to the front room, her face flushed, and looking at her best. Inwardly she was in a ferment of anticipation.

Her disappointment starved her like a nipping frost.

"Please, mother's sent me round to wish you a merry Christmas."

It was Jacky Onions, in his best clothes, his face shining, and his voice full of the importance of his errand.

"Why didn't you come to the back?" said Maggie bitterly.

"Please, mother said I was to be sure and come to the front door. I've got a train—Santa Claus put it on the floor by the chimley, a big one, an' I've got orange, an' suckanobs, an'—'an—we've all got, ever such a lot!"

Maggie strove to interest herself in the child's babbling. She took him inside, and found a bright penny in her purse for him. He saw the dog's head as soon as he entered the sitting-room. "It's broke!" he exclaimed. "Did you break it?" She had to talk to him. Mrs. Onions had invited her to dinner to-day, and she would have to be nice to the children.

When Jacky had gone home in glee, with his

bright penny, she sat down, tired and very lonely. John had not come. He might come yet—there was time, she knew; but her disappointment was so great that she turned away from this feeble hope. She told herself it was not there. The china dog's head was lying on the table, and, presently, when she noticed it, her slow thoughts turned to Sam Bloom. Would he have broken a promise like this? Her thoughts cried emphatically "No!" Yesterday she would have laughed at such a promise from Sam. He said things in fun, and forgot them immediately, or remembered them only for fun. Capricious, wilful, gallant, splendid company, taking nothing on earth seriously—that was his reputation. Maggie had heard it often, and knew it was true, though only half true; for she had been with him when he was serious even to melancholy, and she had been astonished. The next time he had atoned with a wild gaiety. He seemed to live to contradict reputation, she had thought. He was said to be incorrigibly lazy, she had heard him called an idle good-for-nothing, yet she knew that he often had a book in his pocket, Sam Bloom, who only read sporting papers and frequented public-houses—not a library book, either, but one of his own, one he had bought, a book of poetry, above all. She understood that a man should like merry company, horse-racing, public-houses—so many men loved these things; she understood the charm of what she called a good book, a novel by Mrs. Worboise, for instance, and the sentimental serials in the weekly papers; it was natural that scholars should learn poetry at school—she did not ask why; but to read poetry for pleasure, not even to boast of it; that was incomprehensible. He had not offered to show her the volume—she had felt it in his pocket and taken it out for fun. His sporting

friends did not know him at all; she had told him so. "Of course they don't know me. I don't know myself," he said.

Maggie picked up the china dog's body and fitted the head to it. There were no other fragments, and she might stick them together, she thought. She was very sorry it was broken—she must mend it. She put the cigars into the cupboard drawer out of sight. She didn't want to see them.

The bells rang gaily for church. While she was washing up the breakfast things she heard the band playing in the town. The children next door were shouting merrily in the yard. Everybody was happy—it was Christmas Day. She was angry with herself because tears blurred her eyes. The postman came laden up the hill, very late; she saw him coming as she crossed the bedroom before the window. He was very slow—he had so many letters to deliver. She heard him tapping next door; then he went on up the hill. She told herself she didn't care. She had had a letter and a card from her sister yesterday—five cards in all. But to-day was Christmas Day, and nothing had come. Her disappointment became like a solid thing in her throat.

A glance at the clock reminded her that Mrs. Onions had invited her to dinner, and she had some presents to take for the children. She dressed quickly. She would make herself happy with them, help with the dinner, and the washing up after. It didn't matter where John Allday was, or what he was doing—she would forget him—she had forgotten him already. If he came, and he might even yet come, it would be too late. She hoped he would come and find the house empty. So she resolved, though when she went next door she said to Jacky, "You'll tell me if you see anybody come to my door, won't you?"

There was goose, with sage and onions, for dinner. Mr. Onions presided in his shirt sleeves, and took appropriate jokes from his worn store.

"Isn't it grand, Missis Wheatley?" said Jacky, in his enthusiasm.

"I'll give you Missis Wheatley, you comic young rascal," said his mother. "You call her Auntie Maggie. You've got real aunties never done half so much for you."

"I'm a 'omely man, that's me—'omely," explained Mr. Onions, "an' if you was the queen on her throne you couldn't make a dook of me—not if it was ever so."

Maggie resolutely enjoyed herself.

They all went a walk together in the afternoon. Mr. and Mrs. Onions paraded in solemn state, Mr. Onions in front with a twopenny cigar which he had to lick to make it burn evenly, and his wife slightly in the rear. He waited every now and again for her to come up, but she always fell behind. She wore her best bonnet, and nursed an umbrella in her arms. Maggie walked with her. The children ran about everywhere and had to be marshalled at intervals, and the stragglers called in. Other families were parading in the same way, outwardly solemn, and inwardly contented. As far as the park—that was the correct distance. The children sulked when they were ordered off the wet grass, and Mrs. Onions declared, exasperated, that they were aggravating little monkeys. A few moments later she forgave them, and assured a friend they were growing up nicely and a great comfort to her. They grinned, sure of their privilege to-day. Maggie assured Mr. and Mrs. Onions that she was having a very enjoyable time.

"I didn't like to think of you being lonely. I says to my 'usband, 'Now, there's that poor girl,' I says——"

Mrs. Onions, good soul, loved to deck her simple thoughts with superabundant detail.

The band was playing in Orchard Street when they returned, and the children ran along to listen. The others had to follow.

While they were standing, Maggie was startled by a tap on the shoulder. Sam Bloom was behind her.

"A merry Christmas, Maggie! What are you doing here?"

"We've been for a walk," said Maggie.

"Who's we—this crowd?"

"Yes—Mr. and Mrs. Onions, next door. They invited me there to dinner."

Sam made a grimace.

"Good dinner?"

"Yes, very nice. They're very hospitable."

"You aren't feeling lonely, then," said Sam. "I'm sick of Christmas. Are you going to stay with 'em all the evening?"

"I don't know," said Maggie.

"Come to the concert at the 'George,' will you? It'll be rather good—it's something to do, anyhow. I asked John Allday, but he won't come, I expect. I wish you would, Maggie. I know you're lonely, like me—you aren't really enjoying yourself with these folks. Yes, yes, I know they're kind, but you aren't one of 'em. What can you do? It isn't nature to be alone—you've got to find some sort o' company. If you meant 'A merry Christmas' instead of just saying it, you wouldn't refuse."

"All right," said Maggie, at length. Her sympathies were moved, for he was lonely and yearning for companionship, as she was.

"Eight o'clock, in the Bullen, under the Town Hall clock," he arranged.

Mrs. Onions was hungry for gossip.

"We were at school together—it's Mr. Bloom, you know," said Maggie.

"Old Mr. Peacock's grandson. Oh, yes, I remember him, my dear, a very pleasant young fellow, I should say, by all appearance——"

"What—him?" said Mr. Onions. "He's a wild young rip, a proper un."

"We've all got to have our fling a bit," said Mrs. Onions, benevolently. "You've had your day, and many a heartbreaking hour you've give me over it."

She began a long anecdote of one of his peccadilloes, and they argued over unimportant details. Mrs. Onions never by any chance lost her bearings among the tangled forests of her irrelevancies, and when the story was exhausted she came back to Maggie, embarrassing her.

"Is the young gentleman coming up to see you?"

"He's invited me to go to a concert with him to-night."

"At the 'George'?" said Mr. Onions. "I was thinking of going."

"No!" said his wife emphatically. "Home's your place. With Maggie here it's different—she's got her young gentleman."

Maggie blushed. Mr. Onions joked about the miseries of married life until Mrs. Onions reproved him before the children. At tea he was inclined to be morose, and had to be reproved again. The children were getting tired and cross; Jacky had to be smacked in the back kitchen.

Half past seven was striking in the neighbouring steeple when Maggie took the back door key from its nail behind the ivy on the wall. It was cold in the sitting-room, melancholy. When she was ready to go out, she saw the cigars—she had put them out ready to take for Sam. Now she was not sure she ought to take them—perhaps it would be better

not to. She ought to have given them to Mr. Onions for his hospitality. That would be the thing to do, of course, to-morrow or the next day, as though she had got them specially.

She left them on the table.

As she walked down the hill she recollected that the 'George,' where she was going, was a public-house; the concert might be a sort of music-hall entertainment. Would there be many ladies there? None, probably. What sort of women? There would be women, surely. Did Sam know exactly what it was going to be? She was worried. She did not want to be seen in a low music-hall. Then she remembered that the "George" let the hall for dances and socials—this might be quite respectable.

Sam met her before she reached the Town Hall.

"I thought you weren't coming," he said.

"I don't break a promise," she assured him, and the thought brought into her mind the image of John Allday. He wouldn't come, Sam had said. Did he think it was beneath him?

"What sort of thing is it? Will there be many ladies?" she asked.

She saw she had surprised him.

"I don't know. I never thought of that." He laughed. "It's a—a—well, it ain't exactly "The Messiah"—but it's all right—'pon my honour, Maggie."

He took her arm, and laughed away her scruples. All the time they were walking towards the "George."

Maggie had never been in a public-house in her life, save when she was away on holiday and entered for a meal. She was ashamed now. The smells of beer and tobacco were nauseating, the talk coarse. Already the concert had begun. She saw that most of the audience were men, and a fog

of acrid smoke hung in the air above their heads. The women were slatternly, or gay with bright colours; some of them had brought infants whom they could not leave at home; Maggie was sorry for the little things, wailing feebly as their mothers tried to hush them to sleep. Everybody seemed to know Sam, and Maggie was horrified to find herself conspicuous. She was angry with herself for coming, and miserable.

"Do you really like this sort of thing?" she asked.

"Good God, no!" said Sam in a fierce whisper. Then he added lightly, "I've sunk to it, I suppose.

"And now I've sunk," said Maggie.

He caught her hand in his, hurting her.

"We'll go. You shan't stay."

"No, no! I will stay!" she protested. "I've come of my own accord."

A waiter brought Sam whisky, and set a glass of port before her. She drank it off at once.

She had never been in a music-hall. She had heard of the Tivoli, a wonderful new place opened in London a year or two ago, and she had heard her mother talk of going to London once and seeing the crowd going into the Alhambra. Mr. Onions had been telling her to-day of his only visit to London, the greatest travelling adventure of his life. He had seen *Lord Dundreary*. She had been to pantomimes, and to the Selbridge Theatre; and where she had been a housemaid she had seen plays acted by fit-up crowds who had performed in the local market hall, and had gone the next day, leaving their posters to soak off the walls with the rain. The concert to-night was crude and vulgar, little better than a show at the Pie Fair; but after a while, when the wine set her tingling, she became interested, and at length

she admitted to Sam that it helped to pass the time nicely.

A piano, two violins, and a cornet made the orchestra, and the people in the front rows treated the players to drinks. A huge contralto, with an immense display of powdered arms and bosom, sang sentimental songs which brought tears to some of the women's eyes; then she strode off and reappeared in tights. A red-nosed man shouted about his mother-in-law until the audience roared with merriment, and he made great play with a kipper on a string. A nigger minstrel argued with the orchestra. Then came a troupe of handbell ringers—the "Bluebells of Scotland," and "Home, Sweet Home"; then a conjuror, a foreign-looking man, obviously French, to anybody but a Frenchman. Maggie's head ached, and her eyes smarted from the smoke. She wondered what sort of people these performers were at home. This fat contralto, for instance—did she like doing this? In fancy Maggie shaped a private life for each: for the fat woman a broken romance—Maggie had caught the sentimentality of her songs.

Sam took her away before the end. He regretted having invited her, and was irritable.

She was giddy when they were outside, and had to catch his arm. She understood what had happened, and she knew she ought to be ashamed, and she would be ashamed; but now she was filled with a careless, bubbling gaiety.

"Sam, you've made me drunk," she told him.

"No, no," he assured her. "It's the fresh air, after the stuffy place inside. You're all right, my dear."

She laughed—she did not know why—and she wanted to go on laughing.

"You'll have to see me home," she said.

It was a raw, cold night, with a fine rain falling.

The streets were deserted. Here and there in Castle Street the front windows were lit up, and sounds of music and laughter came out. At one place the shadow of an old man's toothless face was cast in profile on the blind; he was talking, and the shadow jaws opened and shut like those of a ventriloquist's doll. Maggie laughed till he eyes filled with tears. When the shadow moved off, and they had gone up the hill, she still had fits of chuckling.

"It was so comic, wasn't it?" she repeated.

Sam moved his arm and put it round her waist. They walked very slowly, pressed against each other.

"It's 'good night,' just as we're beginning to enjoy ourselves," said Sam, when they arrived.

"Yes," said Maggie, reluctantly. "That's the way with everything."

They were silent a while.

"I'll come in and say 'good night,' shall I?" said he suddenly. "It isn't late."

He held her tight. Her heart leaped, and she struggled feebly to escape.

"Somebody might see you. I've got to go round the back. They'd hear you next door."

"I'll stay here, then. You can go round and let me in at the front. Don't be long."

He took his arm from her waist, and walked sharply away towards the top of the hill. She was bemused; he had not given her time to think. For a moment she stood watching him—he did not turn. Then very slowly, with her breath catching in her throat and her heart thumping, she went to the entry and round to the back door. Her hand shook as she fumbled to put the key in the lock. She was afraid of the darkness indoors. When she had lit the gas she perceived the box of cigars lying on the table. Her first instinct was to hide them, but a noise startled her: somebody was

in the yard outside—at the back door. She was terrified.

Sam came in quietly. She had not once thought he might follow her.

"Didn't you know it was me?" he whispered.

Without understanding what she was about, she picked up the cigars.

"What have you got there?" he said.

She looked at the box in her hand. A smarting misery overwhelmed her, forcing tears into her eyes.

"For me?" he said.

"Yes, yes," she exclaimed, and she went up to him, and pressed the box into his hand. He kissed her softly, and thanked her over and over again.

Then he turned from her, leaving her standing by the table. She heard him turn the key in the back door. When he returned he held it out and put it on the table. Then he took her, all trembling, in his arms, and kissed her passionately.

* * * * *

The sticks crackled in the sitting-room grate. A thin, blue reek twisted slowly above the coals, and then shot under the draw-tin, caught by the draught. Maggie took the bellows, and went on her knees to use them, until the flames roared. Then she hung the bellows on their nail, and turned to the table, moving all the while in a stealthy, unnatural way, as though she had no right to be doing these things, and might be caught in her crime at any minute. The blind was down still, a dull yellow rectangle, letting the grey daylight in at the sides; several times she glanced at it swiftly as though she expected to find somebody peeping at her. From the kitchen came the sounds of the tap running into a tin bowl, and then a splashing. She

was startled in a moment by a low whistle, beginning the air of a song she had heard last night. She darted to the doorway.

"You'll have 'em hear you!" she whispered.

Sam was by the sink, rubbing his neck vigorously with a towel.

"I forgot."

He grinned, and Maggie returned to the table and the cupboard. She had no laughter.

Presently he came in, put on his collar and tie, and finished dressing. Neither spoke.

"Dim, religious light," he said, when at last they sat down.

Without a word Maggie went to the blind and jerked it to the top.

"No, no, my dear girl. I was joking. I didn't mean you to take it like that," he said kindly.

He pulled the blind down again, and kissed her. She made no response. When he spoke to her again she burst into tears. He had to coax her to eat as he would a sick child.

As soon as they had finished breakfast he put on his coat and hat, and took one of his cigars to smoke when he was outside.

"This afternoon—three o'clock, by the Town Hall," said he.

"I don't know."

He grew irritable.

"All right—up here, then. I'll come round the back and knock loud. You can be ready."

"I'll come," she said.

"Good! I'm off."

He feigned not to see her humour. They went together through the front room and kissed before she opened the door to let him go. He stepped out quickly, and she shut the door without glancing after him. Then she walked slowly into the sitting-room and sat down in her place, her eye

red and smarting with tears unshed. She was utterly wretched.

Presently the sound of movement in the back yards galvanized her to a swift activity: the breakfast things had to be washed up before Mrs. Onions might come in. Her energy only lasted for the task. When it was done and the blind was up, she sat down again, craving to be alone, to hide herself from everybody. She dreaded Mrs. Onions' busy chatter. She shrank from her own image in the glass. For a long while upstairs she sat on the edge of the bed and gazed vacantly into the wall without a thought of stirring, until the cold benumbed her, and the clock struck to tell her how she was losing time, when she had so much to do, so much to think. Once she looked out and prayed for rain to fall, and the next instant she recollected that it would bring Sam up here, and then she wanted fine weather. At a moment she was reckless, then gay, then despondent, then ashamed. When Mrs. Onions came in, Maggie explained that she was out of sorts, and Mrs. Onions exasperated her with sympathy.

"It's your nerves, my dear. I know I was often like that before I was married."

Maggie laughed wildly, and Mrs. Onions was alarmed. She advised a certain patent medicine which "had done wonders for her husband's brother William's daughter, Agnes, who had gone to a mere nothink, and only took enough food to keep a sparrer, let alone a Christian, and that without a word of a lie."

* * * * *

Sam Bloom walked rapidly from the house up towards the crest of the hill. He stopped to light his cigar in the shelter of the bridge parapet, above

the deep railway cutting, and he stood there a moment, enjoying the freshness of the morning, and looking back at the house he had left. Then he walked sharply over the hill, and made for the country. He wanted to be alone.

He was not at ease. He felt that he ought to be gay, for he had just come from a glorious escapade, to be remembered many a day among the best of his adventures, to be called up at will, not to hang upon his thoughts, oppressing them. It wasn't a thing to brood over—it was past. He resented the heaviness of it, a grand adventure a while ago, and become already a burden which he knew he must carry. He had promised to meet Maggie this afternoon—he had asked her, implored her. That was foolish. It were better forgotten, at least for a time; and he couldn't forget; he would never be able to forget. "I've done it this time!" he complained, and his thoughts sank in gloom. But the air was fresh, the solitude pleasant to his mood. A robin flitted before him along a hedge and looked at him with bright, beady eyes. He smiled a moment—his burden was not all sadness.

He came home by a muddy path along the river. His grandfather was sitting in his easy chair by the fire.

"A fine lad you are—no consideration for a soul on earth!"

That was his greeting.

"I couldn't tell you—I didn't know," began Sam humbly. "I was out with friends, and it got so late they pressed me to stay all night. I went over to Selbridge."

He invented a story of his evening, adding the concert at the "George" for half an hour of it, for fear that his grandfather might come to learn he had been there. The old man stretched out his withered hands to the fire, and said nothing at all.

Sam grew angry. He was bitterly ashamed of his lying, and his grandfather's silence roused him to exasperation.

"You needn't believe me unless you like," he said, savage in his own torment. "I'll tell you something you will believe, though—where I was in the afternoon, and where I shall be this afternoon, too. I'm engaged."

His grandfather swung round on his chair.

"You're what?"

"I'm engaged," said Sam sullenly. His own voice had startled him; it seemed to have spoken without his permission; and now the words were said—nothing could take them back.

"Who's the young woman?" said his grandfather slowly.

"Miss Wheatley—Maggie Wheatley—that's the lady," said Sam, striving to dignity.

"Up in Castle Street—her as her mother died!"

Sam nodded.

The old man rose very solemnly from his chair.

"I don't know much about the daughter," he said gently; "but she's a good girl, my lad, I don't doubt. Her mother was a God-fearing woman, and very unfortunate. If you think you're fond of her as you should be—and I dare say you've thought it over very careful, the two of you—it means money, you know, going without things, and sufferings together as well as happiness—in sickness and in health—and children to bring up in the fear of the Lord—you've thought all these things—well, it's only for me to say, 'God bless you both.' "

Sam was bitterly distressed.

"You'll bring her to see me this afternoon?" said his grandfather.

"I haven't arranged," began Sam, in dread.

"Yes, yes; of course you will. I didn't know

or we could ha' got in something special. We must see Mrs. Thomas. We'll manage, I dare say. There's the ham, and we can get a pork pie, and some cakes and things. There's somebody will be open."

He went to the cupboard, tottering in his haste. "God bless my life, here's me getting excited like a young lad!" he exclaimed. He went to see what was at the cellar head, and then to the cupboard again.

Sam went out. His distress was going, and he suffered a queer feeling of elation. He would have to go up early to tell Maggie. She must put on all her best. He heard his grandfather bustling to and fro, talking to himself in his old, quavering voice. Sam felt something rising in his throat.

CHAPTER VI

SPRINGTIME

THE New Year brought with it an offering of calm, sunny weather, cheating the primroses and auriculas in the gardens where they were too anxious for the spring. Then the west wind gathered the storm clouds and swept the earth with rain; and when at last he was gone in a rage, the east wind gathered all the clouds in his icy hands, squeezed the snow out of them, and scattered it everywhere. Mr. Allday went to bed; the bronchitis kettle came out of the cupboard and sat steaming on the trivet at the bedroom fire. Men in their loud thousands had to stand in icy slush to see Selbridge play their opening match for the English Cup, and caught colds, and coughs, and rheumatism, all for the love and honour of Selbridge sport, nobly upheld by eleven strangers who worked three hours a week, and even more, for cash. While the enthusiasts shouted hoarse advice and censure every Saturday afternoon, and argued and surmised and criticized to speed away the empty hours till Saturday came again, other and more serious enthusiasts were studying form and pedigree, weights and acceptances and odds, ready for the spring which always came to Lincoln first. The ladies enjoyed the spring after another manner—carpets up, and beaten on the back grass plot, clean curtains ready, painters

and paper-hangers whistling in the parlour, meals anywhere and anyhow, and all the while the new fashions in the shops to be considered. The children—nobody told them what to do or think about—they knew, as surely as the birds learnt to mate: spring had to be worshipped with marbles, tops, and skipping ropes.

All the time the fields and woods, the hedge-banks and the gardens, were getting ready. The football followers and their wives, and those sportsmen who loved to see thoroughbred horses' names arranged with figures in the newspapers—even they had to notice the crocuses coming out. "Yes, it's spring again," they said, as they paraded solemnly after Sunday's heavy dinner, and they were satisfied. Nature was doing her duty, not perfectly, of course, and there was much to grumble at, but she was obviously striving to perform the task commanded by the calendar and by other season-making things, such as the spring handicaps. It was nice to see the crocuses coming up so regular every year—very nice. That was enough time spent over the crocuses, and the promenaders went sedately back to tea, and then supper at nine, cold meat and pies, and cheese, and beer, and those beatific feelings of repletion which are accepted as righteousness.

Here and there one heard the dryads whispering together—only here and there, for common folk expected them to shout, and, hearing nothing, declared there were no dryads. Sam Bloom and Maggie heard them while they stood together by gates, and under walls sheltered from the night winds. John Allday heard them, when he was out alone; he was often alone now, suffering from a melancholy for which he had neither cure nor explanation. His mother was anxious. His father assured her that he would get over it all

right, and then he startled her: "You haven't heard of him being out with a young woman at all, have you? I don't say it is, and you needn't go frightening yourself. I have seen 'em take it that way." John had no suspicions that he was being closely watched. The Kingsnortons were away in London, the glee party's season was nearly over, Sam was always with Maggie—John was lonely. His greatest pleasures now, evenings with the Benlows, left him discontented afterwards. He did not seek to understand what he craved; there was more vague yearning and restlessness than misery in his loneliness.

Day after day there was something new for those who sought eagerly, in the sunsets, the night showers, the morning pavements drying, the sky reflected in the roadway's water puddles, white and brilliant blue, washed clear as it is only in early spring. The throstle called boldly over the gardens. In the park the beds were tidied up, neatly ready for the green shafts peeping up from the soil. Another week—no change, or very little—the green spears higher, maybe; the high winds and the hail had kept things back, explained the Sunday promenaders. Nevertheless, the great event had happened: spring had really come, in secret, and not a dozen knew. The chaffinch called "pink, pink" from a thorn; another, hidden, repeated his cheery little madrigal; thrush and blackbird hopped over the lawn; starlings were busy—these things had happened last week too. To-day there was added another voice, "chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff"—the first summer visitor here, telling everybody with all his little might, and nobody understanding. Despite the clouds mounting the sky, the cold wind, and the rush of bitter rain—"chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff"—the message long awaited, sighed for, and uncomprehended.

Maggie Wheatley had an engagement ring, set with two tiny pearls and a ruby, and every spare moment was taken for her sewing; she had to steal hours out of the night so that she might be ready for Easter. She wanted to look nice, to win the praise of the few who would be interested in her wedding-day. As she sat in the quiet sitting-room sewing diligently, she amused herself often with plans of a future in which Sam would rise in business and in social life, and they would live in a bigger, more comfortable, house, with a good plot of garden at the back. There were some nice villas going up in Selbridge, long rows of them, all alike, save for the names on the gates, grandiosely eloquent of the higher respectability. Why shouldn't they get on? They were both young, with health and energy. She was refined, and knew she could play the fine lady if she were given the means. Sam was clever—he would get on if she kept him in the right path, and she could do that, surely. He was cleverer than John Allday, for instance—much cleverer. Everybody admitted that Sam was clever; he had been at the top of the class at school whenever he had wanted, though it was not often. John Allday was getting on fast. Several times Maggie heard of his progress. It was due to his perseverance, not to real cleverness. Sam could beat him—he must. Maggie felt herself challenged to bring Sam forward, and to support him continually with her devotion; she vowed solemnly that he should not fail.

Mrs. Onions was delighted at the news of the engagement. When Maggie was at home, she was often in to help, doing heavy house-work for her so that the sewing might go on. "I've just popped in a minute to see how you're a getting on, my dear," was her usual explanation, and while she chatted she worked hard, despite Maggie's protests. She

insisted on entertaining Sam and Maggie to supper several evenings. Mr. Onions borrowed shillings from Sam, and repaid them in racing tips for tired horses. Sam promised Maggie to give up horse-racing; indirectly she heard of changes in him, and she was proud. At the Royal Emporium the shop girls took a new interest in her: she was leaving to get married, and so she grew daily in importance. Marriage to them was life's consummation, ardently to be longed for, exaggerated in all its joys by visionary contrast with their present monotony of existence. It was easy to get a young man to walk them out, but one to propose marriage seriously—that was another matter. Only the foreman was pessimistic: "I hope you are doing the right thing, Miss Wheatley. If he's got the right character, and a good home to give you, then I'll wish you every happiness." He was a middle-aged bachelor, and the girls smiled; they said he was fond of Maggie. She smiled too, but his words left a bitterness behind them. Sam had not got a good home to give her. He had not a home at all. He had no money. He had never saved a penny before, and now the time was so short. She was providing the home. It was perfectly natural—she had the home, and she was alone. Why wait? They wanted each other now. They would save after they were married; she felt that it would be surer, for she would have him to herself then. Sometimes when she was alone sewing her mind would suffer torments of disquietude—only when she was alone. Her evenings with Sam always brought her a passionate felicity.

She walked to Selbridge on fine mornings when she rose early enough. Sometimes she took the bus. When she was very late she ran down the steep bank to the station. She generally returned

in the bus. Now Sam walked over to fetch her at nine o'clock several nights a week, and brought her back by train, first class, in a compartment to themselves, splendid, though extravagant luxury; and what was a little money saved, such a very little, compared with these delicious moments? They reasoned this way often, always with the same result, holding out their hands for the joys falling like tinted blossoms from the tree of life. There was the thrilling of anticipation all the day through, the quick walk to the station, the excitement, while the train was standing, lest anyone should intrude, and the devices for keeping out the folk who never came, the slow gliding from the platform, faster and faster—safe. Sam put his arm about her, and they sat pressed together, very still, very happy, such a little while, tilting on the curve, roaring into the cutting, nearly home, and the brakes grinding as the station lights peeped at them, and heads moved past the window. The old porter at the gate touched his cap, and wished them "good night."

On early closing days, when the weather was propitious, they walked into the country, beyond the Toll. On fine nights the sky was filled with stars for them. One week there would be the new moon, thin sickle-blade of fortune, which they must not see first through glass. At the next early-closing day there was the first quarter swung in the sky, and then the full-round, climbing up through the rack of clouds, then the darkness, and the solemn stars, and the peewits calling. They counted the full moons till Easter; it seemed to them more romantic than counting by the figured calendar; they looked in the prayer-book, and made the mystic calculation from the golden number.

Sam startled her one Sunday afternoon soon after their engagement had begun.

"Guess where I'm going to take you after tea. To Alldays. We were school chums, you remember. I've asked him to be best man. I promised I would take you to-night."

When she went, all their hospitality could not quell entirely her agitation. Mr. Allday liked her for what he called her quiet modesty. "Very lady-like and nice," he said afterwards to Mrs. Allday. "Sam's lucky." Mrs. Allday agreed, and added, "It is to be hoped Sam will always think so. He needs somebody very firm."

She went to see Maggie in the afternoon of the next early closing day.

"I wanted to ask you, my dear, what arrangements you think of making about your wedding. We've been talking it over. We should like you to be married from our house. Knowing your poor mother so many years, and you from a baby—and Sam as well. There's John best man, you see."

Maggie accepted gladly.

It became a regular custom for her to take her sewing on early closing days, and sit with Mrs. Allday in the afternoon. Mr. Allday slept till nearly tea-time, and then came down and made solemn jokes. After tea there was more sewing, and then John came. Sometimes Maggie and he were for a few moments alone. She was embarrassed, and she dared to think that he was affected in some way like herself. He said very little, simple commonplaces handed to and fro, but to Maggie there seemed to be another conversation, flowing wordlessly between them, undefined; she could not stay her fancy's endowing his image with secret thoughts to mate with hers. Occasionally she strove to check them, called herself wicked, she had no right to fancy thus; still, it did not harm, she said, nobody knew.

When Sam came they were merry. Presently

he would take Maggie for their walk, and they would return for supper. It was the best evening of the week.

Sam had many bitter hours with his inner self, suffering hesitation, doubts, and fears, hopes rising to ecstasy, hours of wild recklessness and fierce repentance. Maggie saw none of these moods. To her he was courteous and devoted as nobody else had ever been, as she had believed nobody could be, out of books. At times it seemed hardly possible that they were live ordinary folk in the fast-rushing days of the great *fin de siècle* which everybody boasted of; rather were they rehearsing for some romantic pageant, in olden style. Maggie felt that she understood—these happy conceits were Sam's—though she could not explain; her gladness was outside all common life she had ever known. She asked no more than the continuance of this delight for ever; she did not think she was asking much. To Sam their moments together were all his wealth; he looked forward ardently, and begrudged every precious second lost. When he had kissed Maggie the last "good night" he was lightsome as a schoolboy on his way down the hill, a merry tune jigging in his thoughts, and his feet keeping time. There was no beer at home now—bread and cheese and a cup of milk were his supper. His grandfather would be in bed long ago. Afterwards he would sit with his pipe until the fire was no more than a dull gleam among the ash, and the room was chilly. Wonderful dreams came to him there in the armchair. Only hours beyond, sometimes in the long, dragging hours before the morning, he would wake and lie tossing in utter wretchedness, his reason unable to explain his mood, and his thoughts as unnaturally distorted as in dream visions.

To his surprise his more serious friends assured

him that he was doing wisely, and they seemed to be pleased. He had become an active member of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, and he fancied now that he was heard more attentively. He was a lively speaker, and his influence was growing among the other men. Secretly he hoped that he might become an official of the society some day—"an easy job, with good money." At the works he was asked if he would like a marble clock. He was greatly flattered at the thought of his being worthy of a presentation.

He had never known the home-life which had always been commonplace to John Allday, and the enjoyment of his own home was one of his keenest anticipations. Mrs. Allday laughed at his eager questions about her kitchen and her household, but she and Mr. Allday understood, and liked him the more. When he bought a small oak table for his new home, the first piece of furniture he had ever truly called his own, he had to look at it often to gratify his new pride, until Maggie laughed at him. He liked to see her sewing. She had Jacky Onions or his mother with her sometimes when he called on a Sunday afternoon, and unless Mrs. Onions chatted, he would sit long in silence watching Maggie's deft fingers, and marvelling that he could in so little find so great content. Maggie would look up at him and smile, and ask anxiously, "You don't think it's wicked of me, do you, sewing this on Sunday? I don't get any time, do I?"

His grandfather made him feel the sanctity of his coming marriage.

"I often say to myself, sitting here, 'Thank God he's marrying a good girl!' Be good to her, my lad, and the Lord bless you both! I've seen you grown up and settled—it's a great blessing. I'm an old broken servant now, going to the Master."

He spoke in a thin, piping voice, with no tone gradation, as quietly as he would speak of the weather or any other banal matter. His voice was almost expressionless. He was entering his ninetieth year, in possession of all his faculties, walking out a short way on fine days, and suffering no malady but that of age, but he was becoming very frail. His body seemed to have shrivelled, his head drooped forward, quivering like a November leaf, his feet dragged. He breathed in little gasps, occasionally putting his hand to his breast, as though his thoughts had to be given solely to the vital task lest he might forget, and die. He did not read his Bible often now; his sight was dim, and his memory preserved well his favourite passages. Hour after hour he sat in the arm-chair by the fire, staring at slow visions, and stretching out his withered hands to the warmth. He was only fully roused when Maggie came with Sam. Then he would talk, drawing from the stock of his long recollections. Sam was awed by these memories, told after being stored away from fifty to eighty years. It seemed impossible that his grandfather had actually seen these things, so extraordinarily different from those to-day. Tales of the coaching days, of Waterloo, of the Reform Bill, and the Bristol Riots, and the cholera, were for the history books, not to be told from actual memory now. There was something unnatural in them, and in their narrator, sitting quietly in his arm-chair, when all his own world was gone.

Mothering Sunday came. The old folk who had children and grandchildren had to bake cakes for the family reunions. The days slipped away rapidly. On Palm Sunday, Maggie Wheatley went to church to early communion at eight o'clock, and took a bunch of daffodils to deck her mother's grave. "This week!" She said it to herself

often—she had waited so long, yet at another moment she said it only seemed a little while. She had left the Royal Emporium so that she might have the last week to herself. The girls had given her silver teaspoons and sugar tongs; the foreman had made the presentation ceremoniously after the shop was closed, and they had had tea. One of the girls was to be bridesmaid. It had been a hard life and monotonous, on her feet so many hours a day, yet with their present they had given Maggie a pride and a recollection of happiness which, though purely visionary, was as real as any past reality.

The time was very near, and so much had to be done. Mrs. Onions was for ever in and out to help, especially with advice, and endless explanations of what she would do if only she were to marry again. "Not as I wish the least bit o' harm in the world to my old man except a bit more common sense now and again, and may he live to be a hundred-an'-one if he thinks he'd be any use so long, as I tell him many a time."

Good Friday came, a wet, squally day. Maggie looked anxiously at the sky. The milkman said he feared the weather was broken for the holidays; he was having no holiday. Mr. Onions said that he couldn't say what it would be to-morrow, and he explained minutely all the reasons which his experience had taught him on a day like this to say he couldn't say. The rag and bone man assured them it was certain to be wet, but Mrs. Onions retorted that his prophecy was more a sign of bad trade than of bad weather.

"Don't you believe it, my love," she told Maggie. "It'll be a bit showery, perhaps, like married life itself, but the sun will shine bright—you call me a double Dutchman else. You don't think I've had my twinges of rheumatics all these years for nothing do you?"

Maggie was comforted.

Sam came after tea to take her to Allday's. He stayed to supper there, and left soon afterwards. Maggie took him to the front door to let him out and to see what the weather was like—it took a long time to see that. When she returned, and Mrs. Allday asked her if it was fine, she said, "Yes—no, no, there's a drop of rain—not much." And they laughed at her confusion.

She declared she could not sleep if she went to bed, so Mr. Allday went, and left them to talk.

It happened that she was alone with John for a few moments before they said "good night."

"How many hours now, Maggie?" said John. "It's only like the other day I heard you were engaged. Christmas comes round quicker every year, I think. You know I came to wish you a merry Christmas—I'll confess I very nearly forgot, and I was angry with myself for it, properly——"

"When did you come?" interrupted Maggie.

"Christmas Day. You were out—getting engaged, I suppose," said he, smiling. "It would be in the evening, about half-past seven."

"Half-past seven?" said Maggie, eagerly.

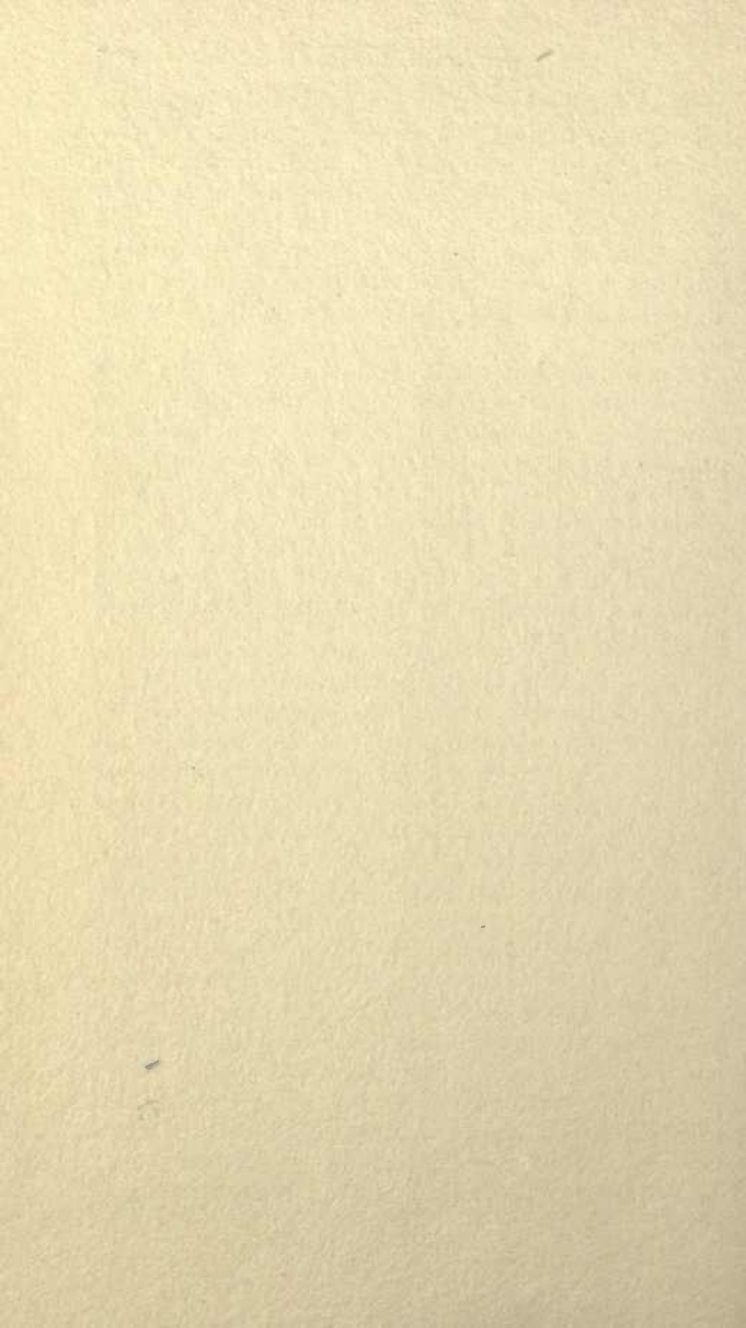
"Yes, I remember the time, because I heard the old church clock strike as I went away. I meant to tell you, only your engagement put it out of my head—I forgot."

There was a moment's silence before Maggie said, very quietly, "Yes, I was out."

Upstairs in her bedroom afterwards she stood for a long time before the looking-glass, staring listlessly at her own image. When at length she realized what she was doing she began quickly to undress, only to find herself after a while as inactive as before, her thoughts pacing heavily to and fro, like prisoners in a narrow yard. One vision recurred vividly—the backyard at home, and herself

groping for the key on its nail behind the ivy, while through the houses, out of ordinary sight, she saw a figure going down the hill, and she heard the half-hour chimed solemnly by the old church clock. Presently she was angry with John for having told her; then she was angry with him for not having told her long ago. She was angry with herself, and shameful of her rebellious thoughts. She did not sleep.

When morning came, and she heard the lark singing for her wedding-day, her thoughts were wearied to exhaustion. She rose, and said her prayers very slowly, striving to be earnest in every word on this day. Then she began to dress. Mrs. Allday caught her, and ordered her into bed again, and brought her a cup of tea. When Mrs. Allday returned to ask her if she would like more, she found her asprawl under the clothes, fallen asleep, like a tired child.



THIRD PART

CHAPTER I

THE CURATE

THE Reverend Laurence Pettigo, B.A., Dublin, newly appointed curate at the parish church, walked briskly along the road from Nickling towards Pedley Hill. He was a tall, sturdy young man, plump, and expecting to grow fat, but not worried at the prospect. His face was ruddy, and his expression that of a man who looked upon the world and found it good. He was occasionally told that he would look well in farmer's clothes, and among his recollections for anecdote was the confession of an old parishioner that he ought to wear the cassock of a Roman Catholic priest, for he looked so well-fed and contented. "Health before doctrine" was his motto; he had never tried asceticism, and scorned it. To-day he carried a stout ash stick and swung it as he walked. He was well pleased with himself. He had come from a poor parish in Liverpool, and to come here was a pleasant change. He saw no squalid poverty, and the poor were for the most part without any of that meanness which makes for misery and crime. This was an easy parish, offering great opportunities. He liked the little mission church at Nickling; he was enthusiastic; he had been well received; and he was sure already

of his progress. His elder brother was a vicar in the North of England, well married; his lady had brought him a respectable fortune and an incumbency. Laurence Pettigo saw no reason why Fortune should not favour him equally. He was not in the Church merely to benefit from a good position won, or to find a wife with riches—oh, no, he was satisfied in his own self that his motives were not of that sort. He had read "The Northern Farmer," and hoped to be saved from the folly of both father and son. He had entered the Church because his brother had entered the Church, because his uncle had entered, and to please his mother too—his father was dead. Being in, he discovered a pleasure and enthusiasm in his work, motives of good enough growth. The theories of Darwin and of the advanced materialists had not touched him vitally; he had laughed at the efforts of up-to-date clerics to reconcile science and the Bible. "I'm a parson, not a polemic"—that was his description of himself. His parents had been churchgoers—he had been trained to be a church-goer, and he saw other families in their thousands like his own. The Church had filled, and still filled a part of both private and national life, and it had become so because it supplied a need. It was not necessary now to consider whether it had created the need which it supplied. To continue in its vital work it must still supply a need, not necessarily the same in detail. Even the irreligious spent a part of their time in denying religion, so religion occupied their thoughts. The Reverend Laurence Pettigo believed that religion might well occupy one's thoughts, but essentially it should occupy the body, providing an incessant activity in social life, and pleasures especially; that was the essence of his belief in his mission. And as he was a healthy, active man, without subtlety,

fond of sport and company, fond of a good joke, a pipe, and a glass of beer, he had already gained enough success to justify his attitude. His vicar in Liverpool had been a man like himself, busily comforting the poor of his parish, and working that they might enjoy a little of life's sunshine, and not harassing them with doctrines.

The vicar of Pedley Hill was not loved. "Curates come, and curates go, but I go on for ever." The joke was old now, and everybody knew it; still its flavour was as rich as ever. The vicar was a gentleman—no one denied that, and he allowed no doubts to exist. He was also an autocrat. His duty was to command others in theirs, so sure was he of his own fulfilling of the strict law. Thus he was revered by the unflinching devout, and heartily disliked by everybody else. Those easygoing creatures who would go to church occasionally as the whim came over them, never went to the parish church. The headmaster of the parish church schools did not go; they had quarrelled, and it was one of the vicar's bitterest grievances that he had failed to get him dismissed, as it was the schoolmaster's grievance that no amount of public feeling whatever had the slightest chance of getting the vicar dismissed. The vicar had no hypocrisy; he was hard on others—he was hard on himself—his God was jealous, hard on the world. He did not, however, preach those doctrines of eternal torment so beloved of the extreme Puritans; his plea was for devotion—the devotion of a slave to a just master. His church re-echoed feebly with the thin voice of a congregation dwindling. The old doctrines were going out of people's hearts; he knew these things, and read in them portents of a bitter future. Suffering in his age, he feared that *Fin de Siècle* might presage *Fin du Monde.* He had never

failed in duty, and he was exasperated that he had not the power to compel the recalcitrants to come again into the fold. Centuries before he would have demanded a charter of pillory, and gallows, and would have used them ruthlessly to save his people's souls. He was a good man, perfect in integrity, chivalrous to ladies, a staunch friend and a hard enemy, though without malice, and his wife had been devoted and submissive all her married life. There were always fresh flowers on her grave. One only of the great virtues he had not—sympathy. He had never doubted himself, He had never learnt that the path to the hills of greatness is over the plains of kindness, and doubts, and self-examination.

The new curate as yet only knew the vicar as a fine, rather dogmatic old gentleman of the old school. Himself, he saw the Church of to-day growing to a great active Church of to-morrow; he did not know that the vicar saw it already full grown, an edifice built not on shifting human hearts, but on the inanimate rocks, defying wind and tide.

As he walked, the curate hummed a rapturous little air, an impromptu of Schubert, which he played with variations on the piano. He had some knowledge of the arts. He also played the banjo and sang with his face blacked. He was a poor performer on the banjo, though much prouder of it than of his prowess at the pianoforte, because it gave more pleasure to other folk.

It was a frosty December afternoon, in the year 1896. By the roadside, here at hand, the bare trees were stiff and ragged. On the distant slopes they were grouped in vague masses in the haze. There had been heavy rains, and the low meadows by the road lay under flood water, dull grey, to be frozen soon for skating if the frost held. A

few starlings straggled overhead; the main flocks had already gone in clouds like dark puffs of smoke. A goods train on the embankment against the hill slope was like a toy, fleecy tufts shooting up from the locomotive and dissolving very slowly in the air.

The curate stood a while to look, and a vague emotion stirred gently in him. The afternoon was beautiful, because he was singularly content. The sun was down below the dim western haze, and, radiating, there were grey clouds drawn in bands, touched with pale red and pink, dull gold, and primrose. An elm rising from the hedge stood against the sky in black patternless lace, with twigs innumerable. Not a leaf whispered in the dried beech—the frost held all silent; only in a garden past the low wall a blackbird lurked among the laurels, and rustled the leaves. Far away, at a great height, a flock of peewits was making for the south. A chill blue mist was bringing the early darkness.

Nobody was near to see the curate smiling; nobody saw his keen glance of anticipated joy when he turned away from the valley and glanced up at the Kingsnortons' house, Ridgeway, his present destination. Miss Kingsnorton and her parents had been among his first acquaintances here. When he had called he had met her sister Barbara. Surprise and admiration had been his first emotions. In a few moments it seemed to him that she was more than gracious—soon she was merry too—and at length he had gone away sure of her favour, and proud that he should have won so much and so easily. He wanted fervidly to succeed here. Time after time he found her image dominating his fancy, its presence not to be accounted for, and insistent, though not alarming. She was witty and talented; he had heard that she was an

elocutionist, and might have become a clever actress; she had known musicians, poets, stage folk, in London. If he could enlist her services in his parish work, then his success would be a triumph, and he counted already on her help.

She had been engaged to a Mr. Hurst, whom she had known in London. The engagement was broken off now, he knew, and he might have heard many rumours, had he cared to listen. Her fiancé had an aunt in the district here, an eccentric old lady, some ten miles or more away, in a big, lonely house. Pettigo would not listen to gossip. It was sufficient for him to know that the engagement was ended—he was pleased; he did not consider the source of his pleasure.

He was shown on his arrival into the drawing-room, and Barbara rose to greet him. He was unaccountably self-conscious, and explained badly that he had called to see her sister about the music at the mission church.

When he reacted the scene in fancy afterwards, he only remembered a fragment of all they talked about.

"I hope I shan't make myself a nuisance by asking for help—I'll ask a lot," he had said. "It's the talented people of a parish, you know, when they have the right zeal, who make all the difference in church life."

"Marian certainly is interested in the little church."

"And are you?"

"Well—not uninterested."

"That's giving me hope."

Then her mother had come in, and they had given him tea.

"Have you been showing Mr. Pettigo Marian's book?" said Mrs. Kingsnorton.

"No, I haven't."

The book was new, just published—thick, creamy paper, with wide margins, and the title in gilt on a rough blue cover:

SELVALLEY RHYMES

BY

MARIAN HORDEN

"Horden is my maiden name, you know, Mr. Pettigo," said Mrs. Kingsnorton proudly. "The Hordens have been in the county for centuries."

The authoress had come just as he was leaving, and had blushed at his compliments.

When he walked towards the town, on his way to the vicarage, the least observant could see that he was a happy man.

"A very pleasant young gentleman," Mrs. Kingsnorton said when he was gone. "What a pity he won't stay."

"He may be the last straw which breaks the old camel's back," suggested Marian.

"My money's on the young parson," said Barbara.

Mrs. Kingsnorton was comfortably shocked.

The curate stopped in High Street at the bookseller's. The windows were decked with boxes of notepaper and envelopes, dish-papers, jars and penny bottles of ink, sealing wax, a dictionary, children's picture-books, a novel by Guy Boothby, several of Dickens' works in cheap edition, the "Strand Magazine," and tin boxes of water colours. The best bookseller in Pedley Hill could not make a living out of books alone—wisely he did not try.

He had a copy of "Selvalley Rhymes."

"I took a big risk in stocking it," he explained.

"I've been quite astonished, the number of folks coming in and buying it. It's Miss Kingsnorton being so well known."

"Not the value of the book?" suggested the curate.

"Well, sir, I don't know—I haven't read it. It's poetry, I see."

The curate laughed. He would not have the book wrapped up, and as soon as he was in the street he opened it to read. He had read very little poetry quite modern, and now he was charmed. This might not be great poetry—it probably was not more than mediocre verse, he told himself, yet it pleased him in a way he could not define, the real way, he said. There seemed to him to be a humanity and primitive simplicity in its inspiration, like a child's happiness in the world's new things, like a fresh breeze from the hills. Barbara Kingsnorton's sister had written this—Barbara herself had helped, maybe. He would rather have believed it to be her work.

Near the Bullen he had to cease reading. He had had two collisions, and the traffic was busy.

He stood a while to watch the market, for he loved a crowd of people. By the "Bull" he helped a poor old woman into the Selbridge bus, handed her heavy basket after her, and laughed at her stammered blessing. A fat man, merry after pints of ale, called in approbation, "Now, that *is* a parson!" The curate could not avoid hearing. He had not helped the old woman for that sort of flattery—nevertheless it was very pleasing.

A little crowd was gathering at the corner of Castle Street. The curate pushed his way forward with the curious, and saw a tiny scared child, with eyes red from weeping, and mouth open aghast, before so many staring faces.

"He can't talk. Where's the pleece?"

One after another spoke, arguing and pushing until the child's mouth drooped, and he sobbed again.

"It's Bloom's little lad up Castle Street, up the top, past the church."

Nobody was going up Castle Street to-day—everybody was too busy. It was scandalous to go and lose a child like this. What was the pleece thinking about? The infant wept almost unnoticed in the middle of the crush, and many were disappointed because it wasn't a fight or somebody drunk to make them laugh.

The curate pushed to the front.

"I'll take him. Come along, little man!"

He picked up the child, and strode off, the crowd parting to let him pass. He was a bachelor, but he had carried children for tired mothers on church outings, and he was fond of children. In fifty yards the child had ceased to cry—in a hundred he was beginning to enjoy himself. A pennyworth of sweets brought him happiness, and his little hand was outstretched eagerly, pointing out the dogs and horses for his new friend to notice.

Reward was not delayed. The curate had the good fortune to address himself to Mrs. Onions, who was on her way up the hill after a busy day spent in the market to fill a small basket with food and a huge curiosity with information.

"Bless my life, I should think I do know—I ought to. You don't mean to say as you're acarryin' of that child home? Lost, was he? You little tinker; what yer been up to, getting lost? He was left with my grandchild—my daughter Lizzie's baby, and she'd meet somebody, I know. You never see such a tongue as that girl's got. I'm acoming up. Mrs. Bloom's my next-door neighbour, an' a very respectable and nice neighbour

she is, an' it's me says it. I *have* had neighbours in my time."

She explained to Maggie afterwards: "We were talking away as free—I took to him in a twink, and so did your little John. Oh, my dear, he's a nice feller."

She did not add that she had watched the house, herself from the kitchen window to watch the back door, and her daughter in the parlour to keep her eye on the front, so that she might go round and hear all the news from Maggie as soon as he was gone.

"He was very nice," said Maggie. "I should have liked to offer him a cup of tea, only the place is all in such a mess, me being ill two days. Wasn't it good of him to bring the child home! It was wonderful how John took to him, he's so shy with strangers—held his little hands out, he didn't want him to go."

She turned to the boy.

"Yes, you—you young mischief!" she said.

The child laughed merrily, and ran into the corner behind the sofa. When he peeped out he was disappointed that his mother was not playing with him.

Maggie was nursing the baby, who was very cross, cutting her first tooth.

"I was ashamed of the place," said Maggie. "I never dreamed of seeing anybody like that come in. Sam quarrelled with the last curate, you know, and he stopped coming. I was very sorry—but he wasn't a nice man."

She stopped suddenly, and then darted across the room to the child.

"Come out of it, you young Turk! Good heavens! Look what he's done—all the black-lead things!"

He had opened the cupboard, and had a dirty

brush in one hand, and a black rag in the other. When he saw his mother's anger, he sat down and howled.

Maggie shut the cupboard, and strove to hush the wailing baby in her arms.

"Now behave yourself!" she commanded him. "I never saw the like of that child for mischief."

"It's health, nature, my dear," said Mrs. Onions. "You've been just the same, I've heard your mother say many a time."

"I dare say," said Maggie. "All the same, it's too much for a woman to look after children and dress 'em, keep the home nice, and herself and be a good partner to her husband, with a mere nothing of wages coming in. It can't be done. It isn't fair."

"When you've had six——"

"I'll die first! It's hard enough now."

"Ah, my dear, I used to feel like that," said Mrs. Onions kindly. "Many an hour's crying I've had, and many a time I've said I'd drown myself. And I just went on."

"Only another few shillings a week," said Maggie bitterly; "money to afford some help, a bit of rest, a chance to go out with my husband——"

"I know, I know—I've said all that. You've got to submit, first or last."

Maggie sat down and sobbed. Mrs. Onions patted her shoulder.

"We've had to go through it, thousands of us. . . ."

"Is that your book?" she said, interrupting herself.

Maggie was roused.

"No—it must be the curate's. He had a book like that. He's left it."

Mrs. Onions looked at it, and exclaimed, "Poetry!" Then she put it down as though

it were hot. Mr. Onions was shouting "Missis!" in the yard, so she had to go.

Maggie prepared to wash up the tea things. She wanted to have the place neat before the curate could come back for his book. The baby was sleepy, and lay quiet when her mother had put her in the cradle. The boy played with a box of bricks on the kitchen hearthrug; he was safe for five minutes, or even more, if Fortune were kind.

The washing up was finished, and Maggie was swilling the dishcloth in the tin bowl under the tap when John Allday came to the back door. At the sound of footsteps Maggie thought it was the curate. The blind was not down, and she saw John pass the window. She was trembling when she opened the door.

"I've brought the book back Sam lent me," said John.

She invited him in.

"Didn't he say you could keep it?" she asked.

"Yes, but it's no good to me. It's true enough what's in it, mind you, so far as it goes. A lot of us do have hard lives, through no fault of our own. I can't exactly say as I have—you do, I know. There's something far wrong with our social system, government, church, and all. But it ain't this'll put it right."

"That's what I say," said Maggie.

She was thinking that John had come to return a book which he need not have brought. Sam was gone to see the football match at Selbridge. John had known surely that Sam had gone; he must have guessed he would be out. Then his pleasure in coming must be all in seeing her.

"It's all very well a man having ideals for himself," said John. "He's bound to have, of course, and the better they are the better he is, but he

can't make ideals for other folks, and then make them change their own for 'em."

"That's how you should talk to Sam," said Maggie.

"I do, but you know——"

He shook his head and smiled. Maggie smiled, though only at her own happy excitation.

"It isn't ideals he's after to-day—it's football," said she.

The little boy had risen from play, and was pulling at the knees of John's trousers, trying to attract his attention. John patted his head.

"Come away, John, don't be a worry!" said Maggie. "It's your bedtime in a minute or two."

The child clung to John's knees, and he picked him up.

"Ah, your Uncle John spoils you!"

Maggie smiled, and the boy laughed with delight.

"It's no good standing here in the cold. Come in the sitting-room. The water's on to bath the children."

Maggie turned out the gas. Mrs. Onions went away from the bedroom window next door—there was no more to see.

The baby woke and began to whimper. Maggie took her out of the cradle, and put on a big apron to nurse her.

"You've got your hands full, Maggie," said John.

"God knows!" she exclaimed. "I could cry many a time, the way I have to keep on day and night, the house to keep clean, meals to cook, and wash up, and these two to look after. I daren't take my eyes off that young mischief—and baby has me up twice every night, and all day on—no peace. I can't wear my best boots, my feet are swollen so. You can't imagine."

"I can," said John, in sympathy. "You've

taught me. I'll admit I had no idea before, although I've heard mother say many a time."

"Nobody has any idea what torments they were as children till they have some of their own. Oh, it's cruel! And they're such helpless little creatures, you can't help loving 'em. If I could only have a nurse-girl, a girl just left school, to relieve me an hour or so a day—it wouldn't cost much—but we're so poor."

"That's the worst of it, Maggie. You mustn't be poor in this world—it's worse than being wicked."

"That's what Sam says. We're going to change all that, he says, the future's going to be wonderful—marvellous things in the twentieth century—oh, yes! But it's now, I tell him, I want a bit of help and money—and he doesn't try to make an extra shilling. He's doing greater things, he's always telling me. Humanity be hanged, if I'm not humanity!"

"Sam's an idealist, a dreamer. He wants to do good——"

"Except at home," said Maggie bitterly.

"No, no!" protested John. "Don't be too hard on him, Maggie."

"I didn't mean that," she said, rebuked; "only it *is* hard."

"It is."

The boy grew restive. He wanted to be played with. Presently he began to whimper, and Maggie threatened him with immediate bed. John pleaded for him, and went down on hands and knees to play with him on the hearthrug.

Maggie interrupted them.

"Do you know the new curate?"

"Not to speak to yet," said John. "I've seen him."

Maggie explained, and told the story of his bringing the boy home.

"This is the book. I put it on the mantelpiece out of that gentleman's road."

John stood up and took the book.

"Why, it's Miss Kingsnorton's new book of poems!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "I've heard a lot about it—I was going to buy one."

The child was annoyed at his play being stopped. John pushed him away gently.

"It's all about the place here—Selvalley, you see. Listen: 'Pie Fair,' 'The Bullen,' 'The Bristol Road'—Oh, I must get this. Ha! Here's another—'The Fat Lady.' Why that's the very one we saw at the Fair—you remember. Sam, and you, and me—you know—the Miss Kingsnortons were in the tent."

"I remember," said Maggie quietly.

"Is the curate coming back for it, do you think? I'll take it, shall I? He's in lodgings in Nickling. I can soon find him, I know."

Maggie smiled at his excitement.

"I've been waiting to tell you," she said. "He wants to start a social club, and all sorts of things. I think he's the very man for it. He was asking me, and I told him to come to you."

"Me?" said John, surprised.

"Yes. You are the one to help him. I should think he'll call and see you about it."

"You *have* let me in for something," said John, smiling. "Was there anything else you were telling him?"

"Only about you," said Maggie, and John saw that she was blushing. "You had better take the book."

She let him out of the house by the front door. They stood talking a while; she told him more about the curate's visit, and he asked eager questions. The baby whimpered. The boy struggled to get into the street, and cried when he was held

back—he became so naughty that she smacked him, and he stood sobbing quietly to himself. John forgot him until he was going; then he took out a penny for him.

"No, you shouldn't!" said Maggie.

John laughed. The child was happy again, and stood with his mother. Maggie held his hand, and they both waved to "Uncle John" going away. When he was gone Maggie hurried to prepare the baths. They had to wear clean clothes to-morrow—her husband's supper had to be cooked—there was no end to her work. She sang nursery rhymes to amuse the children—she was happy, and she was not often happy; she said she hadn't time.

CHAPTER II

"SELVALLEY RHYMES"

JOHN forgot Maggie and her troubles as soon as the front door had shut. His thoughts were for the book under his arm, and for Miss Kingsnorton and her sister. He grew impatient to read more, and at length he stopped by a bright shop window and opened the book.

Too old—not fat enough—I know—
I'm twenty stone, if I'm a bit.
Shiv'ring in the cold draught—but no,
Not worth a penny, and you'll go
And grumble, while I smile and sit,
And sit and smile in hideous din,
And smells of turf and paraffin,
And look to be enjoying it.

The first stanza delighted him. He saw it all again so well—the tent, the smoky lights, the Fat Lady on her dais, Barbara smiling mischievously. When he came to the first market stalls at the bottom of the hill the smell from a paraffin lamp increased the vividness of his memory's vision. The poem was the best in the book, for sure. It was splendid—he had been there in the tent—he remembered. He had not read any of the other poems through—no doubt they were good, but this was the best, unless there were a poem with Barbara in it. He understood why people

were talking so much about the book: it was about places they knew, and people they knew—of course it was good. He made a great resolution to buy the book and read every poem. He had never bought a book of poems in his life—nobody did, except for birthday presents to young ladies, or to be given away as Sunday school prizes. Yet he loved the woods and the fields, the year's ever-changing beauties, and music stirred him deeply. It had never occurred to him that every one is in some measure a poet in feeling, though not in expression, and that poetry, like music, is the voice of those great emotions which make glad the heart. He had always admired it, from a distance, as a sort of clever verbal jugglery. He did not know if this were fine poetry; he remembered that he knew little, and declared that it was good enough for him—he would never demand better.

John had changed greatly in his inner self during the last eighteen months. After his jump forward from obscurity he had expected to make other jumps, and his progress had become so slow that he seemed not to be moving. Disappointment came, and impatience, and intermittent melancholy. His position at Binnses was improved, and he had more money—still, he was not satisfied; he could not become foreman unless the foreman died, fifteen years hence, or more, probably—an eternity. The glee singers had no season this winter: glee were going out of fashion. One of the party had left the place, and another had been tempted into Selbridge Choral Society. John had lost heart in his singing. He refused to sing at smoking concerts, and he could not compete with the boomed professionals brought to Selbridge. His investment in the brick works was more and more successful each year, and took up much of his time, for his father was not so active now. He might some

day leave Binnses, and live by that and by the scrap-iron business, which was improving too. For a while he had had high hopes and aspirations. His father and mother spent hours in surmising what had caused his subsequent despondency. His mother's favourite theory was no nearer truth than the choosing of an effect when seeking cause.

His father confessed he did not know what to think. During the last weeks, however, his mother declared he was more like his old cheerful self, and they were comforted.

Not even the most fantastic gossip associated John Allday in any way with Barbara Kingsnorton's engagement to Mr. Hurst. Instinctively John disliked the man from the moment he first saw him at Benlows' on Christmas Day, three years before. He was too fine a gentleman, too supercilious. John felt rebelliously that he was too aggressive in his superiority. He knew very little of him. He lived in London, travelled, never seemed to work, and often came to stay with his aunt and drove over to Pedley Hill, to the "Bull" at first, and then to the Kingsnortons'. John refused to believe that Barbara had chosen this man, from among all the fine men she must know, because she loved him with that great passion which John felt in his own heart; for at the first news of her engagement John knew surely that he loved her, worshipped her with a devotion akin to reverence. He did not know that he loved only his own idealized vision of her. This great emotion stirring had never been love until his whole self cried out in anguish when he knew that she was given to one utterly unworthy—and he was as sure of the man's unworthiness as he was of his own love. He tried to reason. He knew nothing against this man, a gentleman, received at Ridgeway, accepted as an honourable suitor. It was of no

avail. Dislike became scorn, with pity for Barbara following—fierce, unreasoning passions which dominated all his being, and as immovable as the hills. At times, long awake at night, and all the world asleep, he felt that tears might come to him in his loneliness, only his manhood rebelled proudly. He could not believe that she was happy.

Barbara Kingsnorton's engagement greatly disappointed Mr. Benlow, who had striven to give her and his son every chance to fall in love sensibly with each other. Willie was permanently at home now, helping his father in the business. He was not the prodigy he had been prophesied. London had made him discontented as well as disillusioned. He had failed in the great trial. His father had paid his debts, and he was able to swagger well at home, with a few pupils at high fees, and occasional performances in public; but everybody knew he had failed. Unfortunate words of his own were quoted against him: "London is the burning fiery furnace, refining gold, and using mediocrity as fuel." Barbara Kingsnorton too was permanently at home. Elsie Benlow said to John one day, "I think she has found London out, like Willie—or it found her out." John decided that she had grown weary of her ideals; life was not decked for her happiness—had he not learnt the same thing, these many days? and in her loneliness, her gloom, she had given herself to this man not worthy to tie the latchet of her shoe. He suggested his idea to Elsie Benlow later, and she disappointed him cruelly.

"Oh, I think she likes him well enough. He's supposed to be worth a lot of money, and he's lively—thinks himself a great aristocrat—just the man she would like, don't you think?"

John blamed Elsie for his disappointment.

Sam Bloom was still his friend, though the

close comradeship had become strained. Sam was an active member of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. John was not; he thought he had no need to be, and Sam accused him hotly of selfishness. There were not a dozen trades-union men at Binnses; it was too old-fashioned in its methods, and too smoothly working ever to have need of union intervention. Sam was an extremist, a dreamer, hot in enthusiasm, and erratic. He neglected his work for propaganda—he neglected it for sport too. "A man must have some recreation," he said. He grew didactic in speech and John accused him of intolerance. John was not by nature argumentative; he was weak in repartee, and incensed when Sam defeated him, for he felt that he had been in the right, only Sam had a clever trick of speech. Then he tried silence, and Sam taunted him. Maggie sympathized, and John, in his first grief on hearing of Barbara Kingsnorton's engagement, went to Maggie for the ready sympathy he dared not ask. Maggie gave gladly, never asking why. With her he first understood the great gulf between the merry poverty of the poor and the misery of impecunious respectability. He was sorry for Maggie. He liked her little boy, his namesake and godchild, and liked to hear him say "Uncle John," in his baby way. Sam was often out when he called; there was no harm in that—Sam was so often out. John was conscious of his choosing times when Maggie would be alone, and explained to his own satisfaction that he did not care to argue with Sam before Maggie. Sam had trounced him several times thus, and his knowing secretly that Maggie was always on his side only added to his mortification.

He had heard it said often that children came as a blessing, to cement parents' love. It was a

revelation to learn from Maggie how children bring incessant work and expense, worry and exasperation, to poor homes. The knowledge hurt him, for it destroyed a treasured romance; and with it was revealed how nagging tempers and the unhappiness of mean streets were not due to base character, to the unchangeable ignorance of the dwellers, but to the grind of monotonous poverty and to never-ending hopeless work. For a while he saw none of the merriment and the revelry which only the poor enjoy.

"Thank goodness I'm a bachelor!" he told himself. Yet he was lonely as he had never been before, and yearned for more than companionship, and suffered as his passion beat its wings against its cage of hopelessness. When by slow degrees he realized that others must have suffered thus, and greater than he, his soul was filled with wonder, and presently his suffering became beautiful and precious to him.

The engagement was broken, and he rejoiced. Hope was no higher for his own cause—he did not permit himself the foolishness of hope, he said—yet he was happy. Of many rumours, he chose that which pleased him best: she had broken the engagement off. He was sure she had not been happy.

One Monday afternoon, in autumn, a slack day at the works, the men in the fitting-shop had gone home at three o'clock. John changed his clothes, had tea quickly, and went out on his bicycle. He was returning early, through the woods on the first hill-slopes beyond Nickling. The road was lonely and rather narrow—enthusiastic cyclists, arched like angry cats on wheels, chose always the lower road. John was riding gently, humming a little tune, and thinking of nothing at all; and then, rounding a curve, he saw Barbara Kingsnorton

cycling in front of him. His first desire was to overtake her at once, but he was overwhelmed with shyness, and he chose to ride behind, unseen, in adoration. The leaves came twirling round at every little wind, and rustled under the wheels; gold and brown and green of every hue slid past, and cool grey shadows filled the woods—land of enchantment, these few minutes since.

Suddenly she swerved. John gasped in pain, for she rode into the hedgebank, and fell, and lay there, very still. He put out all his strength and dashed forward.

She lay unconscious on her face. He pulled the machine off her, and turned her over very gently. Her face was white, her forehead bleeding a little from a cut among her hair. The red blood frightened him. Trembling in haste, he soaked his handkerchief in the water of the narrow ditch, and bathed her forehead. She sighed. He had never seen a beauty so wonderful. Then she opened her eyes, stared at him, frowned, struggling to understand, and at last she strove to smile. He refused to let her try to stand.

"What happened?" she said. "There was nothing in the way, was there? I must have lost my senses. I can't think what made me do it. I can't remember." She puckered her forehead. "My brain must have given way."

She laughed, and John was afraid—he had never heard her laugh so.

He put the handle-bar of her machine right, and helped to dust her clothes; then they walked on for a while. Presently she talked as though trying to forget her accident, telling John merry tales of her schooldays, holiday escapades, of London, and asking many questions about himself. When afterwards he reacted the scene, enjoying himself even more gloriously in fancy, he perceived

that she had talked only of the past. The present, then, did not hold her happiness, he said. She was not happy. Over and over he said it, and chafed at his own impotence to aid her.

He did not see her out cycling again, or walking either, except to church with her sister, although he haunted the roads, and hoped continually, until the rains came shrilly from the west.

To-night, with the book of poems under his arm, he felt that he was approaching her again. He looked for her in the market, searching eagerly, though not disappointed any time.

A crowd was gathered in the High Street, all across the road. John made for it as soon as he perceived the commotion. He was not particularly interested to learn what might be happening, and he did not run like many folk flocking out of the Bullen. Nevertheless, when he arrived, he pushed about and craned his neck, and then searched for somebody to be angry with for making him so eager about nothing.

He was going away, irritable in humour, when he saw Barbara Kingsnorton.

"What is it, Mr. Allday, do you know?" she said.

"I don't—unless it's nothing at all."

"It usually is," said she. "Isn't it stupid how people rush into a crowd like this!"

John was not sure what to say.

"That's the proper thing to say, isn't it, Mr. Allday?"

"Yes," said John, finding his courage—"*other* people, you mean."

"Of course."

She smiled.

She was going home, the same way as he, and he was embarrassed. The book saved him; he was able to walk with her while he explained that he was

taking it to Nickling, and then she was interested; she would not wish to drive him away.

"I think it's splendid," he told her. "There's one especially, 'The Fat Lady'—it must have been that night at the Fair. I was in the tent when you were there, with your sister——"

"I remember," said Barbara. "There's another one you'll know too: your father told us, Marian and me, one day in the park—he was telling us about the old days. It's called 'The Three R's':

"'Our schoolin' was o' winter nights,
Wi readin', 'ritin', 'rithmetic.'"

"I haven't read that one yet," said John.

He told her Maggie's story of the curate's taking little John home, and she asked him many questions. It was such a little way home to-night.

"We're soon here," she said, exalting him.

"I'm going to get this," he said of the book. "I didn't know it was published this week."

She turned back after they had said "good night."

"Mr. Allday, you needn't buy a copy unless you want to give one away. I've got a spare copy I'll give you, if you like."

He was awkward in his thanks, but called after her as she went, "I'll give mine away and keep yours—may I?"

He listened to the crunch of her footsteps on the gravel until she had gone round the curve. Nor rain nor snow could spoil this night's loveliness. He sang aloud, and laughed merrily at the thought of folk believing his joy to have been bought by the glass and swallowed in public-houses.

Every one in Nickling knew where the curate lodged. John received a fine welcome. He liked his host from the first moment, instinctively. He

had come, sure that he would like him, for Maggie liked him, and Barbara Kingsnorton seemed to have shared John's pleasure in the story of Maggie's little boy. John rose to a keen enthusiasm. The Church Social Club was organized, splendid in success, and with it a glee club, musical evenings, chamber concerts, nigger minstrels, rambling parties, cycling and picnics for Saturday afternoons. The room was filled with a haze of tobacco smoke; the curtains would be odorous till the washtub received them. John's tongue was parched beyond the powers of thin cocoa to assuage. Neither perceived how much they talked of Barbara Kingsnorton.

"My dear boy, I've been delighted to see you," said the curate when John was going, and John repeated it after the door was shut. Mr. Pettigo was a gentleman, and had treated him as a friend.

John went into the tiny public-house at the end of the village, and had a pint of ale in the parlour—he had never tasted better ale.

His father had gone to bed when he arrived. His mother had expected him early, and was inclined to grumble.

"I went to Bloom's," he began.

"Was Sam in?" asked his mother.

"No—I saw Maggie."

"You haven't been there all this time, have you?"

"Good gracious, no! I've been with Miss Barbara Kingsnorton, and had supper with the Reverend Something Pettigo, B.A."

He had never been prouder.

"Was it with him you had the beer?" said his mother.

He laughed aloud, until she had to smile.

"There's a parcel for you from Kingsnortons'. I've been itching to open it."

He opened the book and read his father's tale, "The Three R's." Stirred by his ardour, his mother recollected episodes of her girlhood, when Mrs. Kingsnorton used to call at her father's house. John knew her stories well, and enjoyed them again by keeping in front of her. She had been worried at the thought of his going so often to see Maggie Bloom; it was not the proper thing to do, she had decided. Now she forgot all she had resolved to say. Full of the good news of John's progress, she woke her husband when she went to bed, and was vexed because he grumbled.

She had told John, "There'll be no need for you to buy a book. It's a waste of money."

"I suppose it would be," John agreed.

He had been tempted. Then, afterwards, when his resolution came, he knew he would not dare to tell her. It was a promise to Barbara, he reasoned, and so he must keep it. He must buy a copy of the poems—they should be Maggie's Christmas present—she would treasure them.

He was so happy, and so full of thoughts, he forgot to say his prayers.

CHAPTER III

FRIENDS

BARBARA KINGSNORTON said of the curate's progress, "It's positively alarming—even the worst dressed people are coming to church." John Allday, to whom she said it one Sunday morning after service, told it everywhere, even after he had been rebuked for repeating himself too frequently. The vicar, on a Sunday early in the New Year, introduced into his sermon irrelevant and emphatic homilies on the treachery of popular success. At once the town learnt that he was jealous of his new curate. "And if it isn't that, what is it then? Of course it is," said the gossips.

The Christmas Social had been the curate's triumph: he had recited a poem about a fat man in church, in crinoline days, who put his top hat in the aisle by the pew, and he had been the fat man, his wife, the verger, a young lady, her grandma, the parson, and the hat, one after another, so quick that the audience choked and gurgled and shrieked, and the vicar had momentarily forgotten that he was the vicar. On the following Sunday the parish church had been nearly full in the morning because Mr. Pettigo was there to preach. He did not make them laugh now, but thrilled them unexpectedly —gave them funny feelings inside, like the trem-

blings in the best melodramas, only more so, explained Barbara at home. At evening service the vicar read a sermon twenty minutes to a congregation dozing. It was a fine evening, and the crowd was at the mission.

The Social Club was founded. John was invited to the first meeting, and he took other men from Binnses. Old Gentleman Binns promised one hundred pounds. He was very old now, still about in fine weather, and so erect that malicious folk talked of stays; but his face was thinner, like parchment, and his lusty vitality was gone.

One afternoon John came home early. It was a cold, raw day; he was thinking of hot toast for his tea, and he whistled merrily as he walked.

Barbara and Marian Kingsnorton were sitting at the fireside. They had been having tea; the best china was out. John, dirty from the works, was grievously embarrassed.

Marian explained. Amateur theatricals had been suggested to raise some money for the new Social Club; they had talked it over with Mr. Pettigo, and he had declared the idea was excellent; they might have local interest, and continue. The name had been suggested, "The Selvalley Players."

"There used to be famous mumming here, years ago, at Christmas-time," said she, "I've heard mother say. I'm writing something after the old style—'Saint George'—and we came this afternoon to ask your father—he remembers——"

"Not so well as I'd like," said John's father, greatly flattered.

John interrupted him.

"It's old Mr. Peacock you should see. He's played 'Saint George,' years ago."

Marian was eager to go at once. Barbara insisted on John's first having some tea.

They were fortunate. Old Mr. Peacock was

bright and ready to talk. His housekeeper assured them he was better than he had been for years. "He worries about young Mr. Bloom, his grandson," she explained. "He sits there sometimes all day brooding—never a word. I'm frightened to go in, for fear he should be gone."

John accompanied the ladies to the Toll, and then went back a little way, to a grocer's where they had a licence. He was invited to the first meeting of the new Selvalley Players. Marian and Barbara Kingsnorton had shaken hands with him, and Barbara had added her invitation to her sister's; this day was to be celebrated, not to be let pass like other days. He demanded a bottle of the best port in the shop, and went home in triumph, banged the wine on the table, sang a snatch of song, broke the cork crumbling in the neck of the bottle, patted his mother's back when she drank, and made her choke with merriment.

* * * * *

The first rehearsal was fixed for a Friday evening in February, and the performance for a week after Easter. John was now a member of the committee of the newly-founded Social Club, and was given a small part in Marian Horden's play, "Saint George." A farce was to be played, too. Barbara had said at the first meeting, "It must be farce—it's like giving children pills, and then jam after."

John was excited all the week.

On the Friday morning he lost a quarter. He had not felt well for several days. This morning he might have been in time if he had hurried after waking, but he didn't want to hurry. He was a good timekeeper at the works—a quarter lost to-day was nothing.

His mother called him as he dozed again.

"I didn't know it was late. Aren't you up yet, John?"

"No," he said irritably. "Don't worry, mother. I'm going after breakfast."

"Why didn't you tell me last night?" she said, aggrieved.

He did not feel any more inclined to rise at breakfast-time, and he startled his mother when he came late downstairs.

"I'm going to have the day off. I'll take the gun and see if the fresh air will do me good. I don't feel very grand. Sam Bloom was telling me there was a lot of golden plover over above Nickling last Sunday. I know there's some been shot."

"I don't like to see you missing your work," said his mother.

She made him feel like a guilty schoolboy caught playing truant. He was very seldom absent from work, and so seldom did he go out with the old gun that she declared the ten shillings wasted on the licence.

Thursday had been a pleasant day, promising early spring. To-day was gloomy, the sky leaden, and the air cold and raw, with no wind stirring to dispel the mist. The mud was sticky, on the roads everywhere, and John was soon tired walking His stiffness did not wear off; his head ached. The road grew worse as it came to the fringe of the woods; hoofs and wheels churned the mud, and rainwater lay in every hollow. Many pines had been felled, and the air was filled with odours of wood and rotting needles. Larks buzzed over the misty fields.

In one place the wood mounted a bank, and rabbits had made burrows innumerable. John was tempted. He put his gun on the top of the low wall and sprang over, alighted on a round stone and slipped. He fell on knees and hands in the

water of a shallow ditch, and swore as he scrambled out. His legs were soaked, and his arms nearly to the elbow. In his exasperation he refused to listen to the voice which demanded his returning home. Half a mile further would see him on the open hillslopes; he would come to no harm so long as he kept moving.

He saw no plover—the flocks had probably gone south—and he had very little sport. A wood pigeon was safe in his pocket. His only other shot had killed a rabbit, but, hit too far behind, the wretched thing had scrambled into a burrow to die.

In the distance he saw three men come out from the woods, and then two more. Presently he recognized Sam Bloom. They had had no sport. He was glad to join them, to forget his own feelings.

In a little hamlet public-house they had ale and hot punch, onions and bread and cheese. John was light-headed, and jolly with the others; but when they returned he thought they never would come to the end—he was cold and dizzy, tired out, and melancholy. A thin rain fell in silence all the way.

"I've caught cold," he said.

"Get to bed, with a hot brick wrapped in flannel," advised Sam.

John thought of the rehearsal, and summoned his failing resolution.

When he entered the house he nearly collapsed.

"Where's the golden plover?" asked his mother.

"I should have been better at work," he said, dispirited.

"I could have told you that."

She was irritable, and John resented her tone. He refused to change his clothes until he had

eaten the dinner which had gone dry waiting for him on the hob.

"I know I'm stupid!" he said angrily.

He refused to take an umbrella when he set out for the rehearsal. He hated umbrellas. As a concession to his mother he went to the back door and assured her the rain had nearly ceased. When he had gone she went out and held up her face anxiously—he did not know that.

A wet mist hung in the air. The water gurgled in the ditches. The trees dripped miserably. John was wet again when he arrived at the church schoolroom, in Nickling, for the rehearsal. It was stupid to have come all this way, he said now.

The rehearsal disappointed him. The players read their parts and tried to laugh at their own awkwardness; the play seemed to be utterly lifeless.

Those living in the town returned by train. John was standing by Elsie Benlow when the party was about to set out.

"You won't be in the wet so much if you go by train, will you?" she said.

"It's scarcely worth it," said he.

A moment afterwards he was angry with himself. He fancied she was disappointed—he was sure of it when she had gone away. All his thoughts were for Barbara Kingsnorton, and the walk back with her and Marian. When he saw the halos of the carriage lamps he called himself a fool; he had forgotten the carriage. He was too proud to wait that they might invite him to accompany them. Quickly he walked through the village, and along the muddy road. The carriage spattered him as it passed.

He was exhausted when he arrived home. His mother had gone to bed; he had hoped she would be waiting for him, with a hot drink ready. Then

he perceived a basin of gruel on the hob and a saucer over it. She had thought of him before she went. And when he went upstairs she called out to him, "Have you had your gruel?"

"Yes, mother, thank you," he said, striving all he knew to show her how he understood her love.

But in a moment his emotion was dead; he was so weary, so full of dull pain, he had no thought.

He slept heavily. When he awoke, gradually becoming conscious that his mother was calling him, he saw it was bright daylight. He was glad she had let him sleep. Then, when he rose and began to dress, he was disappointed that his heaviness was not gone from him, and he grew irritable. Before his mother he grumbled at having lost another quarter.

At the works the men's talk of the cup-tie at Selbridge reminded him that he had promised to go with Sam. He called himself stupid for having given the promise; he didn't like to break it. His mother was annoyed when he told her at dinner-time. She had expected him to have a hot bath and go to bed. "You've got a severe cold on you. Why don't you have a bit of sense?" she said, and a while later she told him he was just like what his father used to be. She might have won him to stay if she had not said that.

Crowds of men went from Pedley Hill to the match. Sam had many friends, noisy sporting men who liked beer, and John had to have rounds of drinks with them. Then he stood all the match through in a thin, misty rain, his head dizzy, and his feet chilled and damp. Afterwards they had more drinks. Sam took him home to tea, and Maggie put rum in his cup each time, and made him wear Sam's slippers.

It was nine o'clock when he went home.

"I'm all right—bit of a cold, that's all," he assured his mother.

On Sunday morning he was so stiff he could scarcely put on his clothes. The stiffness wore off after a while, and he passed the morning indoors. Mr. Pettigo's Bible-class was held in the afternoon; every member of the Social Club was supposed to be a member of the Bible-class too. To-day Mrs. Allday came downstairs from her nap after dinner, and saw that John had taken an umbrella.

"I'm frightened of him being ill," she told her husband.

Monday came. John was no better. On Tuesday he complained at the works that he felt eighty years old when he got up in a morning, and the others laughed at him. On Wednesday he was worse. He was caught in a heavy shower when he went back to work after dinner; all the afternoon he was continually looking at his watch, praying for the hour when he might get home to bed, craving with the whole force of his slow thoughts. On Thursday morning he lay too stiff to move when his mother called him. When he rose for breakfast he had to struggle to get into his clothes; his mother helped him with his vest and jacket. She wanted him to stay at home.

"I'll go to the doctor's to-morrow or Saturday, if I'm no better," he promised her.

"You ought to go to-day," she told him.

She was anxious. When she had watched him go she thought of him constantly; she could not settle to her housework.

At dinner-time she did not recognize his footsteps on the blue bricks of the yard.

"I'm going to bed," he announced.

"I'll get the doctor to come at once," she said.

He refused to have the doctor. "To-morrow,

if I'm no better," he repeated. He dreaded that the doctor would keep him in bed, or at least indoors, throughout the week-end, and to-morrow was the rehearsal—he must be better for that.

"I don't know how I feel," he said, when his mother brought his tea, at dusk. Then, in the quiet of the evening, he fell asleep. She came up at nine o'clock with a basin of gruel—Mr. Allday had just had his in bed—but when she saw he was sleeping, she slipped quietly away. She told her husband John would be better in the morning; so they both had a good night, for their minds were content. Each had been worrying and striving to keep it hidden from the other.

She called John for breakfast. He was a long time coming, she thought. At last, disquieted, she went to listen at the bottom of the stairs, and then she ran up in answer to his call.

"I can't get up," he said. "I'm ill, I think. I've been all of ashiver in the night, and now I'm sweating something awful. I don't like it."

She put on her old cloak and bonnet, and hurried for the doctor. But the doctor didn't hurry—it seemed that he would never come. She went into the front room and looked up the road, and moved to and fro about the house, unable to sit a moment anywhere. Mr. Allday came downstairs, and sat by the fire, and watched the clock. He couldn't conceal his disquietude. "He ought to be here," he said, over and over again.

"Rheumatic fever," said the doctor.

He came again in the evening, and then every day.

"You aren't to worry," he explained. "As long as the stiffness keeps on the move we're safe—if we can keep it away from the heart."

John lay in agony.

Maggie was the first caller to inquire. Sam had

heard of John's going home ill from the works, and had told her. She came at once. Sam followed her in the evening, and stayed to cheer Mr. and Mrs. Allday. The curate came on Sunday evening. On Monday the maid from Ridgeway came to ask how Mr. John Allday was. John brightened when his mother told him who had called. Towards the end of the week Marian and Barbara Kingsnorton called at the front door, and stood a few moments to chat. Then Elsie Benlow and her mother called. Men came from the works, and members of the new Social Club. The neighbours asked every morning.

"It's nice to see him so well respected," said Mrs. Allday.

Mr. Allday agreed. He was as proud as she and as anxious. He put the hassock for her feet when she sat at table, and praised her tidiness about the house, and her care. She shook his cushion for him on the arm-chair, and put the herbs ready at his hand, to burn on the little platter so that he could inhale the smoke, although she couldn't bear the stench of it.

"You're a dear old lass!" he told her.

His smile lingered after she was gone from the room, and she would come back, moments afterwards, smiling too.

One incident had to be repeated often in recollection, so great a pleasure had it brought. A wheezy, bent old woman called one morning at the back door, and Mrs. Allday prepared the usual "Not to-day, thank you," which she kept for hawkers and old clothes women.

"It ain't selling, I am," said the old woman, forestalling her. "I've brought these for the young gentleman, with my respects, an' I hope he's getting better nicely."

She stepped inside and put a cardboard box down

on the edge of the kitchen sink. Mrs. Allday was too astonished to think of keeping her out.

"He was very good to me at Christmas-time, me lying destroyed I was with the bronchitis," she explained. "I've known him years, me gathering watercress and that—I often used to be seeing him about the roads, and pass the time o' day. It was him got my grandson in at Binnses, and me being in my bed he sent me a bottle of wine—only a little it was, but it done me a power of good. There ain't many to be kind to a lone old body like me, since my man died on me. Good morning to you, ma'am. God save you kindly."

The box held half a dozen eggs.

"She stole 'em, I'll lay a penny," said Mr. Allday. "And as for the tongue on her, you'll be buying all manner of rubbish off her now, every times she comes."

"Would you have me turn her away?" said Mrs. Allday seriously.

And then they laughed together. Both were secretly more proud of their son than they would say; they told the story to every visitor.

Days passed into weeks. John grew better very slowly. One day he managed to get up and put on some clothes, but the effort was too great, and he fell on the landing at the top of the stairs. His mother and father had to put him back to bed. He came downstairs at last. A chicken came from Ridgeway for him. Maggie brought some calves' feet jelly; of all the visitors she had been the most assiduous.

One afternoon the curate came, and Barbara Kingsnorton came with him. John's father and mother were enjoying their after-dinner nap upstairs, beyond their time, and John was alone by the sitting-room fire.

"I've brought a lady, you see," said the curate

gaily. "We're going to call her Mrs. Pettigo some day."

John suffered acutely for a while. Then the aching passed, and he rejoiced; she would be nearer to him still, for Pettigo was his loyal friend.

Old Gentleman Binns came in his carriage one sunny morning, and John was able to go out by the front door and stand for a moment.

"I'm glad to see you," said the old gentleman. "Look after yourself—not back till you're better, mind."

He looked after all his good workmen in this way. A boy had come from the works every Saturday with half John's usual wages. To John, as to each man, this visit seemed a special favour for himself alone, and it delighted him. Sam and Maggie came that day after tea, and John sat up till nine o'clock; they were very merry.

Then Barbara and Mr. Pettigo called for him, and took him for a drive in the Kingsnortons' carriage. It was his crowning happiness. Afterwards in thought he had the same drive with them, many times, until fancy decked anew for him the woods and fields, in such a spring as never was in poor unimaginative reality.

Mr. and Mrs. Benlow and Elsie came one day after dinner, and drove him out for the afternoon. He sat with Elsie at the back of the dogcart, their knees together under the warm rug, the hedgerows shutting slowly behind them, and the roadway, a striped dun ribbon, rushing away underneath. Mr. Benlow liked him, he knew. Mrs. Benlow always called him "Allday," as men called him at the works—there was a quaint welcome for him in her bluntness. Once, as he sat with Elsie, the rug slipped, and they both caught it so that their heads came very close together. John felt a sudden tightening across his body; he was

embarrassed, and sat a long while silent. When he glanced at Elsie, he fancied she was self-conscious too. Afterwards, with memory stirring, he told himself he was in danger of letting pride make him foolish.

One souvenir of the drive troubled him intermittently for several days. They had tea at a country inn, and while he stood with Mr. Benlow in the yard afterwards he saw a cyclist pass—the man Hurst, who had been Barbara Kingsnorton's fiancé. John was startled. What was the fellow doing here? He had an aunt in the neighbourhood, and might be staying with her. Everybody had a bicycle—cycling was a craze. John was not satisfied with any explanation. On the way back he scanned every by-road and every distant figure, fearful that he might perceive Barbara Kingsnorton. He saw her next day on her bicycle go past the house, on her way into the country, and he was afraid, against all his reason.

Mr. Benlow had talked business before tea; he was buying bricks from the works in which John had a share, and he explained how he had started years ago. John's ambition was fired.

CHAPTER IV

THE STRIKE

IN July the great engineers' strike began. Pedley Hill was taken by surprise. It had been too loyally busy, celebrating the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, to have time to think of labour troubles. Such things had been like Arctic expeditions: they provided something to talk about, without affecting the quiet rhythm of life. The London Dock strike of 1889 had not been so interesting or so important as Mrs. Maybrick's trial. In 1893 the coal miners' strike had had no chance of being talked about against the fierce arguments on Home Rule and the wonders of the World's Fair at Chicago; and, more important than those things, a Pedley Hill councillor had run away with an alderman's servant, and had been brought back by his own wife, like a naughty schoolboy, to be officially forgiven. The engineers' strike came as a home affair, for the men at the big Selbridge works came out, and many of them lived in Pedley Hill. At Binnses the work went on quietly as it had done these many years; the men saw that a strike was no affair of theirs. John Allday's apprehensions were for Sam Bloom and Maggie—the men were out at Cadby, Stoke & Company, the big foundry. John was sorry for Maggie. He had no other interest in the strike, and went steadily about his own affairs. He had

quite recovered from his illness. At the Diamond Jubilee holiday he had taken his father and mother to Llandudno for the week-end. The weather had been grand. A ship had been set on fire in the bay at night—a novel sort of bonfire. They had never enjoyed themselves better, his father and mother declared.

The first news of the trouble came from London: engineers were demanding an eight-hour day. Old-fashioned people heard it with horror; employers cried out that it would be the ruin of the country—yet the men insisted on it. Some prophesied it would soon be over—a stupid affair—but they saw presently that it was to be a fight between the powerful trades union and the employers, federated to break its tyranny, or federated because they were tyrants in fear at last. Argumentative folk relied on the heavy cudgel of reiteration, and convinced themselves again and again. Nobody outside the union expected the men to win.

Reports came in rapidly from different parts of the country—the men were coming out everywhere. There was no rioting; the men settled down with quiet determination to win—so did the masters. In a short while Pedley Hill was about its business as usual. More groups of men stood idling in the Bullen during the day; that was all the difference to be seen, except in the strikers' own homes.

Sam Bloom called at Alldays' in the evening after the Selbridge District Committee had ordered the men to hand in their notices. Sam was recklessly enthusiastic. "Now we shall see!" he said in triumph. "To a finish this time!" He banged the table with his fist, and set the supper crockery rattling.

"That's what I'm most afraid of—a fight to a

finish. I'm sorry to see it," said Mr. Allday quietly.

Sam indignantly rejected his sympathy.

"We're in for it—we know we're in for it! It isn't sympathy we want, or charity—it's justice, a fair chance for happiness."

"It's Maggie I'm sorry for, and the children. Why should they suffer? You can't gain by it, Sam."

"Better suffer once than suffer everlastingly!" exclaimed Sam. "Isn't it better to lose in a just cause than win in a selfish one? It isn't the man who wins for himself who moves the world—it's the one who suffers. Where's your Christianity?"

Mr. Allday shook his head.

"Ah, Sam, you won't let me help you. I'm an old man now, with my infirmity on me, and I know. You're a man seeing visions—you ask for what's right and just in the world. What's the French say? 'Equality, brotherhood'—something of that, isn't it? But you'll never see it, nor your son, nor your son's son. All your life you'll strive, and win two or three souls, maybe, and disappointments beyond counting, and then what? Why, my lad, you'll die, and there'll be a mere nothing done, and your own flesh and blood left to slave."

"But something will be done—you admit that!" said Sam excitedly. "Then somebody else will carry it on."

Mr. Allday shook his head again. When Sam had gone, he sat up talking with John until Mrs. Allday had to remind them it was long past time for bed.

"If he wasn't so honest, and so simple in his way of looking at the world, as though everybody was as honest as himself, why, you could lose your patience with him easy, and then it wouldn't

bother your head. Only when I think what a fine man he'd have made, how he could be getting on, into a nice house, with a bit of garden to it, and a little servant lass to mind the children, always saving a bit and creeping higher—oh, it worries me."

"There's got to be all sorts, I suppose," said Mrs. Allday. She was tired.

"Mr. Allday smiled.

"Well, mother, that's as may be," said he. "It's very kind of the rogues and vagabonds to keep us from having to take their places—very kind of 'em."

John laughed, and his mother turned out the gas to hurry them.

Most of the men at Binnses had friends or relatives among the strikers. A few of the reckless younger men talked of striking here, but they had no following. There was no union to support them. Fifteen shillings a week strike pay was not much; still, it was better than nothing, thought the married men who had families to keep. There was no fun in a strike for them. Even if they managed to win they would have lost in victory; it would take years to make up the total wages forfeited.

They were startled one morning by the sudden roar of the steam bull. Men dropped their tools, and went out of the shops to see what was the matter. Then the news came. Old Gentleman Binns wanted to see the men. He was waiting at the top of the steps by the engine-house door, the manager on one side of him, and the grimy engineman standing behind. His coat was tightly buttoned, as usual, his top hat glittered in the sun, and his thin, gloved hands rested on the gold knob of his cane. He was in his ninetieth year, very frail now, and stooping, the ruddiness gone from

his face, and his eyes sunken, though sparkling yet.

"Let me see *my* men. All who have been here since they were boys!" he called out. His voice was not so loud as of old, though very clear. He smiled at the great show of hands. He knew the men by their names, and their histories too, and as he told the history of the works he called to them for confirmation. "I'm too old to change now—many of us are," he told them. "I want my men round me to the last—all these years we've been together——"

He finished amid a tumult of cheering. A committee was formed at his suggestion to come to him and talk over what improved conditions they might adopt throughout the works. John Allday was elected to represent the young men among the fitters.

Discontent and jealousy existed, as everywhere, but there was no danger of a strike. Even the firebrands ceased to talk of it, until several weeks later, when the old gentleman was taken ill. When he was gone, the works would belong to his grandson, who never came down from London. He would probably sell the place, or turn it into a limited company; it would be no better than anywhere else then—worse, perhaps. The men dreaded that. Some talked of striking at once, but the older men quelled them; they would be loyal to the old gentleman while he lived. Every morning one of the foremen, elected specially, went up to the house to ask how the master was. His report was the greatest topic of the day.

John's mother called to see Maggie occasionally.

"It's my duty to cheer her up a bit," she said. "There's the poor thing got two children to look after and feed, and herself and her husband—and only strike pay coming in. It's a shame!"

She had no sympathy for the strikers. "They've brought it on themselves," she said to Sam, and overcame him by sheer volubility. When she went to see Maggie she put away her hard words, and always took a basket of good things, a cake specially baked, or other dainties.

She bought a pig's head one day, and made brawn—two moulds, one of them to take to Maggie. The same day she slipped on the wet stones of the yard, and John had to go on the morrow to take the present.

Maggie could scarcely thank him.

"You're too good," she repeated several times. "If it wasn't for the children's sakes, I should be ashamed to accept so much."

They sat talking a while. John took the little boy on his knee and played with him.

Presently Sam came in, nodded to John curtly, and sat down heavily on the sofa.

"What's the matter?" said Maggie.

"Nothing, of course—starvation to face—that's nothing!"

John was alarmed, and uncomfortable. He put the boy down, and took his hat off the table, ready to go. Sam picked up something from the rug.

"Who's throwing sixpences about the place?" he said.

The little boy went across to him, and held up his hand for the coin.

"I gave it him to play with," said John, and he felt his ears burning. He did not wish them to notice the sixpence till he had gone.

Sam held it out.

"Give him a ha'penny for fun, if you like. We don't want charity."

John refused to take it. Sam pressed forward, holding out the coin, and in a moment Maggie plucked it from his fingers.

"Don't be silly, Sam—it's the child's!" she told him.

He was silent for an instant.

"So I'm silly!" he said quietly. And then of a sudden his anger burst out. John was startled, then angry, and in a moment he and Sam were shouting at each other. The children were terrified.

Then John perceived Maggie's face, framed as though in a halo of mist, and he was startled by the intensity of its suffering. He retreated, and made a great effort to choke the anger in his throat.

"I'm sorry, Sam. I didn't mean any harm," he said huskily. And he rushed from the house.

He heard Sam's voice calling after him as he went, but he did not distinguish the words. He dared not return; he could not trust himself, even with the recollection of Maggie's face imploring him.

He said nothing at home, and went out on his bicycle, striving to forget in the cool air of dusk.

When he returned he found Sam and Maggie sitting at supper with his mother and father. Sam rose and came across to him.

"John, old boy, I'm a villain. Forgive me!"

They shook hands, and Mr. Allday began to tell one of his old stories so that they might forget. Mrs. Onions' daughter was looking after the children, so Maggie was able to stay a while.

Week after week the strike went on. People not directly interested began to look upon it as a monotonous incident which had lost its novelty; many were disappointed because it had not provided some wild sensation, as they had secretly hoped it would. The strikers themselves lost heart; courage is most difficult to keep in mere passivity. At first the district committee had good news at every weekly meeting. Reports

came in of firms conceding the men's demands—very few of these reports were true. One real victory in Sunderland gladdened the men's hearts, but it was one only, and there were so many hopes which came to naught. Worst of all, the works were not empty—non-union and apprentice labour kept the machinery from rusting. The master did not feel the pinch—their daily menu was the same—while the men saw their children crying for the dainties which were now beyond price. Bitterness and discontent grew daily. The women talked of committee-men growing fat, with twelve shillings a day, and a mere nothing to do, except to encourage the men to live with their families on fifteen shillings a week, and go on hoping. The story was false, yet it passed for truth often, with many distortions. The men began to turn on one another, seeking one to blame. At home they were gloomy and irritable. The old happy Saturday nights, the marketing, the Sunday happiness, the joint for dinner—all that was gone.

Sam Bloom came one day when only Mrs. Allday was in. He broke down when she chided him.

"Oh, what a shame!" she told her husband. "'We daren't give in,' he says. I could ha' cried. I did."

And so the fight went on, week after week.

John Allday's luck came in the early autumn. He left it to his mother to tell Sam and Maggie; he was ashamed to go rejoicing to them when they could not rejoice. His father had to seek a new investment for some of his capital, and after much talking, and thinking by the fireside, he invested it in the scrap-iron business in which they already had a share.

"I've known Joskins since he was a lad," he explained at the family council. "He's all right, but he's got no capital and no push. There's a good

thing in it. You can stay on at Binnses till the strike's over, and things settle down—till the winter, anyway. And then we'll see how we go."

John went to the yard one dinner-time when the gates were being repainted, and he was so proud, and so anxious to see the sign completed, to observe its effect, he stayed all afternoon.

It made a grand show:

JOSKINS & ALLDAY,

MACHINERY MERCHANTS.

All kinds of new and second-hand Machinery.

Steam Engines, Stamps, Presses, Shears, and Metal Working Tools.
Scrap Iron and Steel.

As he was admiring it for the last time before going home, he saw Sam Bloom on the other side of the road.

"You are the big man now," said Sam, when he came across. "Do you want to take any hands on?"

John was embarrassed.

"Do you want to come in?" he ventured.

Sam patted him on the shoulder.

"Don't patronize me, John!" he said. "We've been good friends a long while, but I should hate you if you tried that on. That's your way"—he pointed to the painted gates—"mine's in the gutter here. I'm a striker, a rebel, and I've got to see it through. By God—nobody seems to notice!"

John was too bemused to reply at once. He called to Sam as he went away, but Sam strode on, with his hands in his pockets, and never turned. John was troubled; for a while the pleasure of

his afternoon was gone; then came pity, bringing its own happiness.

He was so busy at the yard in his spare time, he was not often at the Social Club. The vicar and his curate were open enemies now; every afternoon tea table had some story of their differences, and the ladies collected these tales with much more zest than ever they had in the collection of old china. The vicar had no sympathy with the strikers—the curate had much, not because he upheld their cause, or their employers'; they were fellow mortals in distress, and he worked to give them comfort; he opened the Social Club during the day, and visited constantly. Rumour had it that Mr. Kingsnorton was inclined to take the vicar's view; he was a big shareholder in the Selbridge Iron and Steel Company, and he believed that the curate was encouraging the strikers to hold out. John heard the story first from Mr. Benlow, one evening he was there to supper.

"You see, Mr. Kingsnorton's sympathies can only go in the way of his own interests," said Mr. Benlow. "It's perfectly natural for us to imagine from that he can't be pleased with Pettigo. And Pettigo wants to help those who need most help—he doesn't ask who deserves it. I heard him say once, 'I'm not a judge—I try to be charitable instead—it's better.' And so it is, but it's harder. He's finding that out, I'll be bound."

"He'll never get Barbara Kingsnorton to see it," said Mrs. Benlow.

John was startled.

"I'm afraid not," said Mr. Benlow.

"No fear!" exclaimed Willie. "She told me, not so very long ago, she believed you could do a lot too much for the proletariat. It's true, you can—they're a thankless lot. He's a nice fellow, Pettigo—not half bad—but I'm afraid he's finding

himself on the rocks. That reminds me. Guess whom I saw the other day? I forgot to tell you. Frank Hurst—Barbara Kingsnorton's old inamorata. He passed me on a bicycle. I'm sure it was Hurst. I shouted after him, but he took no notice—and he must have known it was me—he didn't want to see me, I reckon. I saw Barbara Kingsnorton, too, the same afternoon—not the two together, mind you; all the same, you know, it made me think."

John was wretched all the evening.

It was several days later, at sundown, he saw Barbara Kingsnorton pass the house on her bicycle. Impulsively he prepared to set out after her. A tire had to be blown up, and he had to get his lamp, so that he lost time, and it was long before he came in sight of her. Then he was ashamed. He told himself he had no right to spy, and he was afraid—it were better not to know. When he had turned back, and it was too late to follow, he was tormented miserably.

He had set up Barbara's image as his idol, in a shrine of his own delights. Now he dared not enter. Fear stood at the door, with doubt on the other side. The lamp was dim, and flickering shadows filled the place.

CHAPTER V.

STRESS

THE virginia creeper, of which Mrs. Onions was so proud, turned from the summer green to rich crimson against the garden wall, and the robins flitted across the gardens on shortened misty afternoons. The first snow came, white herald of winter—only a little fall, a foretaste for the season. It came after a red lowering dawn, with mottled clouds gathering, swept into a dull leaden mass by the east wind, bitterly cold. Then of a sudden the snow was gently driven across the air, faster and faster, and whirling in the eddies. The hens all made for the pen, except one, a white one, and then it dashed to and fro before the wire netting in desperation to get in, and too excited to remember that the opening was farther on. The last chrysanthemums nodded with their load of wet. The holly bushes became real Christmas bushes, white powdered, with berries glinting red. The storm was over in an hour, all the snow melted, and the soil black and sodden; the hens were out again, pecking across the ragged gardens. But the first snow had fallen—winter was in.

The strikers were out still, doggedly resolved to starve rather than give in. Very few had any hope of victory now; they had lost so much, they would never make up the wages lost; many had lost courage, and energy too; only the strength

of passivity remained. One of the members of the Social Club, a striker, explained to Mr. Pettigo that he was learning to be a very good player at draughts, and that was all the good the strike was likely to do him. From despair the men were passing to indifference.

Maggie Bloom's pride was grievously hurt in accepting so much charity, especially from Mrs. Allday and John. She would have starved rather than accept it for herself, but she could not let the children suffer. And she knew there were many worse than she. Every week, when Sam went to the district meeting, the day the strike pay was distributed, there was a collection for those who had large families, young children to feed, and doctors' bills to pay. Sam gave willingly, although he could not afford to give, and Maggie never complained. John Allday had no knowledge of the depth of her pride's suffering. She had nothing to give in return, save her own devotion, and that was so easily given, and so willingly, it seemed to her as nothing.

It was more and more difficult to make ends meet, and she would not let herself get into debt—she would have had no mental peace. Sam laughed at her punctiliousness, though secretly he was proud of her; but his moods were as uncertain as a bat's flight at dusk. Maggie grew afraid when he was gloomy. Once he talked of suicide, and terrified her. She did her best to cheer him, but her worries made her irritable at times, and sharp words slipped out so glibly and so thoughtlessly, and were so difficult to recall.

In his worst moods Sam railed against the whole fabric of society, and startled Maggie with his violence. Occasionally he came home drunk and then would follow a fierce repentance. He would hand all his strike pay to Maggie, and receive

only a shilling from her for himself—and out of that he would save coppers for the children's money-box on the mantelpiece.

His grandfather had no patience with his views. The old man was not able to climb the hill now, he had not breath enough. Sam did not often go to see him. Since the beginning of the strike the visits had ended in high words. Sam had been worried afterwards, and in repentance, taking Maggie's advice, he had returned to crave the old man's pardon, only to come back to Maggie more angry than before. "He's too old—I can't explain anything to him—he won't listen to anything," he said. Maggie always went to Otter Lane when she was in the town, and had time to call. The old man was always pleased to see her. He liked Maggie, and was very kind to the children, although they were afraid of him. Maggie never failed to plead for Sam, and came back worried after every visit, her only gladness being in the thought of duty done. The image of the old man haunted her for hours after she had left—he was so bent and withered, his flesh colourless, his voice quavering, thin, and reedy, and his breathing like the sighing of a night wind in a ruined house—he no longer seemed to be human, like herself. He often talked of God, in a queer familiar way, as though he knew Him well—"As though He lived next door," said Sam. . . . "I'm so near the Master now," he explained. "Every day I listen for the call—it won't be long." Maggie felt a choking in her throat, and then tears starting.

Every night she prayed for the strike to end, and for Sam to succeed, for the children's sakes. She prayed earnestly, and as humbly as though she had dared to ask for half the world to be given into her keeping. Sam never prayed now, and sometimes she said her prayers secretly in bed,

because he scoffed, and she couldn't bear to hear it. By and by she began to doubt—she had prayed hard, and God didn't seem to listen.

She said to Mrs. Onions one day: "I'm sure I've prayed often enough for the strike to end."

"Ah, my dear—prayers don't seem to work nowadays," said Mrs. Onions. "Perhaps they never did. Perhaps it's because when you're praying for one thing, somebody else is sure to be praying for th' opposite, and your prayers just knock one another's heads off. I know Mrs. Banks now—she prayed night and day for a boy when she was going to have her first, and she was a good un at it—practised at the Wesleyan prayer meetings—and it was a girl. It was more—she had three girls in succession. 'I ain't going to pray again,' she told me, 'and I ain't going to have any more either.' And she hasn't. . . . All the same, I must say as it does relieve you, now and again, to say your prayers."

"Like swearing, to let the steam off," suggested Mr. Onions, who had been listening.

Maggie laughed. She would have been shocked, a while before.

She ceased to pray. Then she felt guilty, and recommenced; but the intensity was gone; she did it as a duty, without hope.

At the end of November the baby was taken ill—bronchitis was threatened. Maggie was unwell, and found it hard to keep up. Her nights were broken; she woke with horrid starts, and lay distressed by the baby's coughing; and time after time she had to jump out of bed to put the child straight in her cradle, and cover her up warm. Food had to be prepared. Downstairs the morning fire had to be lit, in the cold, a thin draught blowing under the door, her legs shivering, for she hurried about half dressed. She began to cough too.

And this was only the beginning of the winter, she told herself in despair.

December came in. The weather had been very stormy for a week, the winds driving the water streaming from the overflowing gutters on the roofs. Then the skies cleared; the moon was up early, and there was frost. To-day was fine, with a little wind stirring, bitter cold. The hoar frost melted on twigs and palings, and the drops fell to make patterns on the rime below, until it was gone, and the earth seemed to exude water everywhere. The last pansies and chrysanthemums lay bedraggled in sheltered corners in the gardens; red daisies and auriculas had rashly ventured out, and here was the frost coming. The sun had a red face, and there were no distant hills.

Maggie wept as she moved to and fro about the house and strove to work to keep herself from thought. Her reflection in the overmantel glass startled her; she had smeared her face with black marks, in brushing away her tears. Sam had been in a bad humour when he came downstairs. Maggie had a headache and was irritable; she suffered constantly from headaches now. The quarrel had been very short, though bitter enough, and she wept at the recollection of her sudden flash of temper. She had been exasperated, she declared, before her own accusing self. And now she accused Sam of indifference and of selfishness. "You needn't expect me in to dinner," he had told her as he went moodily out of the house. She hoped fervently he would repent. The thought of dinner worried her; she did not know what to prepare. As the time drew near, and her fears told her he would keep his word, she resolved to have a cup of tea and some toast. When Sam came she would cook dinner—it might help him to forget.

He did not come. She gave the children their

dinner, and put them to bed for their midday sleep, the little boy with a white fluffy dog in his arms to comfort him, a present from Uncle John, his sister with a rag doll. They cried a long while to-day before sleep came. Then at last Maggie made her pot of tea; she was too listless to make toast—the fire was not suitable—she had forgotten it in attending to the children. She didn't want to eat, she was too wretched, too lonely.

She sat a while after her tea; she had no energy to work. Presently her thoughts stirred. This was the same room in which she had lived as a girl: she remembered how the cupboard door had swung out above her head, and then against her face—how many long years ago? And now her babies played here; these toys, scattered about the floor, were their's. Would she be here all her days, and never rise? Hope was dying. Her mother used to sit here, in this same chair, resting after dinner, while she ran off to school, after doing reluctant housework. She never heard from her sister now. *She* had married badly, and Maggie had despised her for it. How bitterly Fate had punished her, thought Maggie; and slowly in souvenirs of misfortune her thoughts came to John Allday. What a long, raging disappointment had been her's when she had waited for him, after Binnses' bonfire, when she had kept her sixpence to spend with him. He had not been able to come—he hadn't tried as she would have tried. She recollected how she had startled him with her kiss—she recollected so vividly—and then of a sudden she felt herself go hot with shame. Yet she could not stay the fierce ardour of her thoughts; she had no strength to try. But in a little while her sorrow came again. One night, under frosty stars, so many years ago, it seemed, Sam had told her, "I'm a wild creature, Maggie, but I'll do my best," and he had held her

in his arms tight, and carried her over the ice-barred water of a sunken lane. He had loved her then; his heart had startled her, thumping against her breast. Perhaps he had done his best, she thought wistfully, and her sympathy went out to seek him. Perhaps she had brought him misfortune. She would have brought John misfortune, maybe, and John was destined for success. . . .

The children cried. She had to go to them and get them up—there was no more time for thought.

She had not been out to-day, so she walked up and down in the garden to give the children the fresh air. She did not like to go away from the house, lest Sam should return soon. His delay increased her anxiety. The smoke from the chimneys rose straight in the air, and then drifted gently over to the south-west; the tiny breeze seemed to bite like a great rushing wind. The sun went down in a lurid haze, and the sky's western hue faded rapidly to the cold blue of night. The moon was up, a pale silver fragment in the heavens. The baby cried, and Maggie had to take her indoors—she couldn't keep warm.

She had no appetite, though she was faint from want of food. Her tea revived her. She was sitting after it, tormented by her anxiety for Sam, when John Allday came.

"I've brought you a chicken," he announced. "I thought it would be nice, especially for you and the children—nice and light, you know—do you good. Mother told me you weren't very well—she hoped you would be better."

Maggie protested that he was too good to them.

"Bless your life, it's nothing!" he assured her. "I just thought I would bring it. I've taken one home. You know, Maggie, I'm doing very well—this new place of ours is going like one o'clock.

I don't think I shall see the New Year at Binnses. I'm so busy—and there's a difference in profit, I can tell you, working for your own self."

Maggie suffered a throe of bitterness. It was gone in an instant. She knew that John would never boast to cause her humiliation.

He stayed only a few moments. The children were disappointed, especially the boy; he always expected Uncle John to play with him. Maggie played to comfort them, and for a while forgot everything but their pleasure. It was the first time to-day she had joined in their fun with zest. She kept them up long after their usual bedtime.

"Father will be here in a minute or two," she told them.

He came at last. She was very tired, and faint with anxiety. "Thank God!" she exclaimed, when she heard his footsteps outside. But when he came in, she was afraid—he was not sober.

He saw her fear, and bullied to hide his shame:

"Well? You've seen me before, I hope."

"Yes!" she said bitterly—"like you are now. I have—God forgive me!"

"That's nice for a welcome, that is! God forgive you for what?"

"For despising you!"

She heard her own words, and was horrified, even in the swift, incalculable instant before they were uttered. They seemed to be spoken by another self than her's. She knew instantly how useless it would be to try to change them, and she was afraid of her own anger and her tears. The children's bath was on the hearth, and she busied herself with their preparations for bed.

Sam astonished her with silence. When, after a while, he spoke, he startled her.

"What's that thing—that? Who's brought it?"

She looked in the direction of his finger's pointing.

"You needn't call it *that thing,*" she said, stung by his tone. "You can see it's a chicken. John Allday brought it."

"What—him?" exclaimed Sam furiously. "I'll throw the damned thing away! I won't have his damned charity—his damned charity! D'y'ear?"

He rose unsteadily. Maggie had the baby in the bath, and could not move.

"Sit down, and behave yourself!" she commanded.

To her surprise he obeyed, and he said not another word. She was afraid of him then; his silence was more ominous than rage.

Sam's inner self was torn in conflict of black anger and shame. He had spent precious money in public-houses. His quarrel with Maggie in the morning had tormented him all day, in fits of anger against her, and remorse, and wild wretchedness; and drink after drink had only deepened his misery and his formless raging.

He had met the district secretary of the union in the morning, and had had drinks with him. The fatal words seemed to be eaten into his memory:

"Our executive council knew from the first that the thing would be an inevitable failure; but the extremists, the London men, got the upper hand of the society, and determined to fight the employers at once, and get an eight-hour day, or at least to show 'em their determination to get it later, if not now."

Sam had promised secrecy before he was told the news. The men did not know.

"We daren't tell it yet," the secretary had said, "and we daren't give in yet. We must try to make some terms."

In his disillusion and his anger Sam had been near to tears. As he thought now of the words, his fists clenched, and he heard himself growl—he knew the sound to be that of a man who had been drinking, and had lost control of his faculties. He watched his own drunken self, without force to check it.

When Maggie was gone with the children he rose and went softly to listen to them upstairs. He had not kissed them "good night"; they had been afraid, and had not called him. In his blind disappointment he said that Maggie was teaching them to hate him. As he turned from the door he perceived the chicken on a dish on the table, and he trembled with a hot burst of jealousy. John Allday, flaunting his new prosperity, had been here with his charity, patronizing him, scorning him. "Afraid to come when I'm in!" he cried in silent anguish, and shouted down in thought the protest of his inner self. A wild desire came to throw away the chicken, to destroy it—he would not have the fellow's charity. He crossed to the table; but he had not the insane courage for the deed—he was afraid.

His glance moved guiltily about the room. There was a little pile of coppers on the mantelpiece. Without a thought he obeyed the fierce impulse which urged him to take them. He listened. Only his heart-beats sounded in the quiet house. Then he opened the cupboard, took a jug, and went out softly at the back door.

He was back again, with the jug half filled with beer on the table before him, when Maggie came downstairs. Kind words would have brought him to passionate remorse, for of all his black mood there remained only the truculent brutality of shame.

Maggie was startled by the sight of the jug.

"You haven't been out getting beer?" she exclaimed, distressed by the thought of the money wasted.

"D'you think it's milk?" he said, blustering.

"But where did you get the money from?"

"Off the shelf. It's my money."

He took up the jug, and drank.

"What?" she cried. "Oh! Not that? Not that? It's to pay the bread bill!"

"Don't pay!" he said roughly.

Maggie sank into the easy chair, and burst into tears.

"God help us!" she cried.

He was afraid of her sobbing, and had to summon all his brutality to save him from remorse.

"As if God'll hear you if you make that row, or any other row!" he told her. Fear lashed him to rage. "You should be rejoicing because you're poor—that's what the Church tells you, don't it? Christ was poor, so that He could feel for us, understand our sufferings—quite so—and what has His Church done for us? Told us to bear our poverty, because it's a holy thing, because Christ was poor. Is that any consolation? As soon as the poor come to understand—Christianity dies. The Devil's advice is better."

He stood up and shouted to prevent her speech:

"Who's your true churchman? The rich, of course. Here's money for the Church. Go and preach consolation to the poor, and keep 'em poor—don't let 'em get dissatisfied. Promise 'em Heaven, as much as you like, but no Earth. Give 'em charity—never refuse charity—but wrap it up in humiliation. Look at John Allday, coming here with his damned charity!"

Maggie shouted him down:

"He's better than you this minute! I wish to God you were like him!"

The unexpected retaliation startled him, and added to his rage; his whole self trembled in its horrid passion.

"I dare say—I dare say you do!" he cried, all his bitterness going into the repetition. "He's here a damned sight too often for an honest man."

Maggie's face flushed a dark crimson.

"Can't I read it in your own face?" he cried. And as a new jealousy surged in him, torturing him, he raised his clenched fists and advanced upon her.

"You—you——"

A mist came before his eyes. His tongue stuttered. Horrible words rose in his thoughts, but some force seemed yet to hold them back. Maggie stood by the table, very close to him now, her face suddenly gone white and haggard.

"You—you——"

"Coward!" she said quietly.

The word struck him like a great pain. He shouted incoherently, and swung his fist. It fell with a soft thud on her neck, and the chair went clattering on the fender as she dropped.

For an instant he stood shut in a wild agony of horror. Then he was beside her, lifting her tenderly in his arms.

"Maggie! Maggie! Darling!" he called, sobbing. His tears fell on her face as he kissed her, passionately calling her to life. . . .

Upstairs the children wailed, startled out of their first sleep. . . .

He loved her, she knew, in his own wild fashion, and he was her's, as she was his, indissolubly. When they went to bed, early lest they might become too hungry after their scanty meal, he slept almost at once, lying nestled against her like a child. Her arm grew benumbed about his neck, but she

bore the discomfort, lest in moving she might rouse him—and she was long awake. The night was cold. Along the railway bank the telegraph wires hummed in eerie monotone. The roofs glittered like burnished steel under the low moon.

CHAPTER VI

WINTER

SAM awoke, in Maggie's arms. The night was very dark, darker than when they had come to bed—the moon was gone down long ago. A cock crowed hoarsely to announce the coming dawn. Maggie was asleep, breathing very gently; once she gave a little moan. Sam feared to move; he wanted her to sleep, to take all the rest she could. Presently the baby stirred, and said "Mam—mam" quietly, and whimpered a little, the sound falling to silence like a tiny voice heard far away. Sam felt a thrill of happiness. Then gradually his thoughts faded, and he fell asleep again.

At breakfast they talked quietly of the new start they would make. Sam was determined to leave the union. "I might start on my own, before very long, like John Allday," said he. "There's the bicycle trade, for instance. . . ." His quick fancy was full of schemes, and Maggie was as eager to listen as he to talk. They were happy this morning, courteous to each other as they had not been for months—it was like a holiday morning, they said.

There was to be a meeting of the district committee and the men to-night at Selbridge.

"I don't intend to go behind their backs," Sam explained emphatically. "I'm going to tell 'em straight what the secretary told me—I know

I promised him I wouldn't, but it's the men's turn to be considered first—and then I'm going to tell 'em what I think o' the whole thing. To-morrow I shall be back at work. If they won't start me, I'll go on the railway, or I'll go to Binnses; I can get on there, I know. . . ."

"I'll tell you what, old lady," he said, after breakfast. "I'll take the gun and go out for a long walk, and think things out a bit, get my ideas all shipshape, ready for action. I might have a bit of luck, bag a couple of rabbits or something."

"What about the chicken?" said Maggie.

"Well, I might not be back early, and we don't want it to spoil, waiting, do we? I'll take something to eat in my pocket, and we'll have the chicken to-night—dine at quality hours. What do you think?"

"If you like."

She cut some cheese sandwiches for him, and made a packet of them for his coat. He had only three-pennyworth of powder in the old flask.

"I must be like the Frenchman—not shoot at the running birds—wait till they stop," said he.

He had made the worn old joke many a time. This morning it was like a new one.

He was nearly ready to go when Mrs. Onions came in, excited with her news:

"Poor Old Gentleman Binns is gone at last!"

"What—not dead?" said Maggie.

"This very minute."

"What do you mean—this minute?" said Sam.

Mrs. Onions was disconcerted. She hated exactitude in narrative.

"Well, he was dying this morning, first thing, not expected to last the day. That's as true as I stand here. The milkman—not our milkman—him as comes to Smith's—he's told Mrs. Smith, and he come past Binnses this morning. 'Any minute he'll

be gone,' he says. So you may be sure he's just about gone and done it."

"Poor old gentleman!" said Maggie.

"Rich old gentleman, you mean!" said Mrs. Onions, with a snort. "I should like a couple of handfuls o' what he's left—and they wouldn't be missed."

"What about the works now?" said Sam. "That's off, Maggie. It'll never be the same again."

"Just what Mr. Onions was saying last night," agreed Mrs. Onions. "'There'll never be another place like that,' he says."

"Never," said Sam. "There may be as good, better even, some day, mind you, in the future, but not on the same basis. There'll have to be a mutual loyalty created; there's none now—it's dead; it was due to ignorance, perhaps. All the same, I aren't sure if it wasn't better than the distrust and jealousy of short-sighted intelligence."

Mrs. Onions didn't understand.

"Ah—true enough! You're talking now," she said impressively. "Sure, it's all th' old uns gone now, except your grandfather, and him th' oldest o' the lot. He'll feel it when he hears, I know."

"I might call and break it to him. It isn't the news to throw at a man his age."

"Yes—you go, Sam; I should like you to," said Maggie. "He'll be pleased to see you, I'm sure."

Mrs. Onions sat down on the sofa and prepared to give up the whole morning to the memory of Old Gentleman Binns. Sam kissed the children, and then Maggie, and laughed at Mrs. Onions' surprise. Then he left the house, and walked rapidly down the hill.

His grandfather was still in bed when he arrived.

"I went up a minute ago, and he was asleep,"

said the housekeeper. "I'll wake him if you want to see him special."

"No, it doesn't matter. You can tell him I called. I wanted to tell him about Old Gentleman Binns—he's very near gone, I hear. I don't want my grandfather to get a shock."

"Bless your life, Mister Sam, there's no shock he'll get. I was telling him the very latest news o' the old gentleman when I took him his cup o' tea this morning. I had a big argument wi' Mrs. Brewer next door yesterday as th' old gentleman wouldn't last the day out, an' she wanted to crow over me because he's done it, as if an hour or two over makes any difference. . . ."

She was aggressively loquacious.

"My grandfather is asleep, you say?" said Sam.

"Yes—he sleeps best part of his time, dozing and dozing. He's lived so long, you see, there ain't anything new to keep the life in him. Life's the same thing, over and over, work and worry, and disappointment, with a bit o' pleasure now and again to keep you at it—ain't it, Mister Sam? He's tired out, poor soul—and so he sleeps, hour after hour, dozing away in his chair, scarcely ever a word to say. I'm afraid he ain't for long now, Mister Sam. It don't seem natural to see him—all th' old uns took in turn, and him forgot—an' scarcely a breath o' life in him, only now and again. He talks to himself sometimes—it sounds just as though there was something in there with him, a something we couldn't see, unnatural."

Sam was conscious of the odour of whisky.

He looked round the room, so untidy now, so dear to him in the recollections which Time had gilded. He had not been happy here as a boy not often, nor as a young man; yet it had been all he knew of home. His grandfather's long churchwarden pipe was on the mantelpiece, and his carved

snuffbox, unused these many years. His spectacles were in their case on the heavy Bible. Sam had never seen the Bible dusty as it was now. His emotion was tinged with the bitter-sweet of faded memories. . . .

The frost was still on the ground. The sun was pale in a mottled sky of grey, and Sam felt the cold air nip his ears as he walked sharply out beyond the Toll. He was happy this morning; yesterday he had said in his heart he had forgotten what happiness was. Yesterday he would have seen only his own despair mirrored in the bare winter countryside; now he saw its quiet loveliness—the greens of stained mossy trunks, of glossy ivy, of cabbages standing bravely on the white ridges across the ice-barred flood water—the laced birch twigs against the sky—the pale mist on the woods—the hedge, at hand, unheeded in its sober splendour of russet beech leaves, and haws in glinting clusters, and mossy stones, and dead grasses, with red bramble coils, and the wan green stems of the wild rose trailing. The furze bushes crouching on the hill slope seemed as much alive as the grey sheep there. On the hill crest to the south a row of pines stood boldly, like trees in a Japanese painted landscape. A hedge sparrow, perched on a bush, called "peek-peek," and shuffled its wings restlessly, and then, when Sam came too near, it flitted along the hedge before him. A dead mouse lay at the roadside, its white belly to the sky, and its feet curled up pitifully. "Poor little thing!" said Sam, and he pushed it gently with his foot among the grasses, safe out of the way of crushing wheels.

The road entered the fringe of the woods, and then mounted by a clearing. A rabbit darted across the way. Sam dared not fire here; a keeper's cottage was at hand, and the scrape of a spade

told of somebody at work. A little stream gurgled beyond the hedge, and titmice acrobats performed merrily in the trees. A cock crowed. A few yards farther on Sam saw him perched boldly on the gate-post. A pheasant called in the spruce plantation behind the house.

Sam walked rapidly, making upwards. At the crest he halted for a moment. Behind him the hedgerow was all picked out with pale vermilion points where the haws caught the sun. Before him was the rolling country of the hills, mile after mile, scattered copses of stunted trees, stretches of tussocky grass and sedges, and narrow pools, the hedges crouching low beside the roads for the winds to leap them easily.

A black copse stood in a fold in the hills, and against it was a grey house, of stone, with ivy on its walls, a trim lawn before it, and clipped box hedges. A tumbling brook rushed past its garden foot. Sam stopped to admire the contrast of the wild torrent and the air of ease, of well-being, of wealth and order in the great house, with its chimneys reeking gently, and good food cooking in its kitchens at this hour. A while ago he would have railed at the Fates which had divided out the world with such hideous injustice.

A black moving dot on the long winding lane in front became an old woman, bent under the weight of a sack she was carrying. A sunken road crossed diagonally, its track marked by a row of telephone poles dwindling over the edge of the hills. Above the hedge a tiny group of three figures slid rapidly along, and grew—three people in a dogcart, two in front and one behind, Sam noticed; he was astonished at their speed. The old woman crossed as they came on; her head was bowed, and she never looked aside until the driver's shout startled her. The wheel grazed her sack, and flung it to

the roadside; the dogcart swept on rapidly. The groom at the back laughed. The old woman shook her fist, and swore horribly. Then she made a sudden dash for the sack, and stuffed back into it a pheasant and some withered bracken which had come out. She looked at Sam, her eyes sparkling, and then fell to swearing again. The figures in the dogcart blended into a black spot, gliding swiftly along the top of the hedge.

"Did you see that now, the blackguard?" said the old woman to Sam, and she paused to shake her fist again.

Sam smiled. He knew her well. It was she to whom John Allday had sent a bottle of wine last winter when she was ill. Sam had assured him she was an old villain, and did not deserve any charity. And John had said, "Poor old soul—how do we know she doesn't deserve it? If she was drowning we should help her first—shouldn't we?—not ask her if she deserved it." A long argument had followed, and John had won Sam to his opinion, for the first time in his life.

"I'll set the place afire this time—what I've seen these days—sure as death I will, Mister Bloom," said the old woman excitedly. "Haven't they turned me away from the back door many a time with their Kingsnorton pride? And now I'll see her turned away from the front door. And the parson body—God forgive him!—with the sadness filling his heart from this day, and herself away driving the roads and the world with that blackguard for ever, if he'll not run away from her, as he's done before to many a one, I'll be bound."

Sam understood. He had recognized the woman in the dogcart—he knew her face, but at first he had not been able to recollect exactly—the face was muffled, partly hidden by a veil and the high collar of a fur coat. It was Barbara Kingsnorton. He

had not noticed her companion. The old woman explained he was the man to whom she had once been engaged—Hurst. The old woman's rage against him was horrible in its expression. Sam was more amused than interested.

"It isn't my business," he said.

"It's mine now, Mister Bloom!"

The old woman shouldered her sack, and staggered as she strove to heave it into a comfortable position on her back.

"Tell 'em what the wheel knocked out of your sack," called Sam after her.

She made a hoarse, cackling noise of laughter, and went away, talking to herself along the road.

"I must tell John," Sam resolved.

He had had no sport. He had not yet begun to think, as he had determined; and he had come this long way to think things out. What would Maggie say if he returned with the confession that he hadn't thought at all? But there was plenty of time. What indeed was there to think about? He was happy now, enjoying this fine winter day—it was not his winter, thank God; life was beginning anew. He was free to-day; he had been chained to his own misfortunes, but he was free at last. Misfortune was not all his, as he had thought in the dark days, nor was it found only in his house or in other little houses. Happiness might be thrown away, but it could not be sold, or bought. There was as much room for sorrow in the great house as in his, and more—and for happiness—no, happiness was for great hearts, not for houses. He repeated it several times, proud of the saying; he would tell it to Maggie when he returned. He would have some news to tell. How much happiness would there be to-night, or to-morrow, at Kingsnortons'? He was sorry for Pettigo, the curate—he was a nice fellow. John Allday would

be sorry. Why couldn't a woman, or a man, go to the devil alone, without dragging others into the depths? Why should the innocent always suffer too? Surely there was justice somewhere. . . .

A side lane dipped towards the valley, and a long plantation covered the slope. Several pheasants were feeding in the meadow which fringed the wood. Sam looked round quickly. This was his chance. He could get one home unobserved easily enough; he thought of the bird in the old woman's sack—she had half a dozen, perhaps. At home the chicken would last to-day and to-morrow, and then—pheasant of course, or kept hanging a bit longer, and served with bread sauce—they might put sausages round it and make it go further. In fancy already he smelled the fine smell of the cooking.

One of the pheasants, a cock, was in advance of the others, feeding quietly in the open. There were sheep in the next meadow. Sam hoped to drive them gently towards the hedge, and creep up behind them. The pheasants would take no notice of the sheep's approach and then it would be a safe shot from the hedge, twenty or twenty-five yards, no more, a sure kill, smashing the head and keeping the body clean for table—then away with the bird before anyone might be aware of what the shooting was.

He entered the meadow by the gate, and began to cross very slowly, keeping the sheep moving before him without their growing alarmed. In a little while, however, he saw that his eagerness was pushing him too fast; the sheep wandered away restlessly, afraid of being driven; two pheasants flew into the wood. He lay down for a moment and then moved on hands and knees towards the hedge. He lost sight of the pheasant he was stalking. For an instant he believed despair-

ingly that it had run and then taken flight. Another glance showed him the bird—it had moved further out from the wood, and was feeding quietly, apparently undisturbed; but it had passed this meadow, and was now an impossible shot from here. Sam looked about. A hedge came down at right angles to this one, dividing the meadow from another. He would have to crawl through that, and then the pheasant would be his.

For safety he made his way back a little distance, and then crawled rapidly to the other hedge. It was a thorn hedge, unclipped and ragged, and, though very bushy above, it had a space here and there near the ground which might be widened for a man to slip through, if he forced down the wire netting which had been put there for the rabbits.

It was harder than he had expected. He struggled nearly through—then he reached back to clutch the barrel of his gun.

His body was torn with pain. A roaring filled the world, and black darkness. . . .

Presently he saw the hedge above his head, and the sky. He was very weak. The thought of death snatched at him convulsively, like a cold hand. But he had not the strength to rebel; he had not the strength to fight his pain; and he knew surely he would die. A swift succession of images flashed on his mind, clouded, and jostling one another incongruously. For Maggie he had an agony of grief. Once he recollected that he ought to pray, and his thoughts began mechanically the first words of the Lord's Prayer; then he stopped—it was too late now, he realized—he had lived his life—the Lord knew—He would understand. "God, I've tried!" he called, striving with all his feeble strength in vain to sound with his lips what his thoughts cried louder than ever could have been the spoken words.

All his last strength he put into this silent call that should ring in Heaven to plead for him. Then he lay inert a little while, and Maggie came to him, the children with her, his own self as a little boy—time had no place in his new world of vision. And then the darkness. . . .

A bright-eyed robin flitted along the hedge, and stopped, perched on a bramble spray to look curiously at this new thing lying in the fields. Then in a moment, as the robin was without fear, and the day was sunny, and the place here sheltered from the wind, he sang a while, humble unfinished genius, throwing his notes carelessly into the air, hesitating, stammering, and then, inspired, breaking into a rapid crowded little melody.

CHAPTER VII

NEWS

AS the men went into Binnses at six o'clock they heard the news in the time-office: the old gentleman was very near the end. The doctor had been summoned in the early hours of the morning, and was coming again at breakfast-time. It was the only topic of conversation. Some of the men had arrived with the premature knowledge that the old gentleman had "passed away very peaceful" at ten minutes to three, or ten minutes after three, or at some other exact moment—there was no lack of circumstantial evidence in proof; nor would the revealed falsity of it prevent the believers from accepting in future similar evidence about any other visionary happening. The old gentleman died again in the town during the breakfast interval; shopkeepers talked of a half-holiday, and argued whether perhaps it would be best left till the day of the funeral. In the works there was very little done. Every hour the news came authentically from the big house: unconscious, and still the same.

The older men recounted lusty anecdotes of Gentleman Binnses' career, especially of his gallantries. He had been a famous ladies' man; there were none like him now; what had been his courteous freedom was only cheek nowadays—the very

word for it was vulgar—it had lost its grand air, somehow. Indeed, the charm was very difficult to define, and the old men grew blunt and emphatic because the young ones could not be convinced. Great ladies of the district, dead, many of them, others with grandchildren, were paraded in narrative like the best cattle at a fair.

Nobody had been so opportunely deaf as Old Gentleman Binns. "It's convenient to be deaf sometimes." That was one of his best known witticisms; and everybody knew at least one story of his deafness. There was the tale of his captivating young Mrs. Stoke, until her husband, the rich ironfounder of Cadby, Stoke & Co., was as jealous as a boy who can't wag his ears when all his friends can. When her husband died, it was Gentleman Binns who had persuaded her to give the park to the town. And it was done so easily, in the beginning, in his inimitable way:

"Who is this young lady next to me? She's very pretty," in his terrific whisper to a friend beside him at a fête. How could any woman have resisted that flattery?

Each of the old workmen had his favourite tale.

"I saw him one Saturday night knock a man down in the Market, flat, among a lot o' cabbages and stuff. It was old Simley—you've heard of old Simley. . . . His wife had fetched him out o' the 'George' and was trying to get him home. He wouldn't go, not he—and when he got savage he let out and caught her on the jaw. Gentleman Binns happened to see it. Up he come in a twink, and down went old Simley atop o' the cabbages, his legs flapping as if they didn't rightly belong to him. That was only the beginning. Mr. Binns ordered him up, and made him take his wife's arm, and then he stood and lectured him, told him he'd married his wife because he admired her, she was

a fine woman, and he ought to go down on his knees to her and beg her pardon, and be proud he'd got a wife like her. He did let him have it. Why, good Lord! in about three minutes there was old Simley off as proud as he could be, arm in arm with his wife—she was very near dying o' shame, and us dying o' laughing at 'em. . . ."

There was no end to the tales of Gentleman Binns and the good old days. In anecdote it was the old men's triumph this morning. The young ones might be sceptical, but they had to listen.

John Allday met Maggie and the children as he was going home to dinner. She was radiant with the good news of Sam's resolve to break with the union and go back to work.

"That's right, Maggie," agreed John—"you persuade him to start for himself, at the first possible moment. It's hard—long hours, and perseverance, you know—but it's the sure way to progress. You see how I'm getting on. It's only the start, the capital——"

"Yes. I've been to see his grandfather—I've just come away. I went to tell him about Sam—well, not to tell him exactly, because Sam called. I'm glad I went. He didn't know—he was in bed when Sam went. He was delighted—he's promised to give Sam a start, if he likes—the bicycle trade, we thought. Sam doesn't know—I want him to be quick home—to tell him——"

"I'm very glad," said John. "You deserve it Maggie. I'll come up, and we'll have a chat about it. Perhaps I can help——"

"Yes—do—to-morrow—perhaps—we'll have a bit of supper for you. . . ."

It was the first news he told when he got home. His mother and father were interested, but not so enthusiastic as he; they were more anxious to discuss the latest news of Old Gentleman Binns.

The men went quietly into the works at two o'clock. They had scarcely settled down for the afternoon when the news passed magically through the shops: Old Gentleman Binns was dead. There was no more work to-day. The heats were left in the fires, the bellows stopped, and the breeze ceased to glow; strikers washed their grimy hands in the water troughs, and put on their coats. In little groups and in file the men passed out, through the big gates, silently, their voices lowered as they talked. The blinds were down in the big house. The men stood about, hesitating before going away, talking, talking, the same things said again and again, each one awed by the near presence of death, the all powerful. Old men wiped away their tears with the backs of their gnarled hands, unashamed. They had known the master so long; they had worked for him when they were young and he was the reckless dandy they had all admired; and now he was dead, and they were old, like him; it would be their turn soon. The place would never be the same again. It was hard for old men who had been used to the place all their lives to start again in a strange place—for it would be a strange place, with the old gentleman gone. The young men already talked of the advantages of a strike.

John's mother surprised him when he entered the house:

"I knew just after you'd gone. I thought you would be back sooner than this."

"He wasn't dead when you heard," said John.

They had tea early, and John prepared to go out to Nickling to see Mr. Pettigo. A committee meeting at the Social Club was to be held on the morrow, and several important matters were to be discussed; there would now be added the sending of a wreath for Alderman Binnses' funeral—he had been a very generous patron of the club.

The funeral would certainly be a public affair; the shops would close for several hours. The town council, the workmen, the Social Club, all would be represented.

"You'll be invited, John, for sure," said his mother.

"He's been the greatest man the town ever had, I should say," declared Mr. Allday. "He wasn't born here, but he loved the place, and he did his utmost for good all round. Look at the Queen's Jubilee—he might have been at Court, and got knighted, perhaps—it's more than likely—and he preferred to stay here and help the town where he made his money. You never see that nowadays. Splendid, I call it."

"They say a woman did that—Mrs. Whatshername?" said Mrs. Allday.

"*They* say! Who are *they?* Everybody and nobody, mother," said Mr. Allday emphatically. "As sure as ever a man rises, and the higher he rises, there's a jostling lot o' jealous gossips, evil-minded creatures, try to pull his character down, because they can't reach the real man high above them. Never listen——"

"I only said as they say that," said Mrs. Allday.

"Exactly! And they only said—and there you are. 'I know Mrs. Allday is an honest, straightforward woman, and she told me, so it's bound to be true.' How do you like that?"

Mrs. Allday protested, and her husband laughed at her.

John left the house, and walked out rapidly to Nickling. There he was disappointed: Mr. Pettigo was out. His landlady did not know when he might return; perhaps it would be very late—she didn't know.

John moved slowly away, annoyed that he had

come so far for nothing. He recollected that he had seen a light in the window upstairs as he approached the house; that could not be Mr. Pettigo's room, of course, though he had fancied so, at first. He turned. The light was gone. Suddenly the gas was lit in the front room below—Mr. Pettigo's room. A shadow was thrown sharply on the blind, a face in profile. John was startled, for he was sure it was the curate's shadow. It was gone in an instant, and he strove to believe that he had been mistaken—in vain; it *was* the curate's shadow; he could not leave it at home when he went out. John started impulsively towards the house, but after a few steps he hesitated. The landlady had said emphatically that Mr. Pettigo was out; she would not have lied without orders, and so she would lie again; he could not force himself past her. He was acutely perturbed, and annoyed. He had not believed the curate capable of a lie of that sort; it was often done, he knew, but not by Pettigo. What was the reason? It must be a grave one. . . .

The lights of Selbridge threw a lurid glow on the low clouds. A storm was rising, moaning and crying in the bare trees. John was uneasy and depressed.

His mother and father had greater news than his:

"Have you heard—Sam Bloom has shot himself?"

John was aghast.

"Mr. Hastilow heard it at the Toll, so Mrs. Hastilow has been in to tell us," said his mother. "It was over at Wrenfold. I forget the name she said—a farmer there, he was the first to bring the news."

"It isn't true!" said John. "It's impossible! Didn't I tell you I saw Maggie this morning, as

happy as could be because Sam was going to make a fresh start?"

"But you said she told you he was out with his gun," said Mr. Allday. "Perhaps he's had an accident—you never know."

The image in his thoughts, of Maggie, radiant with her happy news, as he had seen her this morning, brought John near to sudden tears.

"I'll go and find out," he said impulsively.

"Everybody's talking about it. I should like to know it isn't true," said his mother.

John put on his hat and coat again. Swiftly he recollected how Maggie had consoled him when he had been sick at heart. If this horrible thing were true, then it would be his duty to go to her. She had not many friends; now was the time for the true ones to show their worth. At least it should never be said of him, as of so many he knew, that he had more sympathy in words than in actions.

He met two of Binnses' men in the High Street, and stayed a moment to glean the news.

"They said as he's done it. I don't know for certain. I dare say it's right enough. He was an erratic, impulsive sort o' fellow, wasn't he?"

In the Bullen, John came upon a little group of the Social Club members.

"Hallo, John! Have you heard the latest?" they greeted him.

"About Sam Bloom? Yes," said John. "I want to know the truth. I don't believe he's shot himself. I tell you, I know for a fact——"

"Oh—that! No—it was an accident, I believe."

"But that isn't it. Haven't you heard about curate Pettigo?"

"What?"

John felt his body shrink.

"His ladylove's bolted with another man—that

man Hurst she was engaged to before, you remember——"

"Poor old Pettigo! He'll feel it——"

"She wasn't good enough for him, anywhere near——"

"That's a fact! A proud, flighty piece o' goods——"

They noticed neither John's silence nor his suffering.

"How do you know it?" he demanded, startling them with his emphasis.

They laughed.

"There isn't any 'how' about it. Why, there's fifty tales already to choose from, all different. Heaven only knows which one's true. But it's right this far—she's done a bunk, skedaddled. . . ."

They were capping one another's jokes when John left them. He couldn't stay and listen, and he couldn't trust himself to talk. His legs were weak, as though he had walked to exhaustion; his grief was like a sickness, filling his whole being. He did not notice that he had crossed the Bullen until he saw the slope of Castle Street rising above him. Then he recollected Maggie. He was going to her; he had said it was his duty to offer her his sympathy and his help. Now as he mounted the hill he knew that it was her sympathy he would need. There would be none other offered him, none he could ask; nobody would know his suffering, and he could not tell. These members of the Social Club—what would they say if he told them how he had worshipped Barbara Kingsnorton—his goddess, "a flighty piece of goods!" Bitterly he understood the unreality of the glorious vision he had loved secretly without hope. The goddess had been in his own heart—he understood now—it was the reality which was the image. What vulgar innuendo would be heard if he let gossip know!

None would understand—perhaps one here and there, but who? Maggie would divine his need for sympathy; she seemed to enter his inner self, to know him as even he did not know. He must go to her, for she was in need also. . . .

He paused by the lamp before he should pass round to the back of the last block of houses. What would he say? Had they brought Sam home? The horror which had been only in his thoughts seemed to fill his body.

A voice roused him:

"Here's Mr. Allday."

He recognized Mrs. Onions standing with a neighbour.

"I was saying only five minutes ago as you'd be up," she called out. "I've said it many a time, I have; it isn't till there's trouble in the house you know who your real friends are. What a terrible day, Mr. Allday, to be sure! It never rains but there's a downpour. Sure, who'd have thought this affliction was hanging right over, so sudden? And whose turn it is next, it makes a body go all of a dither. . . . She's gone—they fetched her this afternoon to see him—quite dead, I believe. Poor soul! I was down the town, else I'd ha' gone with her—she ought to ha' had somebody with 'er. The children are with Mrs. Walker here—they don't know, poor little mites! It's ard, isn't it, for 'em. . . ."

After a short while John walked slowly down the hill. In suffering he saw Maggie setting out alone, with none to comfort her, to find Sam—in a shed, or the club-room of some public-house, perhaps. Suddenly he remembered Sam's grandfather, and he turned back.

"Mrs. Onions, do you know if anybody has told his grandfather, old Mr. Peacock?" he asked.

"Not as I know of, Mr. Allday. I thought

as somebody ought to go—it'll about kill the old man."

"I'll go," said John.

He found relief in action. The swift movement and the thought of his mission drove his own grief from the possession of his mind.

To his surprise he found the house in darkness. The blinds were down, and no one came in answer to his knocking. His knuckles seemed to make only a feeble sound on the door panels. He took out his penknife and tapped sharply with the handle. Old Mr. Peacock might be in bed, but Mrs. Crooks, his housekeeper, would hear that, if she were in.

He was about to go away, disappointed, when the door opened of the house next door, and a yellow shaft of light shot across the street.

"Who is it? Do you want something? Mrs. Crooks isn't in."

John stepped forward into the light.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Allday!" exclaimed the woman who had spoken. Then she lowered her voice almost to a whisper: "The old man's gone—died in his sleep this afternoon. We'd just heard in the street 'ere about his grandson, and Mrs. Crooks was going in to tell 'im. She came running back—we'd been 'aving a cup o' tea early. I could see as something had 'appened. 'He was there in his chair,' she says, 'just as you've seen him many a time, dozing,' she says, 'and I went up to wake him—and when I touched him,' she says, 'I only just touched 'im, an' 'e went flop, all of a lump.' She was that frightened she daresent go back without me, an' then she wouldn't touch him—*we* had to go——"

"Where is she now?" said John.

"She'll be in one of the neighbours', perhaps. She *was* here. To tell you the truth, Mr. Allday,

she's been drinking 'eavy. She ain't been like Mrs. Thomas for looking after him."

"I'll come back to-morrow," said John sharply. "I can see there's nothing to be done to-night; but somebody will have to look after things."

"I'm sure I'll do anything I can, Mr. Allday."

John thanked her, and said "good night." Then he walked swiftly back to the High Street and across the river.

"Poor Maggie!" said his mother, when he told the news. "She'll need all her friends."

"How many's *all?*" said Mr. Allday.

John said nothing of what he had heard of Barbara Kingsnorton. When presently his father told him a neighbour had been in with the news, and asked if he had heard, he had to force his voice to hide the distress he dared not explain.

"I suppose it's right. I heard it in the town."

"Everything's happened all together to-day," said his mother.

"Everything?" said Mr. Allday. "That's a lot, mother. Old Gentleman Binns is dead; and another old man, poor old Mr. Peacock, a nobody, except to a few who knew him, he's dead on the same day—and Sam Bloom's died, very sudden. It isn't everything. The world will go on, mother, just the same. When a great man's dead, he isn't a great man—he *was.*"

"Well, you know what I mean."

"Yes, I know. It's Sam's death we feel the most. A young man, just going to make a real start, it's hard, mother. That's what makes you feel what we all feel. Poor Sam! He might have made such a fine man. But it's Life—it's always the same. What's it say in the Bible? 'There shall be two—something—one shall be taken, and the other left.' Sam's been taken, before he had his proper chance, while there's other men get a

hundred chances. But, mark you, I believe as Sam will be judged by what he would have been—at least, by what he tried to be. You won't perhaps hear your vicar tell you that—I don't care, all the same—it's justice. We don't know enough in this world to be just, perhaps. I know a man's condemned many a time, when he hasn't had enough chance. The old way of things is gone, with Old Gentleman Binns. Sam might ha' made one o' the new men—it's men like him are going to count——"

Mrs. Allday had lost understanding, so she interrupted:

"Poor Maggie—with the children so young!"

"There's a lot o' trouble in the world, sure enough," said Mr. Allday. "Everybody's turn comes, sooner or later. You don't understand life without it. Where do you turn to for sympathy? Why, to them who have known what trouble is—they're more human, somehow. Pettigo won't sleep much to-night, I'll be bound, if it's true. He must have been worried, some time—he must have felt something o' the sort coming. A fine open fellow! There won't be much pity for him, though. Folks will laugh—they always do at that sort of thing—they can't help it. Look at it one way, it's comic——"

"I don't think so. It's horrible!" exclaimed John.

His father was surprised at his vehemence.

"It depends. He's safe enough to get over it, if he can keep from brooding. It isn't the weight of sorrow that breaks a man—it's the loneliness. You've read about men suffering, and women, in olden times, terrible sufferings; yet they bore them—bore them cheerfully sometimes, because they were all together, comrades, all suffering alike. It makes all the difference. The worst suffering

is what you can't tell anybody—what you daren't tell anybody. It gnaws away inside you like a cancer. There's death in that."

"You aren't half going it to-night. You'll have your throat bad," said Mrs. Allday.

He smiled.

In a few moments the call of a newsboy sounded from the street.

"That'll be a special, with the old gentleman's death in," said Mr. Allday. "Run out and get one, John."

GENTLEMAN BINNS

DEATH OF A GRAND OLD MAN

The headlines were in heavy type, and the sheet was filled with the story of his illness, with a long history of his life, of the works, and of his influence in the district, with many anecdotes. John had to read them all aloud.

"There's nothing else in, important, is there?" said Mrs. Allday at last.

John turned over the paper, and searched the columns.

"What's this?" he exclaimed suddenly. "Wait a minute! Here's Sam's death—there's a paragraph in."

He read it out:

POACHER'S DEATH

Two labourers at Wrenfold discovered a man lying shot in a ditch at midday to-day. They carried him to the nearest cottage, where he expired before medical assistance could be summoned. Death is supposed to have been caused by the accidental discharge of his gun while deceased was trespassing in pursuit of game. The body has been identified as that of Samuel Bloom, a workman, residing in Pedley Hill.

"It's wonderful how quick they get the news," said Mrs. Allday.

"Poor Sam!" said Mr. Allday, after a moment's silence. "We know what a fine young fellow he was; and here it is: a workman, a poacher—that's all! There's a lesson for you—what a man lives for, if he doesn't climb like Alderman Binns—dead and buried, and forgotten, and not even understood at all. Poor Sam!"

"It's Maggie I'm thinking of," said Mrs. Allday.

John was silent. His thoughts were for Barbara Kingsnorton, for the vision he had worshipped, more real than her own self, and now lost utterly.

His father's voice roused him:

"Old Mr. Peacock's death isn't in, is it, John?"

He searched the columns again.

"It won't be," said his father. "It wouldn't be in time. I don't suppose it would have been in, even if it had been earlier—not more than a word or two, at the most. You have to pay to tell people you're dead—common folks. We're all nobodies, mother, very near all of us—nobodies, in little houses—except in our own eyes, and in the Lord's."

They were silent a long while.

John was glad to go upstairs to bed. There was companionship for him in the darkness and the silence.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HILL

THE corncrake called in every meadow, a voice here at hand, then there among the grass, a ventriloquist's voice. None had seen the bird come; none would see him go; he might have been a voice only, not a bird skulking invisible to common eyes. Those who had never seen him, however, followed the example of the king's subjects in the fairy tale, who couldn't see the invisible cloak. There was a stuffed corncrake in a glass case in the bar at the "Bull"; it was a poor amateur naturalist indeed who could not put life into a description of that.

It was Friday. John Allday had had a quiet morning at the yard. In the afternoon he went into Selbridge. As soon as his business there was completed, he went to the Royal Emporium, and made his way to the toy department. He thought of Maggie as he went; she had been Maggie Wheatley then, at the tobacco and fancy goods counter—how many years ago?

"I want a doll, please, only a little one, but a nice one."

He didn't blush as he would have done years ago. He had more assurance now, come with his steadily growing prosperity. He made jokes with the girl who served.

The doll was all he wanted. He would go back

to Pedley Hill by train. He was going to tea with Maggie; it was baby's birthday—she was two years old to-day. The doll was tied in its cardboard box, and paid for, when he recollected the baby's brother, his godson, John. It would not do to take nothing for him—he was such a fine little man. So John turned back to the counter and bought a whip with a whistle at the end of the handle. Then he was ready.

"I look quite a family man," he told himself merrily. Many a time he had seen men carrying toys, especially on Saturdays—fathers going home —and he had never realized how happy they must have been. To him they had seemed rather absurd. He was beginning to understand now. In the days of grief, and again when time was healing him, and he had posed, theatrically before his own self, and had called life a mockery, and romance an illusion, when he had had to call on reiteration to help him to the despair which had grown precious, he had found a new growth springing within him, a sympathy and a comprehension for tiny things which he had often seen but had never understood.

The children were eagerly awaiting him.

"I've had the greatest work with 'em," said Maggie. "It's been 'Uncle John! Uncle John!' all afternoon. As for getting them to sleep for their usual nap—not a bit of it. 'Uncle John's coming!' "

"Of course!" said John happily.

He had to show the boy how to blow the whistle, and had to crack the whip for him; then he had to hold the doll and talk to it. Maggie sat and laughed at them, until she was forced to play. Dolly's mother wouldn't have her tea without her.

"You *are* having a birthday—isn't she, Uncle John?" said Maggie.

After tea they went into the garden. The

children played, and Maggie and John walked to and fro and talked. It had been a day of sun and showers, and a cool, rich smell was rising from the earth, from the new foliage of the hedge, and from the grass beyond. Mrs. Onions appeared at the back door, and came along, announcing her intention to do a bit o' weeding.

"It's only a bit of green, but it's nice," said Maggie.

"Yes, it is," John agreed. "You know, it isn't out of the quantity of good things that happiness comes—it's out of our own appreciation of them."

"That's right, Mr. Allday," said Mrs. Onions. "It's what I've said many a time. You're the one to put things sensible."

John whispered to Maggie: "It isn't mine—it's one of father's sayings."

"Some folks don't know they're born," said Mrs. Onions, and she proceeded to anecdote without delay.

Maggie was happy now—she did not need to talk. She wanted to keep John a while longer—the time had gone so quickly; so to prolong her pleasure she invited Mrs. Onions to come indoors and see the children bathed and put to bed.

John sat and smoked his pipe. This was a time he enjoyed; he did not know why; he had never paused to ask himself the cause of his keen pleasure. Both children liked to escape from their mother, if they could, while they were being undressed, and then they would run to him, laughing noisily and feigning fear. Maggie had to chase them all about the room. It was grand fun—for the children. And they always splashed too much in the zinc bath, and threw their toys out—the ball, and the floating swan, and the tiny rowing boat Uncle John had brought from Blackpool.

"You're a spoilt little girlie—and it's all your Uncle John!" said Mrs. Onions, in glee.

When they had said their prayers, and he had kissed them "good night," he stayed to chat with Mrs. Onions while Maggie put them to bed. He had enjoyed himself; he didn't want to go yet.

"I shall have to be giving a look round at home," said Mrs. Onions. "My old man's working over, and I've got a bit o' supper special for him. I shall be back in a minute or two, perhaps."

John sat in the arm-chair, and looked round the quiet sitting-room. It was a comfortable little room, he thought. He had always felt contented here. Maggie kept it very neat; it was splendid, the way she kept the place. A nosegay of lady-smocks stood in a slender glass vase in the centre of the table. They were only wild flowers—Maggie could not afford the rich blooms that filled the florists' shops—but how pretty they were, how delicate in hue! Wild flowers for baby's birthday, and because Uncle John was coming! It was very nice of Maggie—such a little thing, but of those little things which are so much. Maggie was always like that.

Presently she came downstairs, and shut the door quietly.

"They're crying a bit," said she. "They didn't want to go—you being here—but they'll drop off soon. They're tired out. Has Mrs. Onions gone?"

"Yes. She said she would be back in a minute or two."

"Oh—*her* minutes!"

Maggie smiled, and John smiled too. He did not want Mrs. Onions to come back.

Gradually their talk became serious. Maggie spoke of her future plans:

"The grandfather's money was a godsend. I

don't know what I should have done without it. But it isn't much, and I don't want to spend it all, and then be left. I can afford to wait till the children grow up a bit more—John's three now—they won't be so much trouble then, and I can use the money to start properly in business. I'm sure I can make it pay. It's the best investment I could have; don't you think so? It will keep me occupied, as well. I do some sewing now—not much, but it dresses the children. I'm getting ever so quick, and I could make much more profit selling in my own shop—ever so much more. It's your advice, really."

"It's the best way, Maggie," said John. "If anybody had told me twelve months ago I should be doing so well now, I should have treated it as a joke. . . ."

The shadows came out of the corners of the room.

"How quickly the time has gone!"

They were surprised. It had seemed such a little while. John rose to go, and Maggie took him to the front door.

"Good-night, Maggie. It *has* been a happy birthday, hasn't it, for her!"

"Yes—thanks to you."

"Not to me."

"Yes, yes!"

"Well—not entirely. I like to see the children enjoy themselves."

"You spoil them, you know. I shall have ever such a game with 'em to-morrow. They are good, really, I know. You can't expect——"

"Of course not! Good night!"

"Good night, John!"

He held her hand in his the whole time. After he had gone he still felt the warm pressure of it.

He hesitated for an instant on the pavement. Then he mounted slowly towards the crest of the

hill, and stood a while on the railway bridge. He did not want to go home yet, he told himself. It was not late, and it was a lovely evening. He wanted to enjoy the last hours again in recollection, and he must be alone for that; it was no pleasure to be shared; its joys were too delicate to bear narration to another. He did not know that Maggie had stood in reverie after the front door was shut, and saw him pass the window. She had gone outside, by the back door, and stood now in the shadows, watching his dim figure above the parapet of the bridge. He did not know how she watched him go, and how she went quietly indoors again, with an emptiness in her inner self as though he had taken with him all that had lain there.

Lovers were in the lanes, here and there, in the scented dusk, seated close together on the grassy hedgebanks, heedless of the damp, blotted against walls in shadow, by gates, everywhere. John smiled. Why shouldn't they be happy? he said, and his thoughts went back to Maggie, recollecting her "good night," and the pressure of her hand in his. She was fond of him, he knew—and of late he had gone to her for sympathy, many days, when he had been sick at heart and lonely, just as he had gone to his mother, years ago, to shelter from nameless fears. She never refused. Into his thoughts came her image, as she had stood at the door, wishing him "good night," very plain in her black dress, her face pale against the shadows of the room, but with a happy light shining in her eyes. Sorrow had made her quieter, more thoughtful; it had taken the quick, mischievous smile and the laughter, but it had given her a new loveliness. Indeed, many a man would be proud of her. John was startled by the thought. She was young —younger than he. Many a man—there was the thought again, struggling against his efforts to

banish it. He had been tormented thus before—it was an old enemy. Was it an enemy? It had been—but was it now? He was filled with vague disquietude. Once the sound of a kiss, and then soft laughter and whispering, caught him unawares, and left him troubled by its recollection: he had been walking quietly on the grass beside the road, and had come on a pair of lovers unobserved. And the incident sent his memory back into the past, to when he had been a boy at school, and Maggie had kissed him, taking him by surprise. For an instant the vision was exceedingly vivid, and then, when it faded, he called it back again. Maggie came to him in a new image, passionately alive, inflaming him. He thought again of the days when he had said all his happiness was broken. She had never turned him away. In the midst of her grief she had always found some happiness for him. Then came the vision of Barbara Kingsnorton. She had never lived—this Barbara of his. The real Barbara was an unhappy woman, living in London now, married to a man who neglected her already, so John had learnt. He understood in some measure what her suffering must be, how her idols had fallen broken in the dust, and he was sorry for her, for the Barbara who had never really lived. But Maggie had been no vision. The real Maggie he knew, boundless in sympathy, for him, at least, devoted in friendship, perfect in motherhood.

He stopped at a turning. Why should he go on further? Why had he come out here, walking alone? He might have stayed with Maggie longer; there was no need to have come away so early. And with that thought he turned to go back, then hesitated a while. What would Maggie say if he returned to her? What would she think? What would he say in explanation?

Slowly at first he began to walk towards the hill, which rose in silhouette against the last wan light of day, lingering star-bejewelled in the west.

He had no clear thoughts now; they were all in a medley, out of focus, while an unquiet yearning drove him to greater speed. The air in the lanes was warm still, here and there; the earth seemed to have held the day's heat, and now was letting it rise among the shadows, clinging and odorous, troubling his senses as he inhaled it in deep breaths, intoxicating him, filling him with desire.

His hesitation had gone when he arrived, and he knocked at the front door. He had been hurrying, and his heart thumped loudly as he listened for Maggie's footsteps to cross the room.

"John!" she exclaimed, astonished, when she opened the door. "I couldn't think who it was."

She paused, and what seemed to him a long silence followed. He could not speak.

"Come in," she said.

He stepped inside. The front room was in darkness. A yellow patch of light from the sitting-room covered the wall in the passage, and broke the shadows with its soft reflections. Maggie shut the door, and then turned, and they stood face to face.

"I've come back, you see," said John, trembling and distraught. "I always come back."

He tried to smile, to fight down the agitation which pained him. Maggie said nothing; she did not understand.

"I went away too soon," he said, struggling to pluck his thoughts from their tangle. "There was no need—I wanted to stay. I've been thinking, thinking a lot—I want to help you, Maggie—more than that. Why should you be lonely? I'm lonely too, you know. Many a time I've come here I've been lonely, utterly miserable, and you've al-

ways cheered me. I—I—I've come again—I want to—I want to stay—to help you. There isn't much happiness in the world, Maggie. I want to —will you let me try to give you what happiness I can—Maggie?"

Her little exclamation told him nothing. He followed her as she moved away from him towards the sitting-room, and there in the light he saw the tears glistening in her eyes.

"Maggie!" he said, pleading.

She sat down at the table, and covered her face with her hands.

"Maggie, dear."

He put his hand on her shoulder, and called her again very softly. Then he bent down and kissed her hair.

"No, no, John—you shouldn't!" she whispered.

She looked up, and he kissed her on the lips. Then slowly she put her arms up to hold him.

CHAPTER IX

THE EVE

JOHN was so quiet at supper that his mother asked him if he had been worried at the yard.

"No—I've had a very good day," he told her, and then he strove to talk, so that she might not question him further. He was glad to escape to bed.

Sleep would be impossible for hours, he knew. He had no wish for sleep. At first he said he would think carefully of his future plans, for there was so much to be decided; but soon he abandoned his resolve—it was impossible—his emotions were too ebullient to be marshalled calmly in thought. Maggie was with him still, a transcendent vision, calling his soul a while to the high hills, above the petty details of common life. "There's time yet," he said, when at last he saw how hopeless was quiet thought to-night. There was time, indeed, for nothing had been decided—nothing. Maggie was not yet six months a widow. The recollection startled him, and he pushed it away behind those which crowded forward to offer him delights.

"You mustn't ask me. We must think—both of us. . . . John, dear please don't make me say anything now. I never guessed—give me time to think what I ought to do."

The words remained, sharply graven upon his inner thoughts. All the rest had lost its first shape,

and had been retouched by his own passionate fancy. How had she found the strength to resist his pleading? He asked himself in vain. She loved him—she had always loved him. He knew that now, for she had told him so—the secret she had kept so long, told in the faintest whisper; and in his triumph he had held her until she looked into his face and told him again, boldly and proudly at last. Why then did she plead for time to think, while happiness lay here and they might take it in both hands? Time was needed—yes—but for action, not for thought. No engagement could be announced till near the year's end at least. It was a long time, but not to be spent in loneliness—that was past. Their garden of happiness would bloom all the lovelier, hidden from others' eyes, a garden of sweet odours and singing birds. In his enchantment he had no thought for common things.

When he awoke in the brightness of the early morning he lay inert a while in drowsy content. Then slowly his thoughts stirred, piecing together the happenings which had kept sleep so long away. What would his mother and father say? inquired a perverse spirit, newly aroused within him. He had not once thought of that last night. He had seen it coming, afar off, and it had not been able to get to him, for the press of passionate delights. Now it seemed to have been waiting through the night, and gaining strength, and others had come with it, an importunate company. His father and mother were fond of him, and they were proud of him too, as he was of them; his mother especially dreamed of his doing well, he knew. "There's no reason why you shouldn't rise steadily, as you are doing, till you're invited to be mayor, some day," she had said a few weeks ago. John had laughed. Secretly he had been flattered, and his

ambition had glowed. Many a man had started less than he, and had become mayor of his native town. It was not impossible, for what others had done, so he might also. In a few years, at least—less, perhaps—he would be a candidate for the Town Council. Mr. Benlow had suggested it, and had promised his support; and Mr. Benlow was a councillor, a man of influence. There was the Social Club, too, with the Church behind it. Already he had valuable friends, especially since he had left Binnses, and had become a merchant with his own yard. The painted sign on the gate, and his printed advertisements, had served him socially better than any visiting cards. Mr. Benlow was a loyal friend. Mrs. Benlow was always the same, hospitable and kindly. Willie called him "old man" now, since the painting of his name on the yard gate. Elsie was splendid company, very jolly, very nice. She would remain his friend—Mr. Benlow would remain his friend, of course—his marrying would not alter that. How could it? And Elsie? More than once he had dared to hope—but that was past now. Mr. Benlow might think him unwise, perhaps. No doubt, many people would say so. His mother might be disappointed, though she liked Maggie—he knew she was fond of Maggie. It was impossible to satisfy everybody in this world; only fools tried to do that, and did not even satisfy themselves. He was free to choose his own life. He had chosen.

Many thoughts distressed him, but his resolve stood unshaken. All the cold reason of morning could not move it.

At breakfast his mother perceived his disquietude.

"There's something on his mind, worrying him," she told his father emphatically, after he had gone to work.

Mr. Allday listened proudly to John's going in

a morning. He had reached one of the summits of his ambition for his son. John was no ordinary workman now, going to work at six o'clock, as his father had always had to do. Mr. Allday had laughed with John when Mrs. Allday prophesied the mayoralty; but afterwards he confessed that she had voiced his secret hopes.

"Even if it happens, we shan't see it, Susan—I shan't, I know," he said. "All the same, I believe the lad is going to get on in the town. I hope so."

"And I do—please God!" said Mrs. Allday fervently.

They built castles for their hopes.

It was not a busy morning at the yard, and John was able to leave before his usual time. He would be too early for dinner at home, so he strolled across into the Bullen on his way. The sun was warm; a keen fresh wind rolled the cloud tufts along the sky; it was good to be alive.

He met Mr. Pettigo in the Bullen, and stayed for a while to chat. The old vicar had died early in the New Year, and at first the town had declared joyously that Mr. Pettigo would be installed in the vicarage. The gossips had made jokes upon his unfortunate love affair, though for the most part the barbs of their wit were not directed at him, and his momentary notoriety served to make him more popular, since it took many to church in curiosity who returned afterwards because they liked the man. The local paper, in its article upon the vicar's death, said of his curate, "The bishop could not make a choice more pleasing." But the bishop was not the one to bother himself about such unimportant people as mere parishioners, said the nameless popular voice; the bishop could be trusted to put the right relation in the right place. The new vicar, not yet arrived, happened

to be the brother of the man who had married the bishop's niece. He might be a good man, a suitable man, deserving the higher call—no doubt he was. "Quite so!" said the gossips. It was a coincidence that he happened to be the man who had married the bishop's niece—quite so! And from the Social Club, where it was taken up as a password, the exclamation "Quite so!" re-echoed through the town, like a pantomime gag. Perhaps the bishop heard a whisper of the outcry against him; perhaps another bishop did—there was no lack of rumour. Mr. Pettigo was offered an incumbency in a small country town in Gloucestershire. Great preparations were going forward to give him a farewell, so that he would never forget Pedley Hill. A special committee was elected at the Social Club, with John Allday as its chairman.

Elsie Benlow came up while they were talking, and when at length the curate went to mount Castle Street to the old church, Elsie and John stayed chatting in the Bullen. John liked Elsie; she was always good company, and with her he never had any difficulty in making conversation. She looked very pretty this morning in a light spring frock. She had a big bunch of narcissi which she was taking home, and John noticed particularly her hands, in white kid gloves, fitting perfectly—on a Saturday morning, not kept for Sundays only, for churchgoing.

"Has Mr. Pettigo been telling you?" she asked.

"What?" said John.

She laughed.

"I can see he hasn't, or you wouldn't say that."

She would not tell, and she teased him when he pleaded. John was stirred to greater effort; he was sure he could get the secret out of her, and he tried all he knew.

"No, no—I shan't—I can't!" she said. "I'll give you a flower instead, shall I?"

She had put it in his coat when he perceived Maggie crossing the place. Little John was walking at her side, holding her skirt, and she had the baby in her arms, and her marketing basket too. John was disconcerted. She must have passed quite close to him, and he had not seen her; she would know he had not seen her—surely she would know. He could not run away from Elsie Benlow now, and follow Maggie to explain.

"Are you getting angry with me?" said Elsie merrily.

"Yes—savage," said John, catching at her words to hide his agitation.

She laughed, and he had to laugh with her.

In a short while after he left her he had forgotten his curiosity. His thoughts were for Maggie. An inner voice reminded him that he had let her go away alone, with her heavy basket, and the baby on her arm, and the tiny boy dragging at her skirt. He had not been able to go—she would understand, he reasoned; but the voice would not be stilled.

He stayed indoors after dinner and mended the door under the kitchen boiler, as he had promised his mother; then, seeking to kill time, he did other odd jobs about the house. They had tea early. Afterwards he had to sit and talk to his father. He had no spirit for conversation.

"You're right, mother," said his father, when he had gone. "He's got something on his mind."

"I told you!" said Mrs. Allday, disquieted.

Their surmises made their evening conversation until supper time.

John walked towards the Bullen. It was too early for many members of the Social Club to have arrived, but he would find somebody to talk to,

something to do, he told himself. When he came near, however, he felt disinclined for company. He could not make up his mind what to do; and while he suffered this hesitancy, some other force than his seemed to take up his will and force him to cross the place and mount the slope of Castle Street beyond.

"I'll come to-morrow."

Last night he had said that to Maggie—only last night. What a long while ago!

"No, no—you mustn't! I want time to think. Promise me you won't!"

He had promised at last, reluctantly; and now his promise stood before him to bar the way. "I'm not obliged to call," he assured himself. "I can go up and straight past—I haven't promised not to go past." And with the words came the hope that Maggie might be outside, or little John might be playing in the street; it would be a chance meeting then, and his promise would have been kept; she would not be angry. If only he might see her, all his uneasiness would go, all his doubt. He knew he must decide soon what to do, and he strove to summon his thoughts, but his resolve flitted away before him like a little bird along a hedgerow.

Several figures were moving in the Vicarage garden. John saw the gleam of light frocks and heard the laughter beyond the hedge. Higher on the slope he met Mrs. Onions with her marketing basket.

"Here again, Mr. Allday!" she said cheerfully.

John was disconcerted. He felt that she meant well, no doubt, but her manner was too prying, and she was too near guessing his secret.

"Yes," he told her, "I'm just going a stroll over the hill and round. The view from the top's grand a day like this."

"You want your bicycle to get away out," suggested Mrs. Onions.

He was annoyed at what he suspected was a hint that she saw through his excuse.

"It's being repaired," he said.

He was angry with himself then, for he had told an unnecessary lie. By reiteration he tried to persuade himself that it was not a lie, that if the machine was not actually being repaired it needed it: the front wheel wobbled, and the spokes would have to be tightened—he had intended to do it himself to-day.

Once he looked round and saw that Mrs. Onions had stopped to talk to a friend, and he inferred that she had stopped in order to watch him. In thought he called her an interfering busybody, but the knowledge that her glance was following drove him past Maggie's house and to the parapet of the railway bridge before he halted. He recollected his promise to Maggie, and indecision troubled him. "I can call later, when the children are in bed," he said, and he walked over the crest, and down towards the open country to the east. He might return home by another way, suggested a new idea. He had promised Maggie that he would not call to-day; perhaps it would be best to keep that small promise—there was a larger one to keep, a much larger one.

He had not looked round, so he had not seen Maggie and the children in the garden. Little John saw him first, and told his mother excitedly to look. He wanted to shout and to run after his uncle; there was always such fine play when Uncle John came; but his mother held his hand and kept him at her side. She stood there long after John had gone over the hill. The child lost interest; Uncle John was not coming, and so might be forgotten for to-night. Maggie was about to go in-

doors when she saw Elsie Benlow walk across the bridge, pushing her bicycle, and then mount, and glide below the summit. She took the children into the house, and made ready for their going to bed. They were awed by her silence, and didn't cry at all.

John chose the smaller lanes—he wanted to be alone; the irregular procession of cyclists disturbed him on the high roads. At last he came to a spot where he had often paused. The lane dipped between high walls, and at the bottom there was a gap, with a view upon a knoll, striped in black and brown strongly against the low sun, and round the knoll a long coppice swung in a curve of luscious green beside a brook which came trickling under the road. It was a sheltered little spot, and warm; no wind blew. The cloud tufts glided silently from behind the knoll and over the trees. A throstle sang at the edge of the wood; a tiny bird, a warbler, probably, skulked quietly in the whitethorns by the road. John felt an emotion which brought him near to tears—an emotion which he did not seek to understand. The solitude seemed to hold his thoughts, caressing them. This was happiness, he declared. But a noisy picnic party in a wagonette drove him on, and he knew that happiness was not truly here. The world, busy this Saturday evening in the market places, was only unseen for a moment—and that was not even the real world; he could not escape by running away from that. The real world was in his own heart. And the plant of happiness was no rare plant, to be sought earnestly and long in places where men never trod; it grew, like the shepherd's purse, a common, humble little flower, in every lane and roadside, and thousands saw it every day and never knew it was the plant of happiness.

While he was striving to shape the vague thoughts which brought to him what were discoveries

startlingly novel, he was roused by the tinkling of a cycle bell. He turned, and saw Elsie Benlow.

"I was sure it was you," she said in triumph. "I was at the Vicarage, and I saw you off on your royal loneliness. I took the wrong turning twice, and then my front tire went down—only the valve though, luckily. Then I guessed you would be down some by-lane—I remembered you telling me about this. It *is* pretty, isn't it?"

She stopped abruptly. John saw that she was blushing; then he wondered if she were only flushed from her hurrying.

They walked on together. Elsie explained some of the arrangements for the garden-party, Mr. Pettigo's farewell, to be held at Ridgeway. "I had to find you at once, you see, before the Club finish their arrangements," she said. John agreed, and then their talk drifted away pleasantly, leaving all the garden-party plans stranded in the shallows.

A turning brought them to a disused quarry. The sun's low rays swept over the summit, so that the stone face was in shadow, dark and scarred. One side had slipped away, and the red sand towards the base was held by grassroots and bindweed, and a bush of gorse, decked with gay yellow points. Against the stone face at the bottom lay a pool of black water, with sedges growing at the brink. The machinery was gone long ago; only a wire hawser had been left trailing, a toy for mischievous boys.

"Isn't it lovely!" exclaimed Elsie. "When I was a girl I used to think it wonderfully mysterious. There used to be an old watchman—he told us it was haunted, to frighten us, I expect. I nearly killed myself once, getting hips—there—you see the bushes."

She walked through the gap in the broken wall,

and mounted the path towards the summit of the quarry. John left her bicycle, and followed her.

"It was just here," she explained, turning round to wait for him. "I had a marvellous escape. Oh, wasn't I frightened!"

She leaned forward, and looked over the edge. John ran forward and clutched her hand to hold her; and while she laughed, and they stood hand in hand, a lark sprang up from the field, up and up, singing, and then hovered, and sprang again, the air throbbing with his melody. Down he came again, singing ever, then suddenly dropped among the grass to silence. John had not been conscious of Elsie's hand in his; but when she drew it away he felt that the warmth of her touch had inflamed his inner self.

It was dusk when they reached the town and came into the Bullen. There in the traffic they found talk again after the long silences which had told so much. John had to raise his hat several times to people whom they knew—once, awkwardly, to Mr. and Mrs. Onions.

"Hasn't it been lovely?" said Elsie.

"Yes, I've enjoyed it immensely," said John.

"I'm so glad. Won't you come in?"

"Well—mother and father are expecting me early. I ought to call at the Social Club, really. The committee, you know——"

He felt a hand heavy on his shoulder, and he perceived Mr. Benlow.

"You can spare half an hour," said Mr. Benlow. "A bite o' supper—come along. . . ."

CHAPTER X

SUNDAY

"IT isn't out of the quantity of good things that happiness rises—it's out of our own appreciation of them."

John recollected his having said that to Mrs. Onions, when he had been walking in the garden at Maggie's. Now, on Sunday morning, he repeated it many times. That only was clear in the medley of his thoughts—that, and the resolve to go to Maggie to-day. He tried to reason that he should be perfectly happy, that both his happiness and his duty lay before him together; he had only to take Maggie by the hand. Many similes occurred to his fancy. Hand in hand they would go, like happy children, into a future which should be like a wide sunlit avenue before them. He was sure he had found his real self at last, he was so calmly master of his thoughts. But why did Maggie refuse? At least, why did she delay? She loved him—he saw that she had loved him always, and he thrilled again at the memory of her confession, so gently said, with whispering and tears of joy. Yet she was not his—not yet. Why was she afraid? Was she afraid of herself? No, surely! Did she not love him? She could not doubt that. Of him? Then in pain his thoughts fell away in a vague tumult of apprehension. He was afraid

before the questions which came clamouring to be answered; while out of his disquietude the resolve pushed its way again—he must go to Maggie. There would be nothing to fear while he was at her side; that was his place now. His inner tumult would be stilled. She could not doubt him then.

After breakfast he went into the garden, and walked to and fro. It was going to be a warm day. The sky was intensely blue, with tiny puffs of cloud vapour rolling, very high. The grass was long on the railway bank, decked with countless dandelions and the first heads of the cow-parsnip flowering. Green shoots stood in rows in the garden beds, and at every waft of breeze the paper bunches danced on their strings to frighten the timid sparrows, if by chance there were any timid ones.

Gradually John found his stroll growing to a sharp march, like a sailor's promenade. The little garden was too small; he wanted more air and more space; so he walked round to the front of the houses. The postman was approaching; he was late on Sunday mornings. As he approached, John was attacked by the curiosity which comes to every one at the sight of the postman on delivery.

"Mr. John Allday," said the postman jovially, holding out a letter. "A lady's writing, Mr. Allday." He was an old man, postman many years, and privileged.

John saw Maggie's handwriting on the envelope, and his body suffered in the grip of his emotion. He put the letter slowly in his pocket, fighting against the impulse to hurry, to run to some place where he might read in secret. Hatless, he strolled away from the houses and under the railway bridge. Then he looked round furtively, to make sure he was unobserved.

DEAR JOHN:

I shall have gone away when you get this to-morrow morning for the week-end or a few days longer, perhaps the little change will do the children good. John dear, why should I spoil your future. I can't dear, all your future is so bright and I want you to rise high I am sure you will. I should be a drag on you. Besides you have your mother to think of—she must see you succeed. You must not disappoint her you will not disappoint me, I know. My life was chosen five years ago, and now I have only got the children to live for and your success. Please don't try to make me change—don't make it hard for me.

I saw you yesterday with Elsie Benlow. She is very fond of you, John, I know. I have known it a long time.

What can I write more, you know all I would say. I shall start in business I think at once. I am going to see about it the next few days.

Forgive me please I want you to be happy. God bless you, dear, good-bye.

MAGGIE.

The writing was irregular and broken, penned evidently under the stress of great emotion, labouring for expression in an unaccustomed medium. John suffered first astonishment, then dread: indignation came, and fierce desire, and lastly the emptiness of grief; his inner self collapsed, and he was weak in body, as though after an illness. A thrush called boldly in an apple tree beyond the hedge; the path was dappled with the fallen blossom. John heard only Maggie's voice, echoed within himself; his eyes were blurred with tears.

A milk-float rattled towards the town, rousing him. When it had passed he read the letter again,

then put it in his pocket and walked slowly back under the bridge. Where had Maggie gone? There was only one early train on Sunday mornings, one in each direction; but there were two stations —that made four trains. They had gone now; it was too late to see her at the station. One train had passed while he stood at the back door after breakfast. Perhaps she had been in that, and had seen him as she passed. Sam had a cousin married at Clenver, a favourite spot for trippers from Selbridge, especially on early-closing days and Saturdays. It was on the ridge of the hills— a popular cycling rendezvous. Maggie used to go there sometimes with Sam, whose cousin kept a small boarding-house and restaurant, and did prosperously through the summer with teas in the garden, and picnic parties. There were not many places where Maggie could go to-day. She had not half a dozen friends, and she could not go to them without warning. She could not be far away. It was to Clenver she had gone, surely. He might go over on his bicycle; there would be time even after dinner. But she might not be there— and she would not let him see her alone. "If I was only sure!" he said an an agony of indecision. Perhaps Maggie intended to start in business similar to Sam's cousin at Clenver. She had thought of it, he knew. Once he started quickly towards the house; then after a few paces his speed fell away, and he stood hesitating. What would his mother say at his sudden rushing off on his bicycle? He would have to overhaul it first, and she would ask interminable questions. He dared not confess the truth at once. She believed that he was going to church this morning; he had told her so, and he had promised the Benlows. That would not matter, he declared, if Maggie was at Clenver, if he might be sure of seeing her. And

then he discovered the reluctance in his heart, and he was shamed. Maggie had seen deeper there than he had. She had thought of his mother and of her hopes, and of all the promise of his future. Would his pleading change her, or add only to her grief? At the thought of her suffering, and of her loneliness, he was awed, and for a moment his thoughts were hushed.

He stopped by the terrace to talk to a neighbour before he faced his mother indoors.

"I couldn't think where you had gone," she said. "You'll have to be quick if you're going to the mission. You *are* going, aren't you? Didn't you say you promised Mr. Benlow."

"Yes," he told her. "I'll get ready now."

He strove to recollect the words, to justify himself in his having said he had promised to go.

"We shall see you at Nickling to-morrow morning, I suppose? It'll be Pettigo's last sermon there."

Mr. Benlow's words.

"Oh, you must!" said Elsie—and then he had consented. The words were forgotten, but he was sure he had promised, and they would expect him to be there.

He set out as soon as he was ready; it was better to be in the open air, in movement, than brooding indoors. When his mother had spoken of church he had not looked at the time, and he had hurried unnecessarily. Now he saw that he would arrive too soon unless he walked very slowly, and he felt that his agitation would not permit him to walk slowly; so he mounted the road along the ridge—a lane branching beyond the coppices would bring him down to Nickling.

When he had crossed above the railway he stood a moment to glance down at the Bristol Road. A black figure moved in the drive before the Kings-

norton's house, Ridgeway. In a moment it reappeared below, and came out on the road, not a single figure, but two, close together. Two others followed—Mr. and Mrs. Kingsnorton, guessed John. He fancied he recognized Marian Kingsnorton. Her companion was the curate—he was sure of that. They were walking arm in arm. It could not be Marian. Then who was it? Barbara? In sudden pain he told himself that it could not be Barbara. The suggestion was absurd and impossible. It must be Marian; he recognized her perfectly—yet he was not sure, despite his asseveration. Was this why the farewell garden party was to be held at the Kingsnortons'? John grew hot and uncomfortable as he hurried. He wished he had not come this way, and it was too late to turn back.

As he came do n by the lane to Nickling he saw the Benlows on the high road, and he walked more slowly, gauging his speed so that he would meet them. Mrs. Benlow had not come—she never walked this far now. Mr. Benlow was with Elsie, and behind them walked Willie, and his fiancée, who was staying with them for the week-end.

"You're an energetic young man," said Mr. Benlow, when they met. "It was all I could do to get these folks out."

"Oh, father!" exclaimed Elsie. "It was as much as we could do to get you out."

John smiled. Their company seemed to bring him the anodyne he craved.

"I'm disappointed, Mr. Allday," said Elsie, when they had walked a little way. "You haven't asked me anything—just when I was waiting to tell you. Have you heard, or have you lost all your curiosity?"

John was puzzled.

"Oh," he said, with sudden recollection—"Mr.

Pettigo's secret isn't it? I saw him this morning with the Kingsnortons. It isn't—er——"

"That isn't fair," said Elsie, while he was struggling. "You should have waited to be told. Yes—he's engaged to Marian, and I'll tell you a real secret: she was in love with him all the time, right from the first."

She did not perceive how he was affected.

"Are you sure?" said he.

"Of course! I've got eyes, haven't I?"

"But she hasn't told you the moral," interrupted her brother: "never boast when you think you've caught a woman's eye—say your prayers instead."

"Willie!" exclaimed his fiancée.

"They say already, some of 'em, that Pettigo couldn't have the one, so he's taking the other," said Mr. Benlow. "That's a nasty insinuation—trust your gossips to find that sort. Marian will make him a far better wife than ever her sister could have done; she's got more sympathy, more talent, and she's genuinely fond of him. She's older—well, you can't have everything in this world—you can't turn your dreams into realities, although so many of us try. By the time you come to my age, you young folks, you'll see that life is one long compromise between the ideals you order and the realities that Fate offers you over the counter."

"That's it, father!" said Willie. "Glorious youth, ready to battle for a smile. In age it takes a pickled onion to do it."

John enjoyed the talk—it drove away his thoughts.

There was a big congregation this morning to hear Mr. Pettigo for the last time at the mission. John sat with the Benlows, and they walked back together after the service.

"No mistake, it's a lovely day," said Mr. Benlow.

He stopped, took off his hat, and mopped his brow. "It's a day for a good dinner and a cigar, and then forty winks in a comfortable chair, with your feet up, outside in the shade—and that's what I'm going to have."

"But, father, you said you were going to take us out a drive," said Elsie.

"Did I?"

"We'll go without him," said Willie.

"Ask John here," suggested his father. "He wouldn't see me robbed of honest sleep—would you, John?"

"That's right, John, my boy," said Willie affably. "We'll leave the old folks to their indigestion and their cup of strong tea at four o'clock."

John accepted the invitation gladly. Fate, he believed, was keeping him from the loneliness he dreaded. To-day at least he would not be left alone with thought; here was fortune holding out her hands, full of active joys. When he thought of Maggie, it was to wonder why she had written of Elsie Benlow. Perhaps it was true that Elsie liked him—she did like him—yes. Was there more than friendship in her thoughts? Did Maggie see deeper than he in this thing also? He had always been fond of Elsie; she was so unaffected, so good-natured. Mr. Benlow, prosperous now, had started as low as he, and had risen no more rapidly. He had never worshipped Elsie, as he had worshipped the Barbara Kingsnorton who had never really lived. Elsie was too jolly, too splendid a companion, to be worshipped—she *was* a splendid comrade—and what, after all, did a man crave—a comrade, and more than a comrade, but essentially a comrade. He was startled by the new swiftness of his thoughts.

Near the Toll they met John's father out for his

morning promenade, and they stayed for a while to talk before parting.

Mr. Allday entered the house in front of John.

"Your son, Mrs. Allday—he's got something on his mind," he announced solemnly.

"I know he has," said Mrs. Allday. "I don't like it."

John was startled by her tone.

"He's going out a drive, breaking the Sabbath, Mrs. Allday, with a young woman named Benlow, and——"

"Go on with you, giving me such a start!" exclaimed Mrs. Allday. "I hope he never does anything worse."

"He won't hurt if he never does anything better."

They were merry over dinner. Afterwards they waited to see the dogcart arrive before they prepared for their usual nap.

Elsie was driving. Willie and his fiancée sat at the back.

"Jump up, Mr. Allday!" she called out merrily. "Willie says I'm the worst lady whip within fifty miles, so I can promise you excitement, if not enjoyment."

"Just what I want," said John.

"Which?"

"Both."

His father and mother stood at the front window till the dogcart had gone out of sight.

"There goes your son, Mrs. Allday," said John's father. "You won't see him back again as he's gone."

"What do you mean?" she said, alarmed.

"He'll come back engaged, or as near it as makes no matter—you see if he don't."

"Why can't you say what you mean straight out, and not go startling anybody?"

Mr. Allday slipped his arm in her's.

"Come along, Susan, old girl," he said gently. "Half an hour's doze. Your lad's in good hands. Why, in three or four years' time you won't get the chance to sleep on a Sunday afternoon: it'll be 'Grandma—can I play with this? Grandma!'"

"Go along, you wretch!" she exclaimed laughing.

"You're blushing! You are! You are!" he cried triumphantly. "Why, old girl, you're good-looking still! If you don't go off upstairs at once I shan't sleep in my chair for thinking how nice you are."

He led her gaily into the sitting-room.

"It *is* nice to think of him doing well, isn't it?"

"It is, Susan."

He kissed her gently before she went upstairs. Then he put the cushion right in his arm-chair, arrange the hassock for his feet, folded his arms, and settled down for his wheezy sleep till tea-time.

THE END

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