1758

YOUNG HEARTS

J. E. BUCKROSE

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MARRIAGE WHILE YOU WAIT
THE TALE OF MR. TUBBS
THE SILENT LEGION
THE GOSSIP SHOP
THE MATCHMAKERS
THE ROUND-ABOUT
SPRAY ON THE WINDOWS
GAY MORNING
BECAUSE OF JANE
A BACHELOR'S COMEDY
THE BROWNS

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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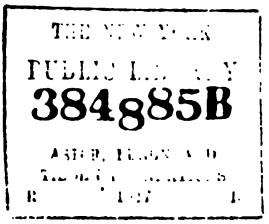

YOUNG HEARTS

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CHAPTER I

"Hear now what Strange Adventures may befall,
With one Poore Pigge at bottom of them all."
Old Rhyme.

The morning light shone pleasantly on a well-appointed breakfast-table round which sat Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, with their two daughters, Helen and Maude. A sparrow chirped on a laurel bush outside, and the postman whistled cheerfully as he tramped up the path from the iron gate. No scene could have been more peaceful, or more apparently devoid of any element of tragedy.

Then a housemaid came in through the highly varnished door bearing a silver dish, and immediately Mrs. Thompson's mild features took on an expression of acute anguish, while Mr. Thompson turned on the girl such a face of outraged indignation that she dropped the dish. Yet it was no poison bowl. It was just ordinary bacon.

"Take it away, woman! Take it away!" shouted Mr. Thompson, waving his arms about.

"Dear! Dear! How *could* cook—— When she *knows*——" said Mrs. Thompson agitatedly.

"Cook's gone off for her day out," muttered the new housemaid as she bent to gather up the fragments from the carpet. Helen and Maude did not appear at all sur-

f!"

"We all do that!" sighed Mrs. Thc
our poor father little thought——" Ar
pt to leave her sentences unfinished, t
ny unnecessary labour.

"Easy enough to be wise after the
'hompson testily. "More tea, please."

But what his wife suggested was tru
ttle thought, when he responded to the
ıose responsible for his country's we
'resident of the Pig Club in the mews b
illa-residence, to what end that patrio
im.

It had all seemed so absolutely simple.
ıe pigs were being fattened, the men
own the mews, poke their property
'alking-sticks, and return home to tea.
'ere ready for killing they would draw
ıe initial processes of curing to be done
lsewhere, and sit down to await prin

it was quite a difficult art: and the ultimate result, in Mr. Thompson's case, was a burial in the back garden.

Now this, in itself, was nothing. Mr. Thompson was disappointed, but a pig more or less would neither make him nor break him. At least, so it seemed. But, like most public men, he was not without enemies, and in his career as chairman of the Urban District Council he had made a vindictive enemy in the person of a milkman named Binns. Poor Binns suffered from an inherited complaint; he was quite unable at times to tell a pump from a cow. And this family weakness exposed him to a fine which he never forgot or forgave.

Now came his opportunity for revenge. He went from house to house, filled with righteous indignation against their chairman, who had hoarded good bacon in his cellar until it went rotten, before he would share it with his poorer neighbours.

In vain did Mr. Thompson explain that he had only possessed one pig, and that the smallest of the whole lot. In vain did a group of friends of all shades of opinion call together a public meeting in the Wressle Assembly Hall in order to put the matter in its true light before the electorate. The fact was, that Mr. Thompson had had his day. Ten years earlier he might have piled his cellar from floor to ceiling with hoarded bacon and escaped censure; now, if any one had accused him of stealing a baby's bottle with which to refresh himself on the way to the Council Chamber, it would not have been actually believed, but he would somehow have come to be regarded as inimical to the cause of the helpless and innocent. His time had come, and the pig was only the instrument that Fate had blindly seized.

But he had achieved eminence so young—having actually opened a small sale of work in place of his mother, a

ng fountain. Of course it was an acci
versight was explained, and Mr. Tl
stonishment passed. But the thing hac
een possible to forget him.

Then came the affair of the bacon;
is failure to be elected a member of
District Council. When he came away
otes and walked home with a well-m
aid, "Better luck next time," and adde
o give up before people began to think
ob, he answered intelligently and chee
as conscious of a kind of surprise
Thompson truly felt as it may be suppo
e first thundered and nobody trembled
onfessed that when the defeated counci
Mrs. Thompson shared the inconvenienc
ndured in like circumstances.

During the next few weeks both the g
way from home: Helen with friends
erm of motor-driving in the service

those long evenings, one on each side of the fire. For the ex-chairman of the Council had soon roused himself from that astonished numbness, determined subconsciously to have a last kick; that is, to make himself prominent once more, at least. With which object he resigned all his other public posts and wrapped himself in the mantle of dignified seclusion. He revived a little on being pressed to remain in office, and was secretly glad that he could still make himself felt by sticking to his decision: but Jove with nothing to do but knock the thunder about at home is an ill companion, and there is no doubt that both Mr. and Mrs. Thompson were more unhappy than they had ever been before in their prosperous married lives. For in the past nothing could be done in Wressle without Mr. Thompson. He was always "approaching" somebody on behalf of something, or being "approached," and each time this term was used he felt a pleasant little access of self-importance. When he sat in his chair in the Council Chamber and moved solemnly that a street-lamp be placed near a doctor's door in a poorish quarter, he had seen his own solemn importance reflected on the faces round him, and they had all felt gravely satisfied—as if they themselves were taking a hand at ushering new electors into Wressle.

Now that was all over. Mr. Thompson no longer rose alertly from his chair after dinner, put on his scarf and coat and marched off with short, active steps down the street to some meeting or other, but sat at home, saying he was glad to have a little peace and quietness, in the intervals of blowing Mrs. Thompson up about any subject that came handy.

At last, however, Fate, who had blindly thrown the pig in the Thompsons' path, now came their way again with a little yellow book entitled *Farming for Amateurs*. It was

selves to "carry on," whatever their
owing Sunday—it was on a Tuesday
ıe began to feel that he had perhaps
:he Council because he was wanted
By Sunday week he had grown entl
:o increase the corn, meat, and milk
whole of Europe was crying out.
neeting which he at the last momen
was how he had long felt about the
:ealizing where his opinions were le:
ıothing in these days. We had had en
nan's business was to do.' There fol
Thompson tipped his Homburg sligh
rore, and was almost himself again.

This was naturally a great relief to
ıer sufferings, though she did hope th
ınd in their buying a farm and living ir

So far as she herself was concerned
much mind ceasing to be a prominen
The air of platforms was agreeable t

ing just to their liking. Every bell, every hot-water appliance, every light was exactly where it best ministered to the convenience of the master and mistress, and she prayed—with the utmost reverence—that every farm they heard of might be snapped up by some other deserving person before her husband closed with the offer.

But since the first catastrophe, bacon had not appeared on the family breakfast-table, and this morning's episode had brought everything back; so that Mr. Thompson's face was red and clouded as he opened the letters which the postman had just brought. Then his expression cleared and he dashed down an envelope on the table.

"Hooray! They've accepted my price. Never dreamed they would! Splendid!"

"Is it that place we motored over to see last week?" said Mrs. Thompson drearily.

"Yes. My word, we have luck! Lovely country. Fine garden. Farmer near who will cultivate the land for me for the first year. I really don't——"

"But there's no railway station within *miles*, Father," said Helen. "Shall you like being buried in the country like that?"

"Buried! What's a car for?" said Mr. Thompson in good humour; but when he noticed that Maude sat silent, he became grave. "Don't you fancy the place, my dear?"

"Oh, I don't care," said Maude.

A little hush fell on the group round the table, Mr. Thompson fidgeting uncomfortably with his watch-chain and Helen looking anxiously at her sister, with wide-open grey eyes which seemed rather at variance with the rest of her determined little face, being placed far apart under a wide, clear forehead and of a changeful softness.

"My poor girl!" thought Mrs. Thompson. And indeed

Then she heard Mrs. Thompson speak
"But, William, I really can't think yo
uch a remote spot yourself. You are us
ıtellectual talk, and so on. And farm
re not——"
"Not what?" said Mr. Thompson
/hat? If you have any objection to the
or Heaven's sake don't"—he snatched at
–"don't damn with faint pauses. Yo
an't stand it."
Helen glanced at her mother's troubled
ent up. She must bring *her* common s
uestion.
"It's all very well, Father," she said.
ıink twice before dragging Mother off
ıe country, just because you were not
ıe Urban District Council. You don't
ourself. You want to take a silly sort
eople of Wressle; and I don't see why

ing at the door, he was not used to hearing it bang as loud as all that.

Helen herself sat defiant, ready for the inevitable explosion; but, to her intense surprise, none came. Mr. Thompson turned a deep ugly red and remained quite silent, his face twitching a little. All three women sat staring at him for a moment or two; then Helen's own face flushed until the crimson tide crept down her neck and brought the moisture to her eyes. It was horrible—horrible! She saw her father sitting humiliated there before them, and she had done it. She felt odiously ashamed herself, as if she had uncovered some nakedness in his soul which she had no right to see.

"Oh, Father, I—I didn't mean! I'm sure you thought it would be nice for us all, too. And Mother doesn't really care much about going out. I expect we shall love it when we are settled down. It—it was just——"

Mr. Thompson lifted his eyes from his plate and looked across at his wife.

"I had no idea you objected to the plan so much. We will remain in Wressle, of course, if you all feel like that about it."

But though he had been a dictatorial husband, and a father with a too great idea of his own omniscience, they loved him; and they could not bear to see him there at the head of his own table like a bubble pricked.

"No—no," said Mrs. Thompson almost eagerly, so moved was she. "I'm sure Helen never meant anything of the sort. I like the country. And—and I was only saying the other day that I was sick of the High Street, and meeting the same Wressle people, and saying the same things every morning."

"Yes," agreed Helen, now quite cold and pale after that

...addie was the last to speak, as
the morning light, which showed h
hour of the day, with a fine skin
when dusted with powder, pink lips,
brown eyes. Her movements were
spite of the slight angularity of her
never dressed for effect, or did he
simplest style, and very few women
men could possibly admire so in Ma
she said in her slow, somewhat draw
what there is to make such a fuss abc
And we can always go away if we are
to lock us up in a moated grange. I'm r
myself."

"Well, I'm not so keen on the place
home," said Helen. "Such lots of the
are married, or have gone away to so
hold no brief for Wressle—as Wressl
that Mother might not care for the cc

"That's the point."

acting rather nobly, and that she ought to be very proud to have such confidence reposed in her judgment.

"We will try it," she responded. "As the girls say, we can but go away if we find it too dull."

"And we can always sell for more than we gave," added Mr. Thompson, reviving slightly. "Never dreamed they would accept my terms!"

"Trust you for making a good bargain, Father," said Helen with artificial sprightliness.

For she was still feeling a little oddly shaken; her father could never seem absolutely the same to her any more. Oh! she wanted to go out and knock together the heads of the ungrateful Wressle electorate who had caused that odious moment. She'd *enjoy* doing it. . . .

But there was Mr. Thompson speaking again, almost in his normal manner. "I rather fancy I got the better of another prospective buyer. I ran over again yesterday—didn't mention it to you, Henrietta, in case there should be any disappointment—and I saw a rather shabbily dressed young man hanging about the place. He told me he was learning farming from that man who seems willing to cultivate our land for the time being, and I thought he was rather anxious to put me off taking the place. Said nothing definite, you know; but if there was a defect, he pointed it out."

"No doubt he wanted the place himself," said Mrs. Thompson; and was so pleased with her own shrewdness that she began to feel almost glad they had got the better of this objectionable sharper.

"Exactly. Just what I thought, my dear," said Mr. Thompson, rubbing his hands.

Then the maid came back again to announce that the Vicar wished to speak to Mr. Thompson for one moment—

out his departure and sure that Wress
e same place without the Thompsons.
tually the traitor who had first ventured
rs of grass in the newly-planted Munic
ıompson was a dictatorial old busybody
dy knew anything but himself, and tha
d a change. The other four had each su
the growing opinion that Wressle had l
ɔo much Thompson." But all now coml
ting regret, and during the ensuing
tically combined with many of their fe
t up a testimonial to Mr. Thompson.
In due course the day of presentation
ıompson and family for a last time mor
Wressle platform than ever before. An
e crowded hall saw him standing there,
d wanted to be rid of him began to f
ing. That quality in last times which ra
e heart for the moment, began to sway
d come more from curiosity than any otl

glowed crimson above the gleaming white collar, and his little black eyes were quite dim as he stammered out that he should never forget. . . . He should always be proud. . . . Privilege for so many happy years. . . . And here he was obliged to stop and blow his nose, while his fellow-townspeople stamped and shouted and clapped in the body of the hall, and actually believed for a few minutes that they liked and regretted him as much as he then thought they did.

Thus the "something kind" in human affairs, which does still differentiate them from the blind and cruel operations of Nature, worked on Mr. Thompson's behalf; so that he was able to leave the town in which he had lived all his life with restored courage and self-confidence.

Indeed, as he drove past the shop windows on the way to the station, he found himself able to look at the display of bacon with scarcely a twinge; and he was so taken up with responding to greetings on either side of the road that he had to tell the chauffeur to go more slowly, lest he should inadvertently hurt any one's feelings. That drive was, in fact, almost like a royal procession, and the stationmaster himself came forth to assist the ladies to alight.

The girls seemed cheerful enough, for they were young and change beckoned them; but poor Mrs. Thompson felt like a cat turned out of its accustomed corner. She was not in the happy position of her husband, who had received inside information that the gods were going to use him for the regeneration of Muckleby.

CHAPTER II

"To thee, Sweet Country, I will take my way,
And there in peace end out my Little Day;
Tend well my flocks, garner the teeming hive,
And teach th' unlettered Rustic how to live."

The first arduous days of unpacking and putting straight were over, and now Mr. Thompson sat at his ease on a wooden bench in the garden, jotting down a few notes for a lecture which he intended to deliver on the subject of co-operative butter-making as soon as he could secure the Parish schoolroom for that purpose. He had already given most handsomely to the collection on the two previous Sundays, thus paving his way in Muckleby with that substance which smooths the rough places on the earth with even greater certainty than oil the troubled waters.

The evening was so clear and still that a sound of laughter came faintly from the distant Muckleby Arms, and Mr. Thompson smiled to think how happy these simple folk were; but his smile might have been less placid had he realized that he furnished the amusement, and that the cause of all this laughter was a résumé given by the farmer opposite, of his own views on agriculture. Harbottle was the man's name, and he had a jolly, bluff sort of manner which made strangers feel sure his heart was in the right place. It was he who had undertaken to cultivate Mr. Thompson's land until the following March, on terms which appeared almost generous.

A little way from the wooden bench were the two girls, standing with their faces towards the sunset, under an apple tree, the rosy petals of blossom falling every now and then upon their hair. Mr. Thompson looked up from his notes and viewed, first his daughters, and then his wife, who came slowly across the grass, smelling a spray of lilac. A cuckoo called over the wood beyond Harbottle's farm. He felt glad he had come to Muckleby.

Helen also listened to the cuckoo over the wood, and her determined little figure in the level rays of the evening sun had no hint of sentimental musings about it. But it was she, and not the raptly-gazing Maude, who thought, with a sudden glow of understanding, that *of course* when people first began to dream of Paradise they called it a garden.

"Helen!" said Maude, drawing a deep breath. "Look at that sky. Did you ever see anything so lovely?"

Helen grunted—not pretty, but true. She somehow hated to brush the bloom off all that with words. "I daresay we shall get sick of it."

"Mother seems afraid we shall never marry here. At least, you. So far as I am concerned——" She sighed and looked away.

"Poor old Maude!" Then Helen added quickly: "But Mother need not worry about me. I do not intend to marry. The papers are always telling us that there are not enough men to go round. Well, *I*, for one, don't intend to compete. Some poor girl who can't get on without a man can have my share."

"But you won't like doing nothing particular all your life, shall you?" said Maude.

Helen frowned.

"That's just the bother. It seems wrong for girls like ourselves, who have money, to take the jobs from others

who can't live without them. And yet to be condemned to do the flowers and dust the drawing-room after knowing the pleasures of real, important work—oh, it's a real problem. Anyway, I shall stop at home this summer and drive the car for Father. I can do that without hurting any one, I suppose."

Mrs. Thompson's voice travelled across the grass.

"Girls! Time you came in to supper!"

"Look," said Helen as they turned to go, pointing to a distant figure on the crest of a large corn-field. "That's that Mr. Bennett who is learning farming at the Harbottles'. Don't you remember his hanging about the premises here when Father was looking over the farm?"

"I expect he is disappointed that he didn't get it," said Maude.

"Don't see how he can be. It is obvious he could never have afforded the price," said Helen, regarding the outline of a shortish, tired figure against the sheet of pale gold.

Then they joined their parents, and all four went into the dining-room. Mrs. Thompson said, as she took her place: "I told the maids they need not hurry back. They have gone to shop for me in the village."

"Why send both at once? You should begin as you mean to go on," said Mr. Thompson, who always knew everything better than anybody, from sewing on a button to building an empire.

"They seemed nervous about walking alone in the country lanes, being both town girls," said Mrs. Thompson. "And as they are already unsettled——"

"Pooh! Pooh! What are they afraid of?" said Mr. Thompson.

"Lots of people are afraid of loneliness when they are not used to it," said Helen, also dogmatic. "I only hope the

shopkeepers won't start telling them any tales about this house. Kerman says it is supposed to be haunted."

"I didn't know Kerman ever said anything," replied Mr. Thompson. "A more silent lad I never saw in my life, though he does his garden work well."

And sure enough, a little after twilight the maids came back, trudging heavily about the hall and staircase as they drew down blinds for the night, with every sign of not having found the village of Muckleby to their taste.

"Better say nothing," murmured Helen. "They'll have settled down by morning, most likely."

So the maids retired first, and then the family followed. The moonlit night was so softly clear that the old house, and the trees behind it in their new foliage, hung as still as a painted farm against the cloudless sky. Inside the house everything was as quiet. The only thing that moved was the patch of moonlight on the floor of the long corridor; and the hours crept silently towards dawn.

Then, suddenly, the silence was torn across by a shriek of agony. In an instant, doors burst open upon the corridor, and all four members of the Thompson family emerged in various stages of undress. They paused, paralysed, at the sight of a white figure rounding the dark corner of the corridor wringing its hands and shrieking, followed by another similarly engaged. After a second's breathless pause, they saw it was only Gladys and the cook. Reaction produced the insensate rage which the mildest feel when they have been badly frightened by their own imaginations.

"Fools! Idiots!" bellowed Mr. Thompson. "What's all this?"

"Hush, dear!" murmured Mrs. Thompson, pulling his pyjama sleeve; mindful even in this crisis of the awful con-

sequences of offending cook. "They'll leave if you talk like that."

As she spoke, the first ghostly figure crossed the stream of moonlight, wailing out: "I felt it! I felt it! I felt Something Cold pass across my face."

Helen turned to her father.

"They *have* heard. I said they would!"

Cook caught the words and leaned against the oak panelling, saying faintly: "Then you knew!" And she added, with rising indignation: "You enticed us down here, and all the time you knew all about it. Shame!"

"We ought to get compensation if there is a law in the land," said the housemaid. Then she relapsed into tears again. "Oh dear; they said we should *see* it; they never said we should *feel* it!"

"Pore girl! We've been treated shameful," said cook, and she pressed her hand to her side.

"Anyway," said Mr. Thompson, still very much upset, for he was of full habit and had been badly startled—"anyway," he said nastily, "I suppose there is no need to hold your side like that, cook. The—the whatever it was—didn't dig you in the ribs."

Upon which the housemaid gave a hysterical giggle, which further angered both Mr. Thompson and cook, and Mrs. Thompson stepped forward from the bedroom with the eider-down, which she put round her husband's shoulders. "Don't you think you will get a chill, dear?"

He flung it off, glaring round at her. But somehow every one became aware of the extreme lightness of their toilette, and cook backed towards the dark part of the corridor, saying as she went: "Me coat's downstairs. I'll go and get it. But no power on earth shall make me go into that room again before daylight."

"Nor me either," said Gladys, also retreating. Then she burst forth again. "Oh, I won't stay! I want to go home! You've never felt Something Cold flapping across your face in the dark, Mrs. Thompson, or else you wouldn't talk like you do. Miss Maude's different. Miss Maude knows there is such things. I saw a book about it in her room when I was dusting. Miss Maude understands . . ."

And suddenly every one realized, what had been overlooked in the general excitement, that Maude hung faint and pallid against the door-post.

But this unfortunate circumstance seemed somehow to conciliate cook and Gladys, who consented to borrow shawls and so forth from the family, and went downstairs to make tea for the poor young lady as well as themselves.

Dawn was breaking as the group of six gathered in the hall round a tray of steaming cups, and it fell forlornly on Mr. Thompson's ruffled hair and unshaven countenance, but he had come to see by now the urgent necessity for taking steps to conciliate Gladys and cook.

"One cannot say that you are in fault," he said. "Sit down, both of you, and we will talk this thing over. You must know that remote country villages are always seething with superstition. Sensible people, like you and me, cook, are of course above believing in such nonsense. No doubt the foolish tales you have been told when you were out produced an unpleasant dream. Perhaps"—he smiled his best platform smile—"perhaps we may assume that you had pickles for supper?" He saw cook's face darken and added hastily: "I am fond of a bit of pickle myself."

But cook was not vulnerable to this form of address, and simply repeated that she had felt Something Cold across her face, and that she was not going to remain in a house where she might again be subjected to such visitations. The house-

maid said much the same; and when full daylight came they supported each other in the process of packing in the haunted apartment. By ten o'clock, the Thompsons listened to the crunch of departing wheels on the drive and knew that they were deserted.

"Well," said Mr. Thompson, reaching for his spud, and preparing to go forth into his fields, "this episode may be, after all, a blessing in disguise. It shows more plainly than ever the need there is for enlightenment in such places as Muckleby. I am confirmed in my opinion that there is much useful work for me to do here. And Muckleby will be only a nucleus. The influence will spread. It is a disgrace to the twentieth century that such foolish superstitions should still have power to work active harm."

The three women paused a moment in the fresh air, watching him go briskly down the drive with his spud, like a knight on a new rural crusade; then Mrs. Thompson said meditatively: "I can't see it quite in the same light. If your father had to wash up——" And they all went indoors.

. . . . . .

But fortunately, after a brief interval, a young person named Mathilda Bain was heard of through the agency of Mrs. Harbottle, the farmer's wife, and she consented to come and do what she could with the aid of Mrs. Kerman, the mother of the garden boy. Mathilda informed Mrs. Thompson that she had left the Vicarage because it was a bad-living place.

"What! The Vicar!" said Mrs. Thompson, shocked. "He strikes one as being such an austere sort of man."

"Oh, he's all right," said Mathilda easily. "But there's porridge—porridge—with more porridge for a change. Nobody in their senses can say it isn't a bad-living place."

So the Vicarage morals were justified, and Mrs. Thomp-

son became aware that good living in Muckleby meant good feeding.

But no other domestic help could be found, and the family settled down to a life on somewhat simpler lines than any they had known before, with the staff already mentioned. The evenings in especial were different, because Mathilda Bain refused to "sleep in," and left as a rule about six o'clock.

With the coming of Mathilda, the Thompsons ceased to stand on the edge of events in Muckleby and slipped finally into the warm current of village life. They, themselves, were unaware of this, and still imagined that they remained detached observers, but they were quickly pushed into the main stream by the sheer force of Mathilda's intense and ardent interest in every trifling thing that happened. The other member of the staff, Mrs. Kerman, was a pale, stout woman who seldom spoke, and her son consented to sleep in the house so as to light the kitchen fire in the morning. He inherited his mother's gift of silence and went about his business in a stolid way that rather touched Helen, who vaguely felt, without reasoning it out, that he had been defrauded of his youth. She went so far as to offer him picture papers and occasional sweets, in a sort of attempt to make up; but he never seemed to respond in the least, or to be particularly grateful.

Oddly enough, Mr. Thompson himself, who had dragged his reluctant family down to Muckleby, was the first to feel discontented there. He chafed when it rained at the sense of his own powerlessness in the face of things which cannot either be "approached" or "dealt with" by committees—however well supported; and he was even beginning to feel a little lost and desolate in this strange world where the

ıich had met with such a brilliant succe
ot put a price on the tail of a ghost.

Ruminating thus pensively, he heard th
[onk!" of the doctor's old car, which w
ɔout those lanes, and was watched for wit
ɛart from little square windows. Here a
hompson, cheering up a bit, was som
ɛrhaps be "approached."

The car stopped at a cottage gate and t
ɡether under the high, bluish sky.

"Hope you like your new residence so fa
reezily. "Sorry to hear you had had t
ıaids when you first came. Married man-
ıeans!"

Here, then, was Mr. Thompson's chanc
[e hastened to use it.

"Yes. Preposterous, wasn't it? Bu
ıtounded by the gross superstition which
lace. One wonders that such a state of
ı these enlightened days. Surely we educ

you worry yourself, Mr. Thompson," he added over his shoulder. "All no good. We have quite ceased to believe in our Squire about here, and almost ceased to believe in our Creator, but we still stick to our superstitions. Fundamental need of human nature, you know. Besides, I'm not absolutely certain I didn't see the White Lady on Muckleby Hill myself one very dark night. Don't you trouble. We're used to it. It doesn't hurt us. Very kind of you all the same. Good-day."

"Good-day," said Mr. Thompson, without any great cordiality.

But the little interview had cheered him, and his thoughts grew more indulgent as he went along. "Poor man! Buried alive for years in a place like this; what could you expect?"

So he felt the old pleasant sense of superiority once more as he tramped across his own fields, decapitating an occasional thistle.

And all the sights and sounds that l
Are omens in a Village Calendar!"

A high wind from the west was blowin
formed apples in thousands all over th
Mr. Thompson stood watching the dest
orchard, he felt like the little Scottish bo
twice on his way to school, picked himself
remark with a snort of contemptuous in
This is paltry!"

Mr. Thompson fumed up and down the
ing to himself that all this waste was in
Something ought to be done. But the slo
had so often initiated a campaign in Wr
here. He was once more up against fo
newspaper articles could intimidate nor su
and he did not like it.

Then Helen came along the path with
which she had been gathering, her face l
colour from brow to chin, and a strand of

said Helen, all unsuspecting, cheerful with buoyant health and her fight against the wind. "I began to think the old man at the Hall had been doing us."

Mr. Thompson frowned more deeply, and glanced at some twisted Elizabethan chimneys which could be seen across the fields, for Helen—annoying in herself—had started another unpleasant train of thought.

"Odd that Wyndham has not called," he said. "Can't understand it."

"But he does not really live there, Father," said Helen easily. "He only comes down now and then for week-ends."

"That does not matter. As squire of the place, he should have made an opportunity to call," said Mr. Thompson.

"I suppose he has hardly got used to being squire yet," said Helen. "You see, his great-uncle only died about a year ago. I'm told the affairs are by no means settled up yet; and when he is here, he is always motoring over to see some girl at Lennington."

"Mathilda Bain again, no doubt!" said Mr. Thompson. "That woman is an incorrigible gossip."

Helen laughed. "We all shall be soon, Father. You have to be, if you live in the country. That's why Mathilda Bain finds life so extraordinarily interesting; she's thrilled by every passing cart and wonders for half an hour where it is going, and why."

"Well, I can only say *I* shall never descend to that," said Mr. Thompson. Then he glanced at the twisted chimneys again and added, after a pause: "I saw the butcher going into the Hall grounds this morning with a large joint as well as a fowl in his basket. That rather looks as if Wyndham would be at home this week-end."

"The housekeeper must eat," responded Helen. Then she added on reflection: "But perhaps you are right. I don't

suppose she would order poultry for herself." She walked on with her basket, saying as she went: "Anyway, Bennett has called. Didn't you see his card on the table?"

"Oh yes," said Mr. Thompson. "But I don't know that I care to encourage that young man. Why is he learning farming at his age? He is over thirty. And he told me, when I met him on the road, that he was sorry not to resume his job in Egypt after the war. It appears he was manager of a branch bank somewhere out there. And unless there was something unsatisfactory about him, he would certainly have had a chance to go back. No! There is something not open about him. In the course of my public life I flatter myself I have learnt to be somewhat of a judge of character, and I tell you he is not open. He has something to conceal, I believe. I hope you girls will not have much to do with him."

"Don't you worry about that, Father," said Helen, smiling. "He shows no signs whatever of wanting to have anything to do with us. Mother is quite puzzled. Two young men in the place, and neither of them wanting to run after Maude."

"Maude always has been so very attractive," said Mr. Thompson seriously. "I hope she may get over her trouble and marry some good man. She is young still."

"I hope so too," said Helen, her bright face clouding a little as she thought of her sister's sorrow. And she went on into the kitchen with her basket of eggs.

Later in the day the west wind dropped to a perfect calm, and as the Thompsons walked in their garden after supper, the master of the house told his family of a plan he had been forming in his mind since his interview with Dr. Wakely on the roadside. He intended to form a habit of taking a late stroll after the household had gone to bed. It might be a little tiring, of course; but this was summer weather; and

—here he threw out his chest with something of his old platform manner—he found it really difficult, after years of public work, to sit down and attempt nothing for the benefit of his neighbours. If a slight effort on his part would show the Muckleby people the folly of their prejudice against frequenting Muckleby Hill at midnight, he was ready to make that effort. He felt——

And he was so obviously launching off into the exercise of a too long neglected talent for public speaking, that Maude said in her even voice: "Surely you don't take all Mathilda Bain says for gospel, Father? A few old-fashioned villagers like her may think it is haunted—or at any rate not want to be there to see. But the majority do not believe in the White Lady any more than you do."

"No, indeed," said Helen. "You'll only make yourself look silly, Father—walking about Muckleby Hill in the middle of the night."

Mr. Thompson flushed with annoyance; but he was not to be put off any longer from trying to improve somebody beyond the family circle, and said in a final manner: "I do what I think right. Perhaps you will allow me to be the best judge of my own actions." And he walked off abruptly towards the house.

Mrs. Thompson followed him. "I'm sure you will be doing a great service to the community if you can stop that sort of thing," she said in a conciliatory tone. "No one but you would have cast about to find something that you could do for the public good. And the girls think the same, though they do like to joke a little. I shall never forget how proud we all were of you that day when you received the testimonial from the people of Wressle. Your nature is to help others. You can't help it." She paused, seeing that he was

hurt, in order to find words more telling. "It is like drink to some people. You simply can't——"

"I take no credit to myself for that," said Mr. Thompson, with a sort of modest pompousness. "I chance to have inherited that temperament."

So he went indoors for a cigar, and the soothing influence of that, together with his wife's words, enabled him, after he had walked a very short distance, to feel once more at peace with all the world. He was bent on a congenial task—the improvement of his fellow-men—and he noticed with pleasure the moon sailing in a pool of light, and the scent of a clover field in flower. The village already lay asleep, and the only lamps still burning twinkled out from Harbottle's farm, where the farm-pupil read and smoked a last pipe by his open sitting-room window. Every footstep could be heard so clearly on the hard road that Bennett looked up at the sound of a passer-by, and then called out "Good-night" in country fashion.

After that everything seemed so very still that Mr. Thompson was quite startled by a sheep breathing asthmatically in the hedge-row. And as he drew nearer to Muckleby Hill the trees became scantier and more weather-beaten, bent away from the north-east and flinging out branches like wild arms in the moonlight. The grass was poorer and shorter here; you could smell the wind from the sea; and the road led up straight and grey towards the mound at the top of the hill beneath which the ruins of Muckleby had long lain buried.

As Mr. Thompson glanced round, he could almost understand how these foolish tales had arisen. Any figure coming silently down that road would seem strange to himself at this hour, and no wonder ignorant peasants centuries ago had been able to imagine the White Lady. With a comfor-

table feeling of charitable superiority, he settled himself on a stile, leaned against a convenient tree-trunk, and looked at the luminous dial of his watch. It was 11.50: ten minutes to ghost-time. Well, he would wait until ten past. . . . So he lighted another cigar and meditated agreeably. First on his own courage—he had always been like that: afraid of nothing. Then he went on to imagine what he would say to the people at the Post Office, and at the General Shop in the village. It should be instructive, but not too serious; something in his lighter vein. He would say, for instance, that what set him against this haunting business was the obvious injustice of its methods and the extraordinary futility of its social customs. The wrong person always seemed to have to do the haunting. This White Lady, now; why should she have to walk up and down Muckleby Hill for centuries because she had been made away with in a peculiarly unpleasant way by a near relative of William the Conqueror? It appeared to him that the relative ought to be the one. He deserved it. Though a thousand years is a long——long——time——

Then, not suddenly, but without any notice or previous warning, he became aware of a tall figure in white a few yards away from him. But his heart neither thudded nor stood still nor did any of the things usual in such a crisis. Most curiously, he felt no more alarmed than had that wavering figure been Mrs. Kerman, the pale, fat charwoman. It was surprising, and yet he was not surprised. A curious calm seemed to spread like oil over his mind. He rose at once in accordance with the rules of common politeness which his mother had instilled into him almost before he could stand, and said with the utmost calmness: "Good evening. It is fine weather for the time of year."

But even as he spoke, he felt it was odd to say that at

such a moment; and yet he somehow took it as a matter of course.

The Lady bowed queerly—there was something peculiar and rather unpleasant about that bow which made Mr. Thompson feel momentarily uncomfortable; then he accounted for it by her being brought up at a foreign court a thousand years ago. Of course her bow would seem odd: natural that it should. . . . And yet when she came nearer, he did feel a vague uneasiness. There seemed, after all, something a little abnormal. . . . Now she was beckoning with a long outstretched finger—a curiously long finger that somehow stirred the nerves of his spine and the roots of his hair—but he felt bound in common politeness to follow. He said to himself that if he found this unpleasant, how much worse for her to have had a thousand years of it.

Fortunately she had her back to him now, and that relieved the tension. He could not see her face distinctly, but he had caught sight just for one moment of burning eyes and white features through a sort of veil-like drapery, and he was most anxious not to do so again. He hoped fervently that, if he kept on following where she wished, she would not turn round. He would not pause a moment—though he began to have a most severe cramp in his right leg—for fear she should turn round and thrust that terrible face close to his. He began to have a most horrible fear of seeing that face again. The torture in his leg was dreadful and he knew he could not keep up much longer, but he also knew that if he turned back she would be upon him; so he managed to pant out: "Delightful evening—for a stroll"—with a last desperate, ridiculous effort to make her keep on strolling.

Her only response was to grow taller—most alarmingly taller; and Mr. Thompson felt more strongly than ever

before, even in the greatest crises of municipal life in Wressle, that Something Must be Done, and done quickly.

"Excuse me!" he gasped, struggling to move but finding himself unable to stir another step. "This—this is most enjoyable, *most*; but I really feel—I ought—to be getting back to Mrs. Thompson."

He waited, paralysed, for her to swoop round; and she did. He tried to shout; could not utter a sound; then yelled, a fearful yell—and saw the fields and hedges of Muckleby Hill lying forlorn under the moonlight. A second later came an agonizing blow on the head, and darkness.

. . . . . .

In the meanwhile, Mrs. Thompson and her daughters, having watched Mr. Thompson out of sight down the drive, went to bed. The girls were soon asleep after long hours in the fresh air, but their mother lingered over her evening toilette, feeling it was not worth while to settle down for the night before Mr. Thompson came in from his ghost-hunting.

As she took down her still abundant hair before the glass, she thought to herself that it was a pity he could not leave things alone and be comfortable, as she did. But she supposed men—— And then she smiled indulgently, glancing over that hidden diary, "Concerning Husbands," which millions of wives carry in their hearts all over the world. But the real book remains as secret as freemasonry, because the only women who could tell, never do. Perhaps winds of life have blown through their hearts and carried away the pages. Anyway, only a fragment at most has ever been made public.

Still, all Mrs. Thompson's knowledge of Mr. Thompson had not prepared her for his staying out after one o'clock, whether he met with a white lady or a black one. So when half-past one arrived and he did not come back, she began

to feel very uneasy. Her torpid imagination began to move with the sense of discomfort always caused by the exercise of seldom-used faculties. It was ridiculous, of course, but supposing he *had* seen anything. . . . At last she took up the candle and went to Helen's room.

"Are you awake?" she said in a low voice. Then more loudly: "Helen, are you awake?"

Helen sat up, all alert; but she had the faculty of being quite wide awake as soon as she had ceased sleeping.

"What's the matter?" she said, throwing off the bedclothes.

"Your father. He has not come home."

"Oh!" Helen jerked the clothes on again, rather crossly. "Is that all? What time is it?"

"After half-past one," said Mrs. Thompson. "He ought to be in by this time. I can't think what has got him."

Helen laughed, recovering her good-humour.

"Well, surely you don't think the White Lady has!"

"No. No. Of course not," said Mrs. Thompson hastily. "But he may have stumbled into a ditch or something; he is not used to walking alone in country lanes in the middle of the night. Besides, there may be nasty characters about. You never know."

"Nonsense, Mother," said Helen briskly. "Dad's all right. He is only waiting to make sure. You know that he is for seeing a thing through to the bitter end when he once starts."

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Thompson, sighing a little. "I daresay it is as you suggest." And she went back to bed again.

But Helen, now thoroughly awake, got up and looked out of the window. This lovely moonlit night did not seem made for dull lying in bed, and she began to think it would be better fun to go and meet her father on his way home.

But she must be careful to put on a dark coat, lest he should take her for the White Lady. And she smiled to herself as she hastily twisted up her hair and got into her clothes.

When she had closed the front door softly behind her, she found herself in the midst of an enchanted world. Her response to the influences of the night—the moonlit fields and the searching sweetness of the clover in the falling dew—was neither passionate nor emotional. She only experienced a sense of lightness and happiness; an increase of the natural cheerfulness which she possessed, and which is like daylight in the mind.

Her footsteps did not echo on the hard road as her father's had done, but still they were loud enough to make Bennett glance up when she passed the open window at which he was still sitting. He had had another last pipe, and another, since Mr. Thompson went by, but his book held him. Now, however, he had nearly finished, and was about at the final page. For a second or two, Helen looked in at the brightness, and he out at the dim female figure in the gloom. Then he rose, just as she said in a low tone: "Good evening; I suppose you don't happen to have had my father in to see you just now?" For it occurred to her that this might be a solution of Bennett's still lighted lamp, and also of Mr. Thompson's belated return.

He jumped over the window-sill and came forward, peering at her.

"Oh! Miss Thompson! I didn't quite recognize—— No; Mr. Thompson has not been here."

He managed to keep out of his voice a good deal of the surprise which he felt, but enough remained to make Helen say hastily:

"I only thought I would ask. I was going to meet him, and didn't want to go all that way for nothing, of course."

"Of course not," agreed Bennett. "Has he gone far?"

"Not so very. Only for a stroll on Muckleby Hill," said Helen; but the information did sound a little odd to herself as she gave it. Muckleby Hill at midnight! And for a gentleman of her father's habits and build. She felt bound to offer some further explanation. "He thinks all this nonsense about the White Lady ought to be knocked on the head. He intends often to take a stroll there late in the evening, just to convince the villagers that there really *is* nothing. But I think he imagines they are all like Mathilda Bain, who is awfully superstitious. The younger generation don't believe in such things. Thank you so much. I must be getting on now. Good-night."

Bennett slipped his pipe in his pocket and joined her.

"Do you mind if I come along too? I have been sitting reading for hours and I should like to stretch my legs before going to bed."

"Oh, all right!" she said casually; and they tramped on together down the moonlit road. "You see, he didn't come home, and Mother got rather nervous. He always comes when he is expected, as a rule." She paused. "Mother would be nervous about me too, if she knew I had come."

"Naturally. I understand," said Bennett gravely, a little light beginning to dawn upon his puzzled mind. So that was it! She had slipped out without any one knowing. He could not help wondering how Thompson would like the countryside being searched because he was an hour late in coming home. Though no one could ever suspect old Thompson of anything—his very collar . . . Then Helen was speaking again.

"We're sure to come across him soon."

"Oh yes; unless he has eloped with the White Lady."

And at this feeble jest they laughed; only because they

both were young and it was such a glorious night; but they had reached the foot of the hill, and still did not see anything at all of Mr. Thompson.

"We're certain to find him here," said Helen; impressed, in spite of herself, by the bare road and the scraggy trees at the top, forlorn against the moon.

"Certain!" said Bennett with conviction, his shortish, sturdy figure most reassuringly commonplace.

"I expect he is sitting down somewhere and can't see us. He never stands when there is a seat," continued Helen. "Should we walk on a little and see?"

So they went up the hill, walking quickly because Helen began to feel at last a little uneasy. It certainly was queer. . . . Then she told herself not to be ridiculous.

When they reached the top of the hill she stood still, breathing rather fast, and looked out over the flat country, which was as clear as day in the moonlight, with white lights and black shadows: but there was nothing to be seen which even remotely resembled the ex-chairman of the Wressle Urban District Council. Helen made herself give a little laugh. Soon she would be as nervous and Victorian as Mother!

"How silly of me! Of course he has gone home by a different road. I wonder we never thought of that before."

"Yes, it was rather stupid," said Bennett, accepting the implied reproach—though he knew well that any way back likely to be known to a comparative stranger like Mr. Thompson led ten miles round by Lennington and Wardle. "Shall we just try walking down the hill again?"

But it was obvious that he only said this because he had nothing better to suggest, and they turned to tramp back in silence. Then, suddenly, they heard a sound.

"Sheep coughing," said Bennett, trudging on.

Helen stood still.

"Listen! I'm sure it was somebody groaning."

"Imagination!" said Bennett, trudging on; for in spite of Helen and the moonlight he was beginning to want to get back to bed.

Then there was another groan, louder and seemingly close at hand. Both ran at once towards the spot whence the sound came, and peered into the high grass. At first they were unable to distinguish anything owing to the deep shadow cast by a tree, but gradually they could make out a stout figure seated among the nettles, holding its head.

"Father!" cried Helen. "What's happened?"

"Has she gone yet?" whispered Mr. Thompson, staring at them, still half stunned. "Oh, my head!" And he began to shudder violently.

Helen knelt down and put her arm around him.

"Father, there's nobody here at all but me—Helen: and Mr. Bennett. You are quite safe."

"Am I?" Mr. Thompson blinked stupidly. "Then I must have been dre——" Then he broke off, and his senses began to reel again. This was no dream. He had meant to knock superstition on the head, but something else had happened.

"Pull yourself together, sir," urged Bennett sharply, bending down and touching Mr. Thompson's arm. "No one is here but your daughter and myself. Now, can you remember if you sat on that stile under the tree while you were waiting?"

"Y-yes," said Mr. Thompson vaguely. "Yes, I sat there. But I walked on when she——" And he began to shudder again.

"You did not," said Bennett distinctly. "You went to sleep sitting on that stile, with your back against the tree,

and you fell off with your head on that stepping-stone. You were dreaming. It is all a dream."

"Yes, yes," urged Helen. "That's how it was, Father. Don't you see now? You were having a bad dream, and you fell off that stile, and got stunned on that stone. Your things are quite damp. You must have been lying there a long time. Nothing else happened. Look, you can see the stone and the stile just behind you."

Mr. Thompson glanced round with feeble obedience, first at the stile and then at the stone, and a slight gleam illuminated the black fog in his mind; he glanced again and the gleam strengthened. "I believe I do recall sitting on that stile and becoming a little drowsy." Then all he had suffered since swept over him again, and he groaned aloud, holding his head.

"Come, come, sir," said Bennett. "You have had a very nasty knock on the top of a bad nightmare, and that's enough to unnerve any man. I daresay you got cramp, you know. Are you subject to cramp?"

"Cramp!" echoed Mr. Thompson, still in a sort of bemused state, searching his mind for a connection. "That would be when I"—he glanced round with some uneasiness still—"when I dreamed I was following her up the hill."

"Exactly," said Bennett. "Now, don't you think you had better get up off this damp grass?" And Mr. Thompson allowed himself to be assisted to rise.

When he was once more on his legs, with Bennett holding one arm and Helen the other, he began to feel better, though his head still ached very badly. But by the time they reached the bottom of the hill he was sufficiently restored to object strongly to the light in which this young man no doubt regarded him. Gratitude had given place to a growing dislike for Bennett. It was all of a piece with his hanging

round that first day to point out defects in the farm, in the hope that it might remain unsold and he might get it cheaply. Always there when he was not wanted. . . . Still, Mr. Thompson felt unable to walk without the support of the fellow's arm and was constrained to be civil.

"Next time I pursue my investigations I must remember not to sit down—ha! ha!" he managed to say, with the feeblest reflection of his old platform manner.

"No one corrects error without suffering," said Bennett gravely.

Helen glanced aside at him. Was he making fun of her father? She was not going to have that.

"Some people think it enough to sit still and laugh at those who do try to do something for the world," she said sharply. "I'm glad my father is not that sort, anyway!"

He looked at her defiant face, bent forward so that she could peer at him across Mr. Thompson, and gradually his expression changed, the deep lines showing plain in the moonlight as he smiled back at her.

"I hope you're not having a dig at me!" was all he said, lightly; but it remained clear that Helen's spirited defence of her father had pleased him. And he added in a much more friendly tone than before: "I quite agree with you, Miss Thompson. It is a great blessing for us all that some men are ready to be uncomfortable for the sake of their kind."

"H—hum!" coughed Mr. Thompson, softening a little. "I do my best. I do my best. But as regards this particular episode, Mr. Bennett; perhaps we had better not let the details go any farther. The story might—a—militate against anything else in the same direction that I might find it my duty to attempt."

"I quite agree. You may rely on my not mentioning it," said Bennett.

"I should not trouble, of course," said Mr. Thompson, finding words with difficulty owing to the throbbing in his head, but still finding them. "Only, when I undertake a matter, I am apt to carry it through: and I have not yet done with this one."

"Well, you will be able to enlarge your field," said Bennett. "The villagers are less ardent believers in the spiritual phenomena than one or two of the other residents about here."

"So it is doubly important that we should keep the matter to ourselves, Mr. Bennett," said Helen.

He smiled at her again.

"Make your mind easy, Miss Thompson. I promise not to say a word," he replied.

But though he kept his promise to the letter, both he and the Thompsons reckoned without that strange fifth dimension in village life which causes things to become known which never seem to have been told to any one. Therefore was it known all over the neighbourhood by the following Sunday that Mr. Thompson had gone up Muckleby Hill to knock superstition on the head, and had received such a blow on his own in the process as kept him at home from divine worship that morning.

CHAPTER IV

"We have our Sports upon the Village Green,
Bring Harvest home, and keep up Hallow E'en;
For though we're poor, we're rich in merriment—
No herbe for Tired Souls like Sweet Content."

Common politeness impelled Bennett to call and inquire after Mr. Thompson the next evening, and he remained for a game of tennis. Before he left, another meeting was arranged; and gradually it became a habit for him to drop in about twice a week, play a few setts, and go home when the light failed. Mr. Thompson's prejudice against him remained dormant, while Mrs. Thompson took him placidly as part of the summer life of Muckleby.

Helen and he were partners, as a rule, because Maude was a much stronger player than her sister, and required the handicap of Mr. Thompson to make the couples at all even. His play was spectacular, but the ball seldom seemed to be there; while Maude moved with an appearance, almost, of languor. But she had an unusually swift service and her wrists were of iron, though she did look so limp and fragile. Bennett played a good, steady game, and Helen's was passable; so the couples were sufficiently evenly matched.

But just towards the end of the hay-harvest the long spell of fine weather broke, and Mr. Thompson had to sit inactive behind streaming window-panes while his property was being utterly ruined. Against reason and his own knowledge, he chafed with a secret indignation against Mr. Har-

bottle and the rest of the farming community. It was ridiculous to let property be ruined like this. Someone ought to be "approached"; Something Ought to be Done. But he had to realize, as day followed leaden day, that there are still powers with which even an enlightened Democracy can do nothing.

When it had rained all it wanted, it simply stopped raining. Such remains of the blackened hay-harvest as were worth preserving were gathered in, and there followed another period of cloudless weather.

During this lull, just between haytime and harvest, fell the date of Muckleby Feast. But the Feast had now lost all its ancient glories, and families no longer gathered from far and near to eat Feast cheese-cakes and spiced bread together; and since the War, even the sweet-stall and the steam roundabout had finally ceased to come. But there were still races for the children in Mr. Harbottle's field, and a tea afterwards, on tables and forms which he brought by waggon. He was parish warden, but he charged for this service, and the Muckleby people said they wondered he let them have the pump-water free, and recommended each other to put a brick into his heart to keep it open. Still they said this good-naturedly; for Harbottles were like that—always had been. They even told tales of the skinflinty bargain which the farmer had made with Mr. Thompson, and of various other of his dealings, not without a certain chuckling pride. It took a Yorkshireman to do that! And you couldn't have anything more entirely Yorkshire than a Harbottle of Muckleby. Their only puzzle was, how he came to get a wife like Mrs. Harbottle, who would give her head away if she could get it off. But no doubt she had been taken in, like all strangers, by his joky, open-handed manner.

Helen gathered all this as she went about laying cups and

plates on the tables ready for the children's tea. Mathilda Bain had also taken a holiday for the Feast, and she was in the act of receiving a large batch of fragrant spiced loaves from the panting Mrs. Harbottle, who thrust them under the table with a furtive, mysterious: "Hush! Don't name it to Mr. Harbottle!" and retired across the field as fast as her stoutness would allow her, her ample proportions shaking in the sunlight.

Mathilda turned to Helen. "She must have baked all these on Tuesday when Harbottle was at market, and hid 'en in the granary."

"But how awfully generous of her! What an abominable man he must be," said Helen. "Poor woman! I am afraid she is very unhappy."

Mathilda Bain chuckled.

"Not a bit of it. She gets more sport out of baking things for folks with him liable to come in at any time and find out and start kicking the furniture about, than what she would do if he told her to. And she has her own bit o' money. She doesn't need to go to him for naught. You'd ha' laughed if you could have seen her on Tuesday, bustling up to see whether he got home from market or spice loaves was out of oven first. Bless your life, she was a Wilson of Wardle, and they're a sporting stock; and my belief she's took to this, instead of betting and horseracing. It's in the blood."

"But Mr. Harbottle must know," said Helen.

"Of course he does. But I expect he thinks she would give away more than ever if he let on he knew, and she could do it open."

"Seems rather queer he shouldn't know more about his own wife than you do," said Helen, in her most cut-and-dried common-sensible tone.

Mathilda Bain cast a condescending look upon Helen and smiled. "If *that's* all you know about marriage!"

Then another woman entered with a covered basket of jam tarts, and put it into Mathilda Bain's hands with a sprightly: "There! Don't name it to Mr. Harbottle." For the remark had become one of the family jokes of Muckleby, and kept that eternal freshness which such jests alone are able to retain.

This proved that Helen had become part of Muckleby, and that the close ranks of the village circle had opened to let her in; because if those who share our sorrows are dear to us, those who share our family jokes are still more intimately near; they really and truly "belong."

So Helen, quite unconsciously to herself, now definitely ceased to be "a young lady from Wressle," and became "that eldest lass o' Thompson's."

Mathilda, who had performed the act of initiating the Thompson family into those village mysteries which may remain closed to new-comers for a very long time, was taking part in the Feast Tea because she had always done so. The entertainment was promoted by the Vicar, but there was no distinction made between the children of the different sects, and Mathilda's shepherd, the Wesleyan minister residing in the next parish, would be there during the afternoon.

Thus the group which formed under some large trees at the upper end of Harbottle's field, slightly elevated and covered with short grass, was sufficiently like a platform to give Mr. Thompson a very pleasant feeling of being once more in his proper place and very much at home. It dispelled the last pricking sense of annoyance or humiliation which had remained from that midnight episode on Muckleby Hill; and he now only remembered that he had suffered in the cause of progress. The reformer is ever stoned. He

was proud of the slight scar on the side of his head, and no longer avoided allusion to local superstitions.

Races were run without a hitch, excepting a slight delay which occurred in that for ladies over thirty. The item had not been sufficiently considered beforehand, and as soon as the age limit was removed there was a sufficient number of entries. The prizes were presented by Mrs. Stainton, the Vicar's wife, and at last the moment arrived which Mr. Thompson had confidently expected.

"Would you," murmured the Vicar, "be so kind as to propose a vote of thanks—the Harbottles?"

Mr. Thompson nodded: the business-like, modest yet important nod of the proposer, proper to the occasion, which he had given so many hundreds of times in Wressle. He then stepped forward a little from the group surrounding him, threw out his chest, automatically shook down his trouser-knees, though he had not been sitting, coughed, and began to speak.

He started off, naturally, with the munificence of Mr. and Mrs. Harbottle, and Helen trembled lest he should "name" the spiced loaves. But he was soon far away from the Harbottles, taking a survey of ancient sports from the beginning of Little Arthur's History of England—the historical work which had remained most permanently in his mind—down to the present occasion. And he wound up with a most eloquent appeal to all present, high and low, rich and poor, to take part in the games which were to follow the prize-giving. Perhaps, he urged, they did not realize that "Nuts in May" and "Kiss in the Ring" were survivals from the golden age of English country life. Those who looked on while others played, were assisting at the degeneration of our race. He did most sincerely hope that everybody here would join in the games. Nobody need think

themselves too old, ha! ha! for he himself hoped to take an active part. And in conclusion (seriously and with feeling) we had to tender our most heartfelt thanks.—Then he stepped back, glanced round instinctively for a chair, and in the absence of one made a remark to Mrs. Harbottle.

But he felt agreeably conscious that the people of Muckleby must now realize how lucky they were to have him and his family settled in their midst. It was perhaps fortunate that he did not hear two men at a short distance away, speaking as follows:

"I hear tell he was one o' them Council chaps at Wressle."

"Aye. You mud know that. He can make such a lot o' talk about nothing."

And at a still greater distance were three or four middle-aged women gathered together.

"I wonder what next! Wanting us to play Kiss in the Ring!"

"He! He! I lay it's the young lasses he'll try to catch."

"Aye! trust them old married chaps . . ."

And the pause conveyed anything the listener might choose to imagine, showing once more the often forgotten value of the pause in all conversation.

But Mr. Thompson strolled about, all unwitting; speaking an agreeable word first to one and then the other, while his daughters stood talking to Tom Stainton, the Vicar's son.

Maude had not helped in the preparations for the festival, and her family had not expected her to do so, because they felt she was exempted by her sorrow from all unnecessary effort at present. They only wanted her to do as she liked until she began to get over the loss of her lover. Helen, indeed, was still indignant with Fate for having dealt so cruelly with her sister, and she felt a burning desire to do anything in the world to make up to Maude for that terrible,

sudden cutting off of all her hopes. It seemed so hard, so unjust. Why *had* things like that to happen? . . . But Maude was not aware of this hidden intensity of rebellious feeling on Helen's part; and as a matter of fact the sisters had not "got on" particularly well together before the catastrophe happened. Helen's brisk cocksureness was so much at variance with Maude's languor and taste for boys and sweets, during their schooldays, that they constantly disagreed.

But their attitude had quite changed—or at least, Helen's had done—and they were very good friends, so far as it went; though Helen found herself unable to understand how Maude could refer to her trouble, however distantly, in talking with Tom Stainton, for instance. Still, it was plain that she must have made some such allusion during the afternoon, because of the way in which he bent to pull up a thistle in her path, and of the manner in which he glared at Mr. Thompson for calling out cheerfully: "Come, Maude! We want another on our side. And you hang on to Helen, Stainton!" Then Bennett advanced across the grass. "Just in time, Bennett. The more the merrier." All unpleasantness being for the time forgotten.

And in the end only Mrs. Thompson, of all the family, absolutely declined to join the game; opposing—as she was very occasionally wont to do—a weight of passive resistance against which his utmost efforts spent themselves in vain.

The afternoon was far advanced now, and two long lines of people, mostly girls and children, all blowzy and blooming, with light gowns and gay ribbons, danced towards each other on the green grass in the slanting rays of the afternoon sunshine. White clouds already tinged with rose hung in the sky above the heavily leaved trees. The clock on the church tower, with its gilt letters catching the bright light,

seemed to echo the message of the sundial in the Vicarage garden near by: "I mark only sunny hours."

It was an agreeable sight indeed to see Mr. Thompson, hand in hand with a long line of people of all ages and sizes, prancing towards another long line opposite; and all to further the purpose which he had formed in his mind as he journeyed towards Muckleby on that spring afternoon some months ago. . . . "Here we come gathering nuts in May," he sang, "Nuts in May, nuts in May! Here we come gathering nuts in May on a fine and frosty morning!" A little breathless, perhaps—because it is not so very easy for a middle-aged gentleman of full habit to prance and sing at the same time—but lustily, and as the village women laughingly told each other, "like a good 'un."

At the onset, he had been just a little inclined to argue about the words, maintaining that errors must have crept into the doggerel which ought to be corrected, because there could obviously never have been nuts in May in England, though frost might well occur at that season of the year. An overwhelming majority, however, ordained that it must be sung so or not at all, and he put off the necessary alteration until some more convenient time. He was pleased to see Maude opposite, laughing and blowzy-haired like the rest; and to observe that she had cast off for the moment the rather dull languor which she usually exhibited when neither dancing nor playing games. Poor child, she was young yet. So thinking, he pranced and sang more energetically than ever, and at last took his place in the long row of merry people clinging to each other's waists, who had now reached that stage in the game which consists in trying to pull the opposing line over a white handkerchief on the grass. But still his thoughts went back to Maude, even while he pulled until some important button parted with a

report from its moorings. He was so glad to see her like that, shouting, laughing, pulling with all the strength of her strong wrists: her hat half off and her hair coming down over her eyes. Then the opposing hold suddenly relaxed, her side gave a tremendous tug, and she fell back screaming into the arms of young Tom Stainton, who was the next behind her. The sudden impact drove him in turn against a girl behind, who was rather fat and unsteady on her legs though a good puller, and she fell back with a thud on her supporter.

It was from this whirlpool of skirts, ribbons, and dishevelled heads that Maude scrambled up to see—calm and composed like visitants from another world—a handsome, slender young man, an elderly gentleman, and a tall girl with a lorgnette.

"How very amusing!" said the girl. "Mr. Stainton, are you *quite* sure you have got your own legs? Everything seems so mixed."

"Hullo, Bennett!" said the young man, nodding to the owner of that name, who stood at a short distance.

"Come to see us rustics at play, eh, Wyndham?" said Bennett easily. "You arrived just at the right minute." Then he was aware of Mr. Thompson at his elbow. "Oh, I don't know if you have actually met yet? Wyndham, this is Mr. Thompson who has bought the Grange."

"Ah yes. I am hoping to call and see you. So little down here," murmured Wyndham perfunctorily.

"Pleased to see you at any time," said Mr. Thompson without effusion, for though somewhat of a snob he had his self-respect. "May I present my daughters? My dears, this is Mr. Wyndham."

Then the young lady with the lorgnette and the elderly gentleman were made known, and their name at once

showed the Thompsons that here they saw the attraction that kept Wyndham from spending much time at home, even when nominally in Muckleby for the week-end.

"Pray do not let us interrupt your game," said Miss Kirke, that being the young lady's name. "We shall love to watch."

But Maude declared somewhat shortly that she was too tired, and walked away with Tom Stainton, while Mr. Thompson remained in converse with Mr. Kirke, unable to play again owing to that button over which he had ceased to have any control. Both Helen and Bennett, however, continued to join in with unabated vigour; but the spirit of careless jollity seemed to have been scared away by the newcomers, and the high climax of the entertainment had passed.

As Wyndham crossed the field with his guests towards the waiting car, he again greeted Bennett, but to Helen's quick perceptions there seemed to be a constraint between the two men, despite a surface heartiness. It was as if Wyndham were determined to be cordial in spite of something, and no one knew what Bennett's steady composure might hide. He would not give himself away, of course; but she was absolutely convinced that Wyndham did not really approve of Bennett, and for some definite reason. She felt proud of her own penetration in finding this out, and yet sorry; she would like to have thought well of Bennett.

Then she saw Wyndham and the lean elderly gentleman hastily conferring together, and after a moment or two's earnest conversation they returned to Mr. Thompson.

"Mr. Kirke had not understood you were living at the Grange," said Wyndham. "He wishes to ask a great favour of you."

"Certainly! Certainly!" said Mr. Thompson, throwing out

his chest; for this was more like the sort of thing he had been accustomed to. "Anything, h—hm! in my power. Shall we step aside a moment?"

So Mr. Kirke stepped aside, and said with great earnestness: "I am going to ask you to grant my request, not for my own sake, but for that of the human race."

Mr. Thompson sub-consciously felt with his elbows for the arms of the municipal armchair so that he might join judicial finger-tips while he considered the request; but finding none, he dangled his eye-glass instead, saying with the non-committal gravity practised at a thousand Council meetings: "I hope and believe, Mr. Kirke, that I have always had the welfare of my fellow-man near at heart."

"I'm sure of it! I'm sure of it!" agreed Mr. Kirke warmly. "I felt sure such would be the case. But some people are so intensely lazy and narrow-minded, Mr. Thompson, that they decline to give others the benefit of any information which they may have acquired."

"That, I think I may truly say," responded Mr. Thompson with a sort of proud modesty, "has never been a fault of mine." He paused. "And the matter to which you refer?"

Mr. Kirke whipped out a little notebook and pencil, leant forward with hovering pencil and said with deeper earnestness than ever:

"Would you kindly give me the exact details of what you saw on Muckleby Hill?"

Mr. Thompson started and turned a lively purple to the roots of his hair. "Sir," he said, "if this is a jest, allow me to remark that it is a very bad one. If not; then you must have been grossly misled and I cannot blame you. But you may put down *this* in your notebook: I saw nothing! I heard nothing! There was nothing!" And he stared above his purple cheeks very fiercely indeed at Mr. Kirke.

But the effect on that gentleman was entirely different from anything Mr. Thompson could possibly have expected. For he shook his head with a resigned and pitying smile, and said quite mildly: "Ah! this is what I feared at the outset. But of course one can understand the reluctance of a common-sense, hard-headed business man to own up that he has passed through such an experience. Naturally, he prefers to put it down to nightmare or indigestion or what not, rather than upset the preconceived theories of a lifetime. I quite see your point of view, Mr. Thompson; but I do beg of you for the sake of others to tell me what it was that upset your equilibrium that night at Muckle——"

"I was not upset!" interrupted Mr. Thompson. Then his ingrained truthfulness caused him to add hastily: "At least, not in that sense."

"Ah!" said Mr. Kirke, snapping at the implied suggestion like a terrier at a biscuit. "Then you'll admit you *were* upset?"

"I will not," said Mr. Thompson. "At least, not in the sense you mean." Then he grew heatedly conscious that he seemed to be prevaricating—an intolerable position for him—and added in a blustering tone: "I tell you, I saw nothing. It was all a dream. I fell asleep on a style and fell off. That is to say——" he paused abruptly. "And let me tell you, sir, I am astonished to find you are not satisfied with my plain statement that I saw and heard nothing supernatural."

"Think! Think a moment," pleaded Mr. Kirke, wistfully licking his pencil so as to be doubly ready at once if Mr. Thompson did decree to benefit the world. "You own you had a dream? But was it really a dream? Could you not describe it to me?"

"I could not," said Mr. Thompson. "Or at any rate I

further acquaintance may remove tl
sion I have made, and perhaps on s
may induce you to visit us at Lenning

"Thank you. Good-day to you, sir,
still very much annoyed. And with
lute back upon Mr. Kirke, who walke
away to his daughter and Wyndham.

When Mr. Thompson heard their
better; but he was still not free fron
the people on the field knew he had b
the White Lady of Muckleby Hill,
what he had replied.

The Vicar, whom he chanced to e
colour to this supposition by saying wi
ness: "An agreeable man, Mr. Kirke,
in his bonnet—was an ardent fruitaria

"He has certainly got a bee in hi
Thompson shortly. "Shall we join t
tree?"

The sunset was fading now

"Nonsense! I've carried heavier weights than this, thanks all the same," said Helen, smiling over her shoulder.

"I see. 'Gone are those old Victorian days, Their crinolines and helpless ways,'" quoted Bennett, accepting the situation and strolling along beside her with his hands in his pockets. "All the same, I know Trudge, because she belongs to the Harbottles' shepherd, and is always getting lost. And she is solid. She weighs pretty heavy after the first fifty yards or so."

Helen was finding that out, but controlled her voice to no sign of breathlessness as she answered in a light conversational tone: "What a pretty scene! I'm glad we came to live in Muckleby."

"I like it," he answered, then checked something further which he had been about to say.

"It is a good thing I am fond of the place," continued Helen, furtively shifting the position of the sagging Trudge, "because I am quite likely to spend the rest of my life here."

"Scarcely that," he answered, responding, as he thought to an obvious draw.

"Why not?" she said vaguely, all her energies set on keeping herself from panting.

"Well, you may marry, I suppose."

She shook her head, saving breath.

"Don't intend! Not enough to go round! Anybody may have *my* share!

He turned and looked at the little obstinate face, crimson with exertion: then took Trudge out of her arms.

"Mr. Bennett! I could quite well——" she exclaimed.

"I know you could. The honour of the twentieth-century girl is vindicated," he said, smiling. "But Trudge gave me a look I could not resist. You wanted me to carry you, didn't you, Trudge?"

"Yeth," said Trudge. "She hurted me. I like mens to carry me. Then she relented a little and added sleepily: "She can kiss me good-night."

Bennett glanced from Helen to the curly golden head on his shoulder. "Want to avail yourself of the privilege?" he said, half stopping.

Helen felt herself flushing for no reason at all and vented her annoyance at this silliness on Bennett. "No, thank you," she said. "Trudge is a thought too sticky for my taste this evening."

He walked on again, his shortish figure so evenly balanced that any one could see its great strength and power of endurance. "Then should we return to the subject of marriage?" he said.

"Oh, I don't care. Why should we?" said Helen carelessly.

"Because it is a subject of universal interest. Even you might fall in love, you know. Nobody is immune."

"Oh, I know that," said Helen with a readiness that rather took him aback. "Anybody may fall in love to a certain extent; but it can be nipped in the bud. You don't fall fathoms deep in love without knowing where you are going, excepting in novels."

He smiled at her over Trudge's head, that was snuggled in his tweed coat. "I see you know something about life."

She nodded. "You bet I do."

But as she walked there beside him with her erect poise and her air of triumphant girlhood, the low rays of the sun making the edges of her hair and of her white dress all golden, the mocking expression faded altogether out of his eyes and he looked at her gravely, as if hoping that what she had still to learn might not be too hard for her Then he said, after a moment's pause:

"Here comes Trudge's mother!"

CHAPTER V

"While there are Girles and Flow'ry Ways,
Men will forget that Winter Days
Must come when Summer's ended."

Though the young owner of the Hall had not appeared to take much notice of the Thompsons when he met them at the Vicarage sports, he became so far actively aware of their existence as to call at the Grange the next time he was in Muckleby. This happened on a Saturday afternoon, and Tom Stainton sat at tea with the family; a thing which happened more often than Mrs. Stainton thought wise, considering that her son was supposed to be reading hard for his examination at Cambridge.

It was now that time of high summer when the whole countryside seems to be waiting in a quiet fullness of fruition for the first sound of the reaper across the harvest fields. The group under the elm tree could see this rich prospect spread out before them; now and then a red summer apple fell with a little thud upon the grass; the warm red bricks of the house behind lay soaking in the sunshine. The girls themselves in their light gowns, and young Tom in his white flannels, were no less in keeping with the place and the hour. There was an impression of repose and permanence about it all, only the more delightful because everything was changing. And as Wyndham advanced across the lawn to pay his respects, with that ease of manner which arises partly from being always fairly sure of a wel-

come, the picture was complete. His tall, graceful figure, clear, darkish complexion, and fine eyes would have served admirably for a model, had any painter desired to immortalize the moment under the title of "The Young Squire"; and Tom Stainton's low-voiced comment seemed quite out of keeping. "Close time for heiress-hunting!" he muttered savagely. "I heard she was in Scotland."

For he already worshipped Maude, and he resented the advent of a man older and more experienced than himself into a circle where he was constantly the only male guest.

But he need not have feared; Maude took no notice at all of Wyndham after the first greeting, and devoted herself to Tom with far more animation than she usually showed in general company. Wyndham, therefore, was left to Mr. and Mrs. Thompson and Helen, and the talk fell upon the weather, then by a natural sequence upon the sports of the week previous.

"Glad you take an interest in these village festivals," said Wyndham heartily. "Great pity to let them drop into disuse. By the way, I hope you didn't take Mr. Kirke too seriously. He's like you—very ardent when he gets interested in a subject; we want men like that, though, in these days. Tepidness the unforgivable, you know. He's a very good sort and a good friend, when you understand him."

"No doubt, no doubt," murmured Mr. Thompson, who would not abuse a guest's probable father-in-law to that guest on his own lawn. "As a public man I have now and then come into contact with the type. Busy mind. Sufficient income. No definite occupation. Must find some outlet, of course. He sent me a pamphlet, by the way; but I must own I threw it into the waste-paper basket!"

Then Maude made a diversion by rising from her seat

and strolling towards the rose-bed. "I don't believe we got all the caterpillars this morning," she said to Tom, smiling over her shoulder.

Tom followed, in a seventh heaven. Her graciousness went to the boy's head, and his jealous moroseness gave place to reckless high spirits. "I say," he called out, picking up an old mandoline from the ground, "what was the good of my mending this up if you aren't going to use it?" Then he turned to Wyndham—he didn't care a toss now about Wyndham or any other fellow. "I say, Miss Maude was going to play this after tea for me to sing to. Can't we have a tune now, Mrs. Thompson?"

"If Maude likes. She has not used that old thing since she was a schoolgirl," said Mrs. Thompson, comfortably leaning back with some crochet in her hands.

"No, thank you," said Maude, bending over a white rose-bush.

"Ha!" said Tom, striking a mock-melodramatic attitude. "I know what she wants. Her minstrel-boy to her court has come, with his tiddly-um behind him—can't remember the exact words; can you, Wyndham?" And he began to twang the mandoline, rather out of tune, declaiming in a sing-song voice:

"See to the rose, my Lady goes,
To give her sister greeting;
While clear and high, a lark near by,
Sings to the pretty meeting."

Maude turned round, laughing. "I like your idea of tune, Tom."

Helen laughed too, then said politely to Wyndham: "You sing, don't you?"

"Oh yes," said Tom for him, relapsing into bitterness.

...day I can manage." And w
he began to sing.

With the first bar Helen flushe
man held Maude cheap. She hers
of her sister's ways with the men,
to seeing them "crazy after Maud
much a part of the girl as her slow
She never argued the matter out in
aware—as she might have done i
related to her—that Maude belonge
who have something about them
aniseed draws rats; a quality far
widow's "Come-hither-in-the-eye," o
notorious "Go-away-in-the-giggle."

But after Wyndham had sung a
impression faded from her mind. T
so hackneyed, the notes of an absolu
up into the quiet air of that summe
heart with the sort of aching wistf
has been and never can be. which
bring "S

staring away into the distance. Maude was looking at a rose in her hand; no one could tell whether she were moved or not. . . .

Then Mr. Thompson blew his nose, and every one stirred as if a spell had been broken. Thanks were showered on the singer, which he accepted with the ease of long custom, but he refused to sing again.

"Won't somebody else?" he said. "Every one ought to take a turn."

"Yes. Yes," said Mr. Thompson, seizing the idea. "Excellent suggestion. One ought to revive the old custom of sitting round on winter evenings and singing songs by the fire. No dullness in village life then. It is only dreary now, because that kind of thing has died out. If we can only bring back simple jollity, Mr. Wyndham, we shall do more than all the Boards of Agriculture."

"Won't you give us a song, then, Mr. Thompson? Set a good example, sir," said Tom.

"Oh, well; quite ready to back up my theory," said Mr. Thompson, conscious of a rolling baritone which used to be greatly admired, and glad to give this young landowner a lead in the right direction. "Ahem! Something not too intricate, of course——"

"'The Lost Chord,'" suggested Mrs. Thompson. "I always used to think you sang that so well, William," and she looked at him very kindly, perhaps stirred too, by the previous singer, to remember things that had seemed forgotten.

So Mr. Thompson coughed, while Wyndham thrummed out the air: then he began almost nervously: "'Seated one day at the organ——'" But he gained confidence as the song progressed, and the final "Amen" was bellowed with all his old confidence across the afternoon stillness, where

Mrs. Thompson smiled a farewell at him
"That's right!" she said. "You boys at
some holiday tasks, or you would get we
holidays."

Boys! Holidays! To a man on fire
vindicated his age and standing by sha
solemnly and formally all round ere h
Maude; but it is to be feared that the r
which filled his mind as he walked beside h
for Latin or Greek.

Wyndham also naturally rose to take l
they all strolled with him towards the g
casually: "I wonder Mr. Bennett has not
often comes in for a game of tennis about

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Thompson. "No
him well. I understand he was in Egyp
broke out; but I suppose he was born on E

"Australia, I think," said Wyndham.
exquisite dahlias, Mrs. Thompson."

But Mr. Thompson's experience on com
dered him immune from [illegible]

a little of a man whom I have admitted to my family circle."

"Exactly!" replied Wyndham. "Oh, a very good fellow! A very good fellow indeed!"

Then he went away, mentioning once more an engagement already made for the whole family to go over to Muckleby Hall on the following Thursday, because he was remaining at home during the whole of that week.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Mr. Thompson said emphatically: "A delightful young man. But it is evident he does not approve very highly of Bennett."

"I don't see why you should think so," said Mrs. Thompson.

Mr. Thompson beamed on her, in a very good temper. "Ah, my dear, fortunately you have not been obliged to learn so much about the world as I have. A word—an inflection is enough for me. I am convinced there is something not quite right about Bennett. This intimacy must not be encouraged, Helen. You and Maude must see to it that his visits gradually become less frequent. I don't want any open breach, of course, but things must not go on as they have been doing. I had my doubts all the time, and my first impressions are usually right; I am seldom deceived. Why is he learning farming at his age? Why didn't he go back to his bank in Egypt? Depend on it, there is something we do not know."

"You won't be troubled with Bennett much during the next few weeks," said Helen, throwing up her chin. "He told us yesterday that he would be too busy to play tennis after harvest had once started, and Harbottle begins to-morrow."

"Ah, well, one can't be too careful, my dear; young men who have lived abroad——" said Mrs. Thompson

pacifically. Then she added in a sharper tone: "Here comes Mrs. Kerman. Now what does she want? I do hope it is nothing about Lillie." For Lillie was the latest addition to the household staff, besides being the daughter of the charwoman and the sister of Sam Kerman, the garden boy; and the servant-nerve in Mrs. Thompson had become abnormally sensitive to the slightest draught.

"Why should it be any bother with Lillie?" said Mr. Thompson, pardonably irritated. "You are always looking for trouble, Henrietta."

Mrs. Thompson appeared not to hear him. "You may depend on it, that's what it is, Helen," she said, addressing her daughter. "I thought the girl looked sulky at lunch."

Then Mrs. Kerman came within hail and stood still, saying nothing.

"Well, Mrs. Kerman?" said Mr. Thompson, stepping forward and assuming a bluff cheerfulness. "Anything we can do for you?"

Mrs. Kerman changed her bass from one hand to the other.

"I'm sorry to disoblige," she said, "but I have my family to consither."

"Naturally, of course," agreed Mr. Thompson, with heartiness.

"But what is it all about?" asked Mrs. Thompson, her comfortable face puckering with anxiety.

"It's about our Lillie——"

"I thought so. What did I tell you?" breathed Mrs. Thompson to Helen.

"I aren't willing for her to sleep in. Nor Sam neither. I'm sorry to disoblige. But I have my family to consither," repeated Mrs. Kerman.

Then Helen took the matter in hand.

"Surely to goodness, Mrs. Kerman, it is not any more nonsense about the Grange being haunted? We have never, any of us, seen anything. Those maids from Wressle found the place too far away from picture palaces and things, and took the excuse to go. I'm sure Lillie is not one of that foolish sort."

"No," said Mrs. Kerman. "Very likely she would see something if she stopped; we do see things in our family. But you consithered that in her wages, and she mud take her chance."

"Then what on earth is it?" exploded Mr. Thompson, unable to hold himself in any longer. "Good food; good treatment; girl not afraid of ghosts——"

"It's what she might bring home with her, sir," replied Mrs. Kerman, goggling at him, rather alarmed, but still unwavering in her purpose. "I didn't know when I said she might sleep in that she might get what she couldn't get rid on. Our Sam only read the piece out last night. It was in a paper you threw away in your waste-paper basket, and I took it home because our Sam's so fond of a bit of reading."

"My paper basket? What do you mean?" said Mr. Thompson. Then he shouted out so loudly that Mrs. Kerman let her bass fall: "It's that damned pamphlet that Kirke sent me!"

"Y-yes, sir," quavered Mrs. Kerman. "It said, 'With Mr. Kirke's compliments'; but you'd thrown it away. I didn't know you wanted it. I'm sure I wouldn't take a pin that didn't belong to me."

"Of course not! No! No!" murmured Mrs. Thompson soothingly.

"When Lillie came back from her last place, I let her come to sleep in instead of Sam stopping to light fires. I

didn't know you could bring ghosts away with you until our Sam read out that bit in the paper. He read it after supper, and I never slept a wink all night, for I've always been so partikler about our bairns not bringing aught onpleasant home with them. I was, when they were at school——"

"Really, Mrs. Kerman," interposed Helen, "you are wandering from the point. What did you read in that idiotic paper?"

"Well"—Mrs. Kerman's dull, pale face lighted up a little —"it was a rare interestin' bit, I must say. A man spent a night in an haunted room and saw nothing. But the ghost followed him up, and next day it made him tumble down and break his arm, and a bit later on it dropped a stone image on his young lady. I couldn't risk none of that sort of thing in our house." Then her voice fell to its old monotone: "I'm sure I'm sorry to disoblige, but I have my family to consither."

"But this is ridiculous, Mrs. Kerman," said Mr. Thompson, trying to reason mildly. "That story is all nonsense; a pack of lies from beginning to end."

"But it was all set down there in print; a lord gave his word it was true," said Mrs. Kerman, almost weeping. "I should be sorry for Sam to lose his job here. He likes you; and Lillie does an' all. And I'm sorry to disoblige, but I can't—I reely can't let them sleep in." She turned to Mrs. Thompson. "You're a mother yourself. You have a family to consither. You'll understand as I can't run the risk of having such a thing brought home." And she burst into tears.

"Hush, Mrs. Kerman," interposed Mrs. Thompson hastily, forestalling her husband. "Don't distress yourself so. We will wait until you are less upset before we say

any more about this matter. Now go, and we will have another little talk to-morrow. Good evening."

"Good evening, 'm," responded Mrs. Kerman. Then sniffing disconsolately, but with obstinacy written in every line of her figure, she made her way across the lawn.

Mr. Thompson stared fiercely after her. "So all this is owing to that fool of a Kirke. It's no use Wyndham trying to smooth things over and make us neighbourly. I shall never tolerate him. I shall not attempt to do so. These people in remote country places become so afraid of the inconvenience of quarrelling with desirable neighbours that a spirit of false tolerance hangs over everything like a fog. I am not afraid of having an enemy, as they will very soon see. I intend to fight Kirke and his theories, tooth and nail. I shall write to the *Yorkshire Post*. If he attempts to bring his pernicious literature——"

Mrs. Thompson walked beside him as he jerked along with short steps towards the house, and she contributed nothing to the conversation; for though not particularly wise, she had learned this lesson from married life—that some storms can only be safely weathered in silence.

Helen wandered off in another direction, intending to meet Maude in the lane leading from the Vicarage. At first no one was to be seen; then two figures came strolling along, evidently engrossed in each other's conversation. For a moment or two the sunset light in which they walked dazzled her; but immediately she knew that Bennett was one of them, she turned back and began to walk quickly home again. The impulse which had made her do this surprised herself, and she could imagine no reason for it. Of course, if there were a young man anywhere about, he would desire to stroll with Maude in a lane at sunset. It was not exactly Maude's doing; she never ran after them, but just accepted

on to the garden gate, there to wait
resolutely strangled her inclination t
she were a fool, she would not be a

"Too late for tennis to-night!" sh
as they came within hail; but the ne
shortish figure and weather-beaten f
aching twinge that stirred her to
wouldn't feel like that! She'd stop
ache if she died in the process. . .
voice, pleasant and even as usual: "
there will be no more tennis for me t
harvest is finished the evenings will be
at her. "Summer's nearly over."

"It has been a lovely summer," said

CHAPTER VI

"If a man's house is noble, he'll be seen
So much the nobler in it—or more mean."

Thursday morning was grey and sunless, not promising very well for the return visit to Muckleby Hall in the afternoon. Three times between breakfast and three o'clock did Mr. Thompson change his mind about his suit; for he liked to wear clothes exactly appropriate to the occasion and the weather, holding with Pepys—whom he could not really admire from the little he had read of him—that dress is an important factor in a man's life. But he would have been greatly offended if any one had accused him of thinking much about dress, one way or another.

The final verdict at three was for the lightish, as compared with the absolutely summer-like, with a pale-coloured tie; and he was confirmed in his judgment when a slight drizzle set in just as the party motored up the long avenue of beech trees leading to the Hall. They could see servants hastily moving tea-tables in out of the rain, and their host himself came forward to usher his guests into the house.

His graceful figure showed to great advantage at the top of the broad steps with the fine Georgian house behind him, and as he walked beside Mrs. Thompson into the hall, she could not help feeling that it was rather a pity his affections were already engaged—or at any rate partly engaged. Here was a son-in-law whom any woman might welcome. But

...ually spread tables.

The house was too small to contain
the family portraits, which were chief
period, adorned the walls of the hall. O
from whom the present owner had
down from the place of honour above th
other despots in the past, he had remov
ancestor to make room for his own, pro
the same human strain runs through Eng
men and long-dead Egyptian kings.

Maude, who was on occasion rather
trace some resemblance between these
and bucolic gentlemen and their succe
found an ear and a pair of eyebrows th
Still, Wyndham drew his chair near t
pleased by her attention to his persona
Tom—ordinarily a most cheerful youth-
side labouring under a load of unpleasa
intense consciousness that his tennis flan
the wash to a degree that no effort coul
...with l...

gentleman on the wages of a farm labourer. Finally, he had put between himself and this difficult life a sort of barrier behind which he said mechanically at intervals: "Yayse! Yayse!" and hoped people would so far as possible let him alone. He could then go on being harassed about boots or bread without drawing any one's attention or pity. Mrs. Stainton was vivacious, but a little hard and shrewish—as, indeed, who might not be in her place? For had she not often been entreated to "Hush! Don't name it to Mr. Harbottle," the larder at the Vicarage would have been in a parlous state indeed. Her difficulties were further increased by the necessity of not naming it to Mr. Stainton, whose pride would not have let him take a gift from his churchwarden's house of which his churchwarden did not cordially approve. So what with juggling with her own conscience, the Vicar's, and the viands, Mrs. Stainton had a worrying time, even at the best of it.

Mr. Thompson felt sorry for the Vicar, and now pointedly addressed him, thinking he was out of spirits.

"I suppose you knew the former Squire well?" he said, making conversation. "A great loss, no doubt?"

"M', yayse," murmured Mr. Stainton doubtfully; as indeed he might, seeing that old Ned had never come to church, and that even the bowdlerized version of the reply sent back when the Vicar offered to attend the death-bed had been too terrible for repetition.

So that subject did not last long. Then Tom declined to make any response to his mother's constant "You remember, don't you, Tom?" or, "I'm sure, Mr. Wyndham, Tom would love to see it"; but instead ate cakes in a heavy silence, one after the other.

It could not be called a gay occasion; but Maude seemed to be enjoying herself, and responded with alertness when

her host proposed showing her the ballroom. The Vicar also suggested that Mr. Thompson might like to see the library, and they all trooped across the hall into that fine apartment, where the great arm-chair still stood by the fire in which old Ned Wyndham had spent most of the last two years of his life, girding against the infirmities of age, and never touching one of the volumes that filled the shelves from floor to ceiling. After this inspection, the Vicar said he must go about some Parish business, and took his leave, while the rest of the party went to see the ballroom.

Mr. Thompson, however, had discovered an ancient directory of that part of East Yorkshire in which Wressle was situated, and he remained behind for a few minutes, engrossed in its pages. For this quaint old history of the neighbourhood in which he had lived his best years had the effect on him which a well-remembered scent has on an exile. It brought back to him memories of council meetings when he sat in a glow of solemn importance to consider behind closed doors the thrilling case of Ex-Councillor Jebbs and the road-scrapings, or the proposed new street-lamps which it was feared a cheese-paring proletariat might think unnecessary, and many others of a like nature. As he stood there by a desk not far from old Ned's chair, turning over the leaves of the directory, he experienced that form of nostalgia from which few public men in retirement can be always and altogether exempt, however much they may have wished to retire.

So Mr. Thompson stayed where he was, while the others went into the ballroom and viewed the shabby white panelling, and the dusty, polished floor on which so many feet now still had tripped in years gone by. Mrs. Stainton, with her head a little on one side, said as much: in the way people will do who have not imagination enough to be really

saddened by such reflections. Helen felt acutely irritated with her, believing this annoyance to be caused by a "sloppiness" which this generation detests; but the actual fact was that she rebelled against the little dragging pain caused by a too sharp realization of all that dead-and-gone youth and gaiety.

Then Mrs. Stainton, with a laudable desire to help her host and make the rather dull party "go," opened the piano and began to play a dance tune. Immediately the atmosphere seemed to grow less heavy; the musty silence of the great echoing place once stirred, became no longer so oppressive, and Tom seized hold of Mrs. Thompson, who stood near him, calling out to his mother: "I say, play us something we can jazz to. Mrs. Thompson, you simply ought to learn how to jazz."

"Thomas!" cried Mrs. Stainton repressingly. But the boy had a way with him—disarming to ladies whose youth is past—of assuming that they were still not too old for anything; and Mrs. Thompson only withdrew herself with an indulgent laugh. "There! There! You'd better take one of the girls."

"Come on!" cried Maude, slipping past her host, who was just going to invite her, and beginning to dance before Tom had time to catch her in his arms.

Wyndham perforce turned to Helen, and they also danced; while the dust rose into a bar of sunlight that now streamed across the room through an open shutter, showing that the rain had ceased. But after a while Helen stopped, and Wyndham stood by Mrs. Thompson to watch the other two. Still Maude went on, oblivious of everything but the fine floor and the joy of dancing. It was a passion with her, and Tom's lithe young figure and supple movements enabled

him to support her exactly as she wished, without her being too much aware of him.

At last Mrs. Stainton could stand it no longer. Her fingers came down on the notes with a crash. This girl was making a perfect fool of her boy, besides interrupting his studies, though she no more thought of marrying him than Sam Kerman, the garden boy.

Wyndham started at the sound of that crashing chord, as if he had been violently jerked out of some engrossing preoccupation. "Your daughter dances wonderfully, Mrs. Thompson," he said then, almost nervously, as if to hide his former state of mind. Then he recovered himself. "And Tom too. I had no idea you were such a hand at it, Tom."

"No? Don't know quite everything yet, my boy!" responded Tom, a little beyond himself with joy and triumph. "Come on! Let's have another go!" And with that he actually took Helen for his partner, leaving Maude for Wyndham, in the fullness of his magnanimous gratitude to his host for having provided such a glorious opportunity.

Round and round they went; slip—slip—slip on the floor, and Mrs. Stainton thumped out notes, keeping time. Then a clear voice sounded outside in the hall and the music suddenly ceased. Wyndham stopped short as if he had been shot. The girls looked at each other and Mrs. Thompson.

"Miss Kirke!" said Mrs. Stainton. "I thought she was in Scotland."

"So did old Wyndham," thought Tom to himself, grinning at his host's perturbed expression. But aloud he said: "Shall I go and fetch her in?"

"No. If you'll just excuse me——" And Wyndham hurried off.

"When the cat's away, the mouse will play," said Tom

with a wink. "She keeps a fairly tight hand on him, I think. Knows too much about his goings-on with other girls before her, to stand any nonsense."

"But they are not engaged, are they?" said Maude, drawling more than usual and with an elaborate carelessness.

"No. I think she's holding off a bit. She has pots of money, and doesn't mean to throw herself away," said Tom. "Lots of men have had a try for her, but she turned 'em all down. But Wyndham's a beggar for the girls. What they see in him I don't know. Still, there it is!"

"I can't see anything so unusually attractive about him," said Maude.

"Oh, I can," said Helen.

"So can I," said Mrs. Thompson. "He is just the sort of young man I might have fallen in love with in my young days."

"I agree with you," said Mrs. Stainton, almost with a sigh. And perhaps those two middle-aged women did go back for a moment to the forgotten ideal of their girlish dreams and see how different the reality had been; but only for a second; the kindly blindness that love gives to married people who care for each other swept over them again before the memory became an actual thought.

Wyndham meanwhile hurried into the hall, and found that neither his lady nor her father were anywhere to be seen. For once he was more preoccupied with Mr. Kirke, because only that afternoon Mr. Thompson had said that he intended to set the law of libel in action against that gentleman for damage to his occupation as a farmer by preventing his procuring domestic help for the house. He had also announced his intention of figuratively pulling Mr. Kirke's nose when they next met. Mr. Kirke often took books from

the library, and it would be perfectly awful if this figurative nose-pulling took place in that apartment, thus upsetting the rather delicate relations already existing between Wyndham and his hoped-for father-in-law.

So he opened the library door, fearing the worst, to see Mr. Kirke seated in the window, glancing at the *Yorkshire Post* of the previous day. No occupation could be less indicative of any sensational happening than this perusal of the oracle of the East Riding, and the fact of its being a day old seemed in some way to accentuate the calm. Wyndham glanced hurriedly round as he greeted Mr. Kirke. Where was Miss Kirke? Where was Thompson?

To the former spoken query, Mr. Kirke said that his daughter had gone to see the poultry-woman about some fowls she was getting for winter laying. They had understood from the maid that there was dancing in the ballroom, and had decided not to disturb the company.

Wyndham listened to this with only half an ear. It was certain Thompson was not in the hall; he could not get out of the window, and the only other exit had been nailed up by old Ned to avoid the draughts which blew round his chair "when those scoundrels left it open"—old Ned's snarling voice came back to the memory with most extraordinary vividness as the words passed through Wyndham's mind.

"Ah!" said Mr. Kirke, glancing up. "I had not noticed this letter about storing potatoes in yesterday's——" Then he started slightly. "I thought you told me that door was nailed up, Wyndham?"

"So it is," said Wyndham, surprised. "What makes you ask?"

"I thought I saw that curtain over the door move," said Mr. Kirke.

"Wind!" said his host, with a horrible sinking of the

heart. "There's always a tremendous draught through that door. That's why my old uncle had it fastened up and a heavy curtain hung over it."

"Well, I feel almost convinced——" He broke off abruptly. "There it is again! I distinctly saw that curtain move. No draught could move such a heavy curtain. Besides, it was totally unlike any movement caused by an ordinary draught."

Wyndham smiled—an anxious smile that strove to be reassuring and indulgent. "My dear sir, you don't know what the draughts can do in this house."

For all was now clear to him. Mr. Thompson, hearing Mr. Kirke's voice just outside, and being possessed by a keen desire to avoid a man whose nose he could not pull figuratively with any ease in his host's library, had slipped behind the curtain. He had naturally supposed, from its situation, that this curtain concealed the other exit from the room, and when he found himself in the space formed by the thick wall between curtain and door, he had fought silently with the refractory handle of a door which he expected to open every minute. Then it had been rather difficult to emerge; with every second more difficult—if he were to emerge with the dignity which he would wish to show on the occasion of such a meeting. This hesitation finally made any appearance extremely undignified and awkward, and he had obviously decided to stay where he was until Mr. Kirke went out of the room.

These reflections raced through Wyndham's mind in the interval between Mr. Kirke's next remark, which he did not take in, and his own hurried: "I know this is a draughty hole. Do let us go into the dining-room. It is always the warmest room. Or the hall? There is a wood fire in the hall, because of the damp."

"No, thank you. I prefer to stay where I am," said Mr. Kirke, settling himself once more to his paper. "But please don't let me keep you away from your guests. I hear the Thompsons are here."

"Yes. They are returning my call," said Wyndham.

"Ah, well, I don't care to meet him when I can help it. I consider him a pestilent fellow. But you go and see after your guests. I am perfectly right here for any length of——" He gave another start, and this time rose from his seat. "You may say what you like," he remarked firmly, "but I saw that curtain move again. I am going to investigate. It may be something of supreme interest that we are about to discover. This house has always struck me as having an atmosphere conducive——"

"Come," said Wyndham, grasping Mr. Kirke's arm in an unusually demonstrative fashion, "I really can't let you stay here and catch cold. Come along with me to the dining-room." For he had a horrid suspicion that though Mr. Thompson had borne being called a pestilent fellow, he would not stand many more insults without casting dignity to the winds, and might break forth any second in a frame of mind which could lead to anything.

Mr. Kirke suffered himself to be propelled towards the door with reluctance, glancing over his shoulder. "I must investigate this matter further, Wyndham," he said, solemnly excited. "I feel convinced that some spirit accustomed to enter this library by that nailed-up door has just passed through. Did I not understand from you that this house was once attached to a monastery? Perhaps some old monk returns——"

"Oh, sorry!" said Tom Stainton, entering the room so hastily that he was almost upon the linked couple before he

saw them. "But I'm looking for Mr. Thompson. The car is round, and the ladies are waiting to say good-bye."

"Where are they?" asked Wyndham anxiously, stopping short.

"Out on the terrace. Miss Kirke has joined them." He hesitated, glancing at Mr. Kirke. "It struck me they—they weren't getting on particularly well. Mother is with Miss Kirke, but still—— So I came to fetch you."

Wyndham felt a little damp about the forehead; a wife and some five thousand a year seemed to hang upon his next move. For if Mr. Thompson did come out from the hiding-place and thus make Mr. Kirke look a fool for his surmises, the latter gentleman's prickly vanity would be irretrievably wounded. And all his daughter's doubts, which she was gradually stifling because Wyndham attracted her, would return in full force at this evidence of duplicity.

"Do," he said, turning to Mr. Kirke, "*do* come into the dining-room. I—I wouldn't have you catch cold in this draughty place for all the world."

And the agonized pleading in his voice rather surprised Mr. Kirke, but touched him a little, all the same. This young fellow really did seem to place a proper value on an elderly gentleman's health and convenience—a good sign, a good sign. Still he did not go. So full of his subject was he, that he had to pause a moment to tell Tom.

"A most interesting thing has happened within the last few minutes," he said. "That door you see there is nailed up, and yet the curtain moved as if a strong wind stirred it—a movement which could not possibly have been caused by any draught from a closed door. No doubt some spirit accustomed to enter by that way——" And at last he allowed himself to be gently urged out of the library, still talking.

Tom, left alone, hesitated a moment. Rum thing how old Kirke did go on. . . . Could there really be anything in all this? He was still staring at the curtain, when a red face came peering cautiously round it, then a whole figure emerged. The next instant Mr. Thompson was twinkling speechlessly across that library carpet and through the door with an agility perfectly miraculous in one of his age and build.

Tom Stainton gazed after him for a second, jaw dropped, eyes goggling. "What on earth——" Then his face underwent a lightning change. "He's started a new ghost in the neighbourhood! Thompson's been taken for a ghost, after all his crusading, and he can never put the matter right. Oh dear! Oh dear! And Tom was obliged to bend double and clasp his hand before his mouth to stifle a paroxysm of laughter.

After recovering a little, he went out into the hall, which his host was now crossing on the way to the front door, having deposited Mr. Kirke safely in the dining-room with the door closed. Wyndham hurried past Tom with a distrait and worried air, saying as he went: "I suppose the Thompsons are there still?"

"Yes," said Tom, grinning. "And the ghost's joined them outside. I thought you'd be glad to hear that."

"I don't know what you mean," said Wyndham shortly, pressing on.

"Don't you?" said Tom, then he bent double again. "I'm sorry. I can't help it," he gasped. "But when I think of old Thompson being obliged to play ghosts, and not able to come out and denounce——" He broke off again.

Wyndham turned on him and said in a fierce whisper: "You young fool! What makes you think Thompson was there?"

"I—I saw him," gasped Tom.

Wyndham walked on a step or two, nonplussed; then he mumbled curtly: "Keep your knowledge to yourself; least you can do."

"All right," said Tom good-naturedly. "Quite understand you don't want to offend old Kirke. I'm mum!"

The two came out upon the front steps together, Wyndham saying with cheerful heartiness: "Ah, Mr. Thompson, here you are! We have been looking for you all over the place."

"Such a house for unexpected nooks!" said Mrs. Stainton, ready as ever to make everything pleasant. "No wonder Mr. Thompson could not be found. I once lost myself between the two staircases. Don't you think there are quaint old nooks, Mr. Thompson?"

The gentleman appealed to avoided his host's eye. "Yes," he said, and left it at that. He was not sure if Wyndham knew where he had spent that intolerable quarter of an hour, but at any rate Tom knew.

Miss Kirke stood a little outside the group, attaching herself obviously to Mrs. Stainton alone, and after Wyndham's greeting she retired farther away, looking through her lorgnettes at Helen making preparations to start the car. Then farewells were said; the Thompsons offered Mrs. Stainton a lift home, and Tom was about to set off alone on his walk across the fields, when he felt a touch on his shoulder and heard Mr. Thompson say in a tone of would-be bluff camaraderie: "I'll join you, if I may. I feel inclined for a tramp after tea. Good for both of us. Eaten too many rich cakes."

Tom allowed the aspersion on his own appetite to pass, and accompanied Mr. Thompson down the drive and away to the open pastures, talking of the weather and the crops,

without any surprise. He knew what was coming, and it came. About halfway across the last field, Mr. Thompson coughed, slashed a dandelion with his walking-stick, and said with a smile: "Funny that episode in the library, wasn't it?"

"It was that!" replied Tom, perhaps more heartily than was agreeable, for his companion went on at once in a sharper tone:

"Not that there is anything essentially ridiculous in a man desiring to avoid a painful scene in the house of his host."

"Oh, dear, no! Of course not," said Tom. "I understood from the girls that you had threatened to pull Mr. Kirke's nose, and of course that would have been awkward in a strange house."

"Well! Well! That was a figure of speech," said Mr. Thompson. "The thing is this: that having endeavoured to leave the room, as the most dignified thing to do under the circumstances, I could not well declare that I was still—er—present; if you take my meaning?"

The spectacle of the fluent Mr. Thompson floundering rather appealed to Tom's sense of humour; but he had also a kind heart, and after all, this was a fellow-creature in pain.

"Look here, Mr. Thompson," he said, stopping short on the path. "Don't you worry. I told Wyndham I shouldn't say a word to a living soul, and I shan't."

"Then Wyndham knows?" said Mr. Thompson eagerly. "I felt he did!"

"Oh, he knows all right," said Tom. "I expect he was scared to death lest you should come out and show you weren't a ghost, after Kirke thought you were, and so make the old beggar look silly. Can't afford to lose any chances with the heiress, you know."

Mr. Thompson turned very red.

"I wish now I had come out," he said. "I have a great mind to write to Kirke and tell him the truth."

"Wouldn't that be giving Wyndham away pretty badly?" suggested Tom. "Kirke would remember at once how Wyndham had tried to get him out of the library. He'd probably think it was all a put-up thing—a practical joke."

"Do I strike you as the sort of man who would lend myself to a practical joke of that nature?" demanded Mr. Thompson.

"But that's just the one sort you might, you know," urged the ingenious Tom; "in order to prove how silly all these spiritualistic goings-on were. And Kirke would naturally be raging wild at the bare suspicion of Wyndham doing such a thing. It would be unfair on Wyndham."

Mr. Thompson tramped some distance deep in thought; then he turned round and said heavily: "I'm sure I don't want to act unfairly to any man. I suppose the matter must rest where it is."

"That's right, sir," said Tom. "And after all, what does it matter if you do add one little ghost to old Kirke's collection? The more the merrier."

But Mr. Thompson made no reply at all to that consoling speech, and they parted at the next stile without any further conversation.

CHAPTER VII

"Sundays after Trinity—
When I hear the words, I see
All the summers of my youth:
Church doors open to the air,
Twittering birds, and hum of prayer—
Not a shadow of the truth!"

The Sunday morning was dewy and still, and yellow sunlight lay on Mr. Thompson's wheat-field, which Harbottle had finished reaping the day before. It was a light crop, but dry and good; partridges flew out with a whir as the Thompson family walked along the lane leading from the Grange to the village church; blackberries hung on the hedges; the sound of the first bell was telling the women of Muckleby to put on their hats and bonnets; and yet Mr. Thompson tramped rather morosely by the side of his wife, out of tune with the peaceful hour.

First, there was that absurd business last Thursday; and now, this morning, his collar had been unwearable; and the last and finishing touch had been given to his disturbance by Mathilda Bain, when he very properly exploded about the washing, and asked what the fool of a washerwoman could have been thinking of. For Mathilda had replied with a most irritating casualness: "Oh, I expect it's this owd onrest. Everybody's got it. Nobody's going to kill theirselves to keep theirselves like they used to do." And she then continued her dusting, as if to say that she and the washerwoman, and the people of Muckleby in general had

no more control over this complaint than they had had over "owd h'illness"—the local name for influenza.

But this incident, trifling as it was in itself, had an effect on Mr. Thompson out of all proportion to its importance, for it stirred that in the bottom of his mind which he did not want to think about: a consciousness—like the throb of a tooth beginning to ache again—of those factors in the life of to-day which he had run away into the heart of the country to escape. Though he did not acknowledge it to himself, the altered mental attitude of every workman, every shop assistant, every porter and cab-driver, had acted on him like the constant, irritating friction of a small nail in the shoe. He went about just as usual, but he was never quite at ease; he had a dull, uneasy sense of something uncomfortable.

That was one reason—added to the fact of his losing his place on the Council—which had decided him to leave Wressle and live in a remote place like Muckleby. His action had not been entirely the sudden impulse which both he and every one else thought it, but was the outcome of a steadily increasing discomfort produced by an unfamiliar mental atmosphere which made him feel irritated and strange. But there was no escaping it. It spread over country fields and red-tiled villages just the same. It was covering the world. . . . Mr. Thompson gave a jerk to the offending collar. The jerk was a sort of safety valve for these feelings which he did not translate into words, but which spoilt for him the peacefulness of the morning.

Then Mrs. Thompson complained of the heat and the length of the walk, and seemed to be looking back regretfully—like Lot's wife—in the direction of the Wressle pavements. Mr. Thompson marched up the aisle just as the service was about to begin, and sat down in the corner of

the Grange pew nearest the door, filled with bottled-up irritation. As he lifted his head from—it is to be feared—a perfunctory greeting to his Creator, he became conscious of a lady standing in the pew on the other side of the narrow aisle with a most vindictive eye fixed on him. She was tall, thin, with very fine aquiline features and an unmistakable look of breeding, which made her behaviour all the more remarkable; for she never knelt down and never took her eyes off Mr. Thompson. The choir-boys nudged each other and giggled furtively; the Reverend James Stainton cast a hasty glance in the lady's direction and plunged nervously into the service; Helen, Maude, and Mrs. Thompson, each after her manner, betrayed their surprised disapproval. Suddenly the lady began to remove her gloves with great rapidity and—without the faintest warning—flung them into the crimson face of Mr. Thompson.

He stared at her; breathed hard; choked; while the Vicar's voice quavered up and down, and you could have heard a pin drop in Muckleby Church, so tense was the interest of the congregation to see what Mr. Thompson would do next. With an immense dignity he stooped, placed the gloves on a large prayer-book, and handed them back across the aisle with a slight bow to the lady. She, seemingly nonplussed by this behaviour, hesitated a moment; then accepted the gloves and sat down. The Vicar's voice steadied; the congregation rustled in their seats, disappointed; and Mr. Thompson felt modestly proud of himself. He could carry off any situation, as that most extraordinary female would find out. Meanwhile, he began to feel less rasped and uneasy. Those unpleasant thoughts which had been giving signs of life on his way to church became quiescent once more, and he listened to the familiar words of the service which fell like a healing balm upon his

mind. Here, anyway, was something that did not change. . . . He opened the dirty old hymn-book on the ledge from which a generation or two of Mucklebyites had sung, and noticed with disapproval that some one had scribbled in pencil on the fly-leaf. His glance idly followed the words:

"Eliza Milford Fox. 1841.

The loss of wealth is much,
The loss of health is more;
The loss of faith is such,
And no man can restore."

But it did not occur to him that those words had any bearing on his own thoughts and feelings, or on what was happening now. Still he felt soothed and comforted as the service went on. The sun fell pleasantly through the unstained window, and he liked to feel that he was paying a proper respect to his Maker. . . . Then came the hymn: "The King of Love my Shepherd is; His goodness faileth never." And Mr. Thompson sang lustily, throwing out his chest; honestly desiring to live and die after the fashion there made plain.

So the service came to an end, the strange lady bolting out first into the sunlight, with a total disregard of the choir on its way to the vestry.

The Thompsons followed rather at the tail-end of the congregation, and were joined by Wyndham, who sat in a high carved pew on one side of the chancel, not easily visible from where they were sitting. His presence there seemed to prove that Miss Kirke had now definitely gone on that promised visit to Scotland which had once been put off with such disastrous effects to the tea-party at the Hall; other-

wise he would have been dancing attendance, no doubt, on the lady.

But when Wyndham joined the Thompsons, neither he nor they had any idea how clear the situation was to the lookers-on from the village. They did not hear Mrs. Barber murmur to Mrs. Harbottle: "There he goes; taking up with that lass o' Thompson's when he can't get the young woman he is really after! I told you so."

"Well! Well!" said Mrs. Harbottle comfortably. "It's a case of diamond cut diamond this time. Miss Maude's just such a one for the lads as he is for the girls. Now if it had been Mr. Bennett—he's different."

"Don't you make too sure about that," said Mrs. Barber. "Our Ella saw Miss Maude and him sauntering along the lane one night. Oh, men's all alike when it comes to."

"I'll lay my life Mr. Bennett isn't," said Mrs. Harbottle.

"Oh, I know he's a nonsuch!" retorted Mrs. Barber good-naturedly.

As the subject of their conversation passed at this moment, they held their peace, noting him intently. "Would he or wouldn't he?" He paused by Mrs. Thompson and the girls, Wyndham having now dropped behind with Mr. Thompson, with an apparent desire to put a distance between himself and the group in front.

"Mr. Thompson," began Wyndham when they were well out of earshot, "I have been wanting a few words with you in private." Mr. Thompson bristled a little. "I wanted to thank you for what you did on Thursday. I was awfully struck by the clever way in which you prevented a most awkward situation," continued Wyndham. "I can't thank you enough for the tact and *savoir-faire* you showed. Only a man of the world——"

"Oh, nothing!" interposed Mr. Thompson, with a wave

of his hand; but he began to see, himself, how tactful and resourceful he had been, now you came to think of it. "Any man in the same position—no need to thank me; I'm sure—only too glad to get you out of a hole. I suppose Kirke must be aware of my views about his tomfoolery. I can understand that he rather dreads being confronted by an adversary so accustomed to debates as I am. My long experience in the Council and so forth at Wressle——"

"Exactly," said Wyndham. "But I thought I should just like to express my gratitude."

"Very glad to have stepped into the breach," said Mr. Thompson. Then he felt so far restored as actually to see humour in the situation. "Literally into the breach, ha! ha! Those walls of yours must be very thick, or I couldn't have been accommodated where I was, Wyndham."

In this mood, therefore, Mr. Thompson fitted his pace to that of his companion, who now appeared anxious to catch up with the party in front. At once, as was only natural, the talk was about the extraordinary behaviour of the thin lady in church.

"Father," began Helen, "Mr. Bennett says she is called Miss Milford Fox. The Grange belonged to her family for ages. They sold it to the man who had it before we came, and she used to go at night and dig up his carpet-beddings. She said carpet-bedding there was sacrilege, like putting a gramophone on the altar, and she wasn't going to have it while she had hands to dig up roots. I suppose she was annoyed to see you in the Grange pew."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Thompson, rather startled. "Didn't the owner get her stopped, Bennett? She must be mad. Why didn't he take out a summons against her?"

"Oh, he hesitated to do that," said Bennett. "You see, she has relatives all over the county. And she is quite sane,

excepting on that one point. Fact is, it nearly broke her heart when they had to sell the property. She loved the house and the whole place more than anything in the world."

Helen frowned and her cheeks reddened—her habit when she was moved. "I say! I rather like her caring like that, you know. It's fine to care like that for anything. Some people can't ever." But common sense took the ascendant once more. "But of course she ought to go into a home or something. She's not fit to live alone."

Then the Vicar's wife came out of church holding her son's arm in a firm grasp, and propelling that reluctant youth swiftly past the Thompson group. "Lovely day! Must hurry on account of Sunday school. Tom kindly taking my boys' class as I have a headache," she said as they went.

"Poor old Tom!" said Maude, smiling at him as he gazed back at her ruefully.

Wyndham was standing by her and he lowered his voice. "Poor? Do you think it's nothing to be twenty and madly in love?"

But the words also reached Helen's ears, and she suddenly felt jarred that Tom's calf-love should be made a peg for Wyndham's sentiment to hang on. Her chin went up in the fashion those nearest to her cordially disliked. "I think it's far more comfortable to be thirty and discreetly in love," she answered.

Wyndham appeared not to hear and turned to Mrs. Thompson, who immediately invited him to luncheon at the Grange. Bennett had come up meanwhile, and stood a little on the edge of the group, as if uncertain whether to go or stay. "You'll come back to luncheon with us too, Mr. Bennett?" said Mrs. Thompson rather perfunctorily, as they moved on.

"N-no, thank you," said Bennett; then more decidedly: "No, thank you very much—I have a lot of letters to write."

So without much further pressing he was allowed to go his way, while Helen and her father found themselves walking together, a little behind the others. "Did you see that?" said Mr. Thompson in a low tone. "I'm confident Bennett was taking his cue from Wyndham. If Wyndham had not looked the other way in such a detached, non-committal sort of manner while the discussion was going on, Bennett would have come. But I did not press it. I am confirmed in my opinion that Wyndham knows something more than the rest of us do about that young man. I have thrown out feelers several times, but Wyndham always retreats into his shell and changes the subject. Public school code, I suppose. Won't give another man away. But I think there are cases——"

"I don't believe Bennett has done anything to be ashamed of," said Helen trenchantly.

"Why does he never speak about his relations? Why do his experiences seem to be bounded by an Egyptian bank? He didn't emerge from a crocodile's head a fully fledged bank manager, I suppose?" And here Mr. Thompson smiled, his irritation dissipated by satisfaction at his own *jeu d'esprit*.

The whole party went in amicably to lunch, where apple tart made from apples in the Grange orchard was served, and Mr. Thompson remarked with perfect truth that he had never tasted such delicious apples in his life; for indeed they did possess that exquisite flavour of home-grown things which those new to growing their food taste at once, because they are in harmony for the first time with the old gardener Adam and his wife, and some latent instinct stirs within them, giving a zest to misshapen carrots and inferior cauli-

flowers which prime pineapple had not known before. All this neither to be defined nor analysed, but only experienced, like all things partly of the spirit.

So when Mr. Thompson threw out his chest to praise the apple tart, Mrs. Thompson echoed his feeling somewhat more tepidly. And though the girls laughed, "Did you ever hear anything like Father with his new toy? One would think nobody else grew fruit!" they also found the apples somehow subtly different from any ever bought in the Wessle shops.

After lunch was over, Mr. Thompson retired to the study and Mrs. Thompson went upstairs to rest. Wyndham and the girls, therefore, wandered out into the garden, where they sat for a little while talking in a desultory fashion under the trees. Then Helen went to feed the chickens, leaving the other two alone. Maude made no attempt at conversation, lazily pulling a leaf to pieces in her long fingers, with her heavy white lids drooping. After a while she also rose, strolled across the lawn, and stood leaning on a little side gate which led into the lane. A couple of lovers walked slowly, arms entwined, far enough away to add to the peacefulness of the scene on that Sunday afternoon. It seemed a world of love and greenery and sunshine. Wyndham leaned on the gate too, and they watched it in silence.

"I never knew a girl so easy to get on with as you," he said at last. "Most girls always seem to think they must keep on chattering for fear a man should turn bored and go."

Maude smiled, knocking a rose she carried with her left hand on the top bar of the gate. He laughed softly and moved closer to her. "I see! You are never afraid of the man going. You have learnt that, Miss Maude."

"I like men-friends. I don't see why there should be such

a lot of nonsense——" She lowered her voice. "Perhaps you know?" He nodded gravely. "I shall never feel in that way about any one again, of course," she continued. "But surely I am not to be debarred from any friendships with men because I don't want to marry them."

"Of course not," said Wyndham. "Just in the same way that I do not intend to cease having women-friends when—when—if I marry." He stumbled a little over this gossamer allusion to Mildred Kirke and went on hastily: "It's ridiculous, shutting oneself up into romance-tight compartments like that. If a man and woman can't trust themselves, they had better remain unmarried."

"I quite agree," said Maude. Then she moved an inch or so towards Wyndham's side of the gate. "It's such a rest to have a real friend."

He also moved, and his cloth sleeve touched her muslin one. "You don't know how I've wanted that too. Nobody would think I was a very lonely man, but I am." He bent his head towards her. "I wish you would have me for a friend."

She sighed gently. "I don't know. I don't know how it will work out. I shouldn't like—any one—to be annoyed, of course."

Wyndham had not the faintest intention of letting "any one" find out; and indeed he was himself aware—at the back of his mind—of the unwisdom of these proceedings. But he begged the question by saying in that delightfully modulated voice of his: "Do let us be friends, Maude? Won't you?"

She let the use of her Christian name pass.

"Well, if you really want——" she hesitated; then she lifted those heavy lids and looked into his face.

Suddenly he was on fire, but he controlled himself and

placed his hand gently on hers as it played with the ro
"All right. Then that's settled," he said. But she cou
hear a tone in his voice which she recognized well enough

"Listen!" she said, moving from the gate; "I hear Hel
calling us in to tea."

"I can't hear anything," he said. "Besides, it is not tin
for tea yet. Do stay!"

"We have tea very early on Sundays," she answered; a
at once she began to walk towards the house, Wyndha
perforce following her.

When tea was over, he went up to the drawing-roo
piano and began to look at a pile of songs which Mr
Thompson had turned out of a music-case belonging to h
in her girlhood. After a while he sat down to try over son
of them, singing a few bars here and there, then he sa
one all through. After that, as the room darkened, he ga
them others which he knew by heart. Maude sat near th
window where the fading light just caught her face, leavi
the rest of her in the shadow. But no one could gather fro
her still lips and down-dropt eyelids what she thought
the singing—whether she were entranced or utterly bored

At last he stopped and left the piano. Mr. Thompso
sneezed violently, as if he had been under a spell and wai
ing for the cessation of the music to wake up. Helen struc
a match and held it to the candle, her eyes rather wide ar
shining under her broad, candid forehead as she bent ov
the flickering light. Mrs. Thompson shivered a little, fee
ing as if she had wakened rather chilly out of a ver
pleasant dream. All three told Wyndham how much the
had enjoyed his singing; but Maude did not say anything

Then he went away, and the girls pulled down the blin
and prepared supper, because neither Mathilda nor any
the scratch staff were available on a Sunday evening.

At the larder door, Helen paused with a bowl of milk in her hand to address her sister. "You never thanked Wyndham. Why didn't you?"

"Plenty of you to do it without me," said Maude, gathering up some small pastry. "No need for us all four to gush over him, was there?"

Helen put down her bowl again and looked gravely at her sister over the top of the candle on the white-scrubbed table. "He is practically engaged to that girl, you know."

"Well, what if he is?"

"You should know best. But—but I shouldn't like you to be made miserable, old girl."

"Miserable!" Maude turned round, pale with anger. "What do you mean? Am I never to have a man-friend without you prying after me and imagining all sorts of vulgar things? I know he is as good as engaged. I'm sure he has no idea of anything of that sort with me." Then her voice broke and she began to weep. "Oh, Helen, how can you be so unkind! When you know I shall never think of anybody in that way again! I do call it cruel of you to want to spoil all my pleasure in being friendly with anybody. But you've done it now. I won't see him again or speak to him." And she burst forth into a fresh storm of hysterical sobbing. "To accuse me of running after Wyndham!"

Helen was both touched and angry. "Stop, Maude, do stop!" she said distressfully. "I never thought of such a thing. But I can see you do like Wyndham, and I'm quite sure he will never count the world well lost for love. Any money you may have in the dim and distant future will be a flea-bite compared with what that Kirke girl has down on the nail."

"But I don't want to marry him. I wouldn't if I had millions. And you have no right to say he is marrying the Kirke girl for her money. He thought it was time he married, and she seemed suitable," sobbed Maude. "He hadn't—he wasn't—he'd never really fallen in love! He didn't realize . . ."

"Did he tell you all this?" asked Helen.

"No. But I'm intuitive. I know," gasped Maude, choking and wiping her eyes.

"Come, Maude," said Helen, bringing a glass of water. "Try and pull yourself together. I'm—I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. You know I feel for you most awfully. I'd do anything—I don't wonder you get upset sometimes. I've such a way of blurting things out, but I'd give anything to —to make up——" The extreme difficulty Helen experienced in talking about her feelings here brought her to a full stop, and she hastened to add in another tone: "Here, have a drink of water." For some inner delicacy always prompted her to turn her mind away as soon as she could from witnessing intimate emotions.

Maude, however, preferred to return to the subject of Wyndham in order to close it in her own way. So she managed to say, still sobbing a little, but with a fair attempt at self-control: "Don't know how I came to be so silly. But it all seemed to rush back upon me in a sort of wave. I think it was that singing in the dusk. Enough to upset any one who has had a great trouble."

"Of course it was. I ought to have understood," said Helen repentantly.

"But so far as Wyndham goes, you may make your mind easy," said Maude. "I have had men running after me before who were every bit as attractive as he is, and I am

quite well able to take care of myself. You ought to know that by now. What made you get suddenly panic-stricken?"

And Helen, finding herself quite unable to say, was forced to conclude that she had been rather ridiculous.

CHAPTER VIII

"No need to travel when we love,
For Wonders come so near;
A Desert Sunrise in a Smile,
The Dead Sea in a Tear."

Mr. Thompson could not disguise from himself the plain fact that he was not getting on with the reformation of Muckleby as he had expected. The very abuses he had set out to reform seemed actually to strengthen through his agency. People who had before relegated the White Lady of Muckleby Hill to a place among the legends of the past, now naturally felt that a ghost which could somehow cause a hearty gentleman, only just past his prime, to receive "a clout on the side of the head" which incapacitated him for some days, must be a ghost still in good-going order. When it became clear to Mr. Thompson that secrecy did not answer, he related what had really happened on that eventful night to everybody who would listen; but he could not help feeling that this explanation had come too late, and that public opinion remained unchanged. The more uneducated villagers obviously thought he was trying to make his actual experiences fit in with his preconceived theories, while the others began to think he must have seen "something" after all.

At last he determined to seek the assistance of the Vicar, but the Vicar would not interfere; and only under continued pressure from his wife and son—who for differing

reasons desired to stand well with Mr. Thompson—did he finally consent to do as he was requested. But even then, his bald announcement from the reading-desk, *after* the notice of the mothers' meeting, that "a prominent member of the congregation with a sincere desire to prevent the spread of superstition wished it to be made known that the ghost which hit him on the side of the head was a stone at the bottom of a fence," did nothing but strengthen the faith of those who already believed, and arouse the curiosity of those who did not.

Further, there was a rumor abroad that Mr. Kirke was bringing from Scotland a great authority on such matters to stay with Wyndham at Muckleby Hall, in order to investigate the affair of the library door. Mr. Thompson's lips were, of course, sealed; but he felt keenly the indignity of having impersonated a disembodied spirit.

Being, however, of the stuff of which the British Empire was made, he did not feel himself deterred by failure from seeking a new field of endeavour. A campaign against superstition was a good thing, no doubt; but after all, the first duty of every Englishman at the present crisis was to increase the food supply of the community. He remembered this with a sudden illuminating clearness as he perused a weekly journal before the empty firegrate in his library, and regretted that he had, so to speak, side-tracked that interest for a time after settling down in Muckleby.

He at once rose and sought the society of his wife, who crocheted peacefully near the drawing-room window; and she saw as soon as he entered the room that he was in the first glow of a new enthusiasm. This rather pleased her than otherwise, because Mr. Thompson had been in such an explosive condition during the past week or two that he "went off" at the lightest touch, and she really had begun

to wonder how they should get through the winter in Muckleby, with the clayey lanes and footpaths in that state which had no doubt been the origin of the name. So she looked up at her husband with a smile, and said encouragingly: "Well, William?"

"Wonderful how a chance word!" said Mr. Thompson, waving his paper. "I can't think how I came to let side-issues obscure my real ambition when I left Wressle and took this place. But this article has put me on the right track again." He put the paper on the table and banged his hand down upon it. "You'll see from this, that the countryside is teeming with unused animal food—positively teeming with it."

Mrs. Thompson glanced up, a little perturbed. "Surely to goodness, William, you have had enough of that question." She paused and sped her arrow. "Your last venture——"

"There you go again!" said Mr. Thompson. "Always the same. Talk about the cold-water cure; a man has only to be married, to get *that* free gratis and for nothing every time he thinks of any original idea." He went on, working himself up, because latent doubts of his own powers had begun to assail him lately, and he violently hated the uncomfortable sensation caused thereby. "It ought to be put in the marriage service; I—Jane ——— or what-not—promise and vow to throw cold water on any idea of this my wedded husband that was not held by my great-grandmother. Bah! Here I come to you for sympathy, and you only twit me about a putrid pig!"

"I'm sure I didn't mean to be unkind," said Mrs. Thompson, laying down her crochet. "But I naturally felt—— You can't forget things, can you? And of course it led to our leaving Wressle."

"Very glad indeed we did," retorted Mr. Thompson, now assailed by another set of pricking doubts, which he usually managed to keep down out of sight. "I was sick of Wressle!"

Mrs. Thompson glanced out of the window rather drearily. "Well, what about all this animal food that is lying about?"

"Hardly worth telling you; not interested——" muttered Mr. Thompson. Then the temptation to talk about the subject with which he was brimming over conquered his pride. "Well, hedgehogs for one thing."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Thompson, relieved; for she meditated that hedgehogs are scarce. "I have heard that gipsies eat them, and find them very tasty."

"And snails," continued Mr. Thompson; then he went on quickly, forestalling objection: "Why should we in England turn up our noses at food which a highly civilized nation such as the French enjoy? It is our ridiculous insularity; and the sooner a stern necessity makes us march with the times and mend our ways, the better."

Mrs. Thompson shook her head. "William, I couldn't." She placed a plump white hand on her chest, and shuddered slightly. "Anything that crawls——"

"Nonsense," said Mr. Thompson; "I intend to gather a large supply, feed them on barley-meal in buckets—I think it is barley-meal they are fed with abroad—and supply our neighbours as well as our own household. The Vicarage, for instance; even Mrs. Stainton could not be offended by the offer of a delicacy that had cost us nothing."

"I am sorry to say it. I know you will think me unsympathetic again. But the very *name*——"

"Ha!" cried Mr. Thompson triumphantly. "But that's just it. People are so influenced by a name. Perhaps, as

Shakespeare said, when you know you *do* like a thing, a name does not matter; but when you don't know whether you will or not, it is tremendously important. I have thought that all out. I shall call them land-winkles. Correct description; tempting associations; you couldn't have anything better."

"For those who like winkles, of course," added Mrs. Thompson.

"Those who don't like them must learn to like them," said Mr. Thompson. "With the world in the state it is in now, this is no time to talk of likes or dislikes."

"N-no," said Mrs. Thompson. "But I'm afraid the servants——"

"The servants be hanged!" said Mr. Thompson, bounding off with his periodical in his hand.

A minute or two later Helen came into the drawing-room, dressed ready to go out.

"What's the matter with Father now?" she said.

"Oh, he is a little upset, dear. He takes things so to heart that can't be altered. People will go their own way, even if it is a wrong one. He'll never get the Muckleby people to increase the food supply by eating snails and hedgehogs."

"Oh, is that it?" said Helen lightly. "Well, let him try, Mother. He has been like a bear with a sore head the last week or two. It will keep him from teasing my life out about the way I look after the chickens, at any rate. He gets so worried about the want of organization in the hen-roost, laying ten eggs one day and two the next, and then he *will* make me change the food." She paused. "All the same, I like Dad always wanting to make the world better. I'd hate him to be different." So she concluded, chin up, defying a host of unseen critics.

"Yes. Oh, one wouldn't have him any different for the world," said Mrs. Thompson dutifully, suppressing a sigh. 'By the way, here is a note for you to take across to the Harbottles: something about reaping the corn, I think. Your father missed Harbottle when he went last night."

"All right; I can cycle round that way," replied Helen. 'I'll be back in time to see about supper. Sam Kerman promised to stay and clean the knives, but Mathilda and Lillie both leave at half-past five to-day."

"Sam is such a queer boy. He never talks," said Mrs. Thompson. "But he always seems ready to do anything you ask him, Helen."

"Well, I ought to have one Muckleby male devoted to me; Maude gets all the rest!" laughed Helen as she went off. "Even the serious Bennett seems to have succumbed at last!" she forced herself to add from the doorway, simply because the words hurt her; for she still held fiercely to the determination not to be a silly fool, though unable to help being a fool.

When she reached the Harbottles' porch, which was of brick and grown over with blush roses, she found Mrs. Harbottle seated on one of the wooden benches which were placed on either side, still panting a little from some exertion just over. "There! That's got their teas off! The girl's taken it down in the trap, so I'm by myself in the house. Come in and sit you down a minute. You'll miss Mr. Bennett's tennis-playing now, I expect?"

"Yes; but tennis is nearly over." Helen paused. "Does he seem to find the harvest work very hard? He won't be used to it."

"Not that I know of; a good day's work in the field isn't play to anybody," said Mrs. Harbottle. "But I often wonder what made him turn farmer. He came to us through a

lawyer at Wressle, but I fancy he knew Mr. Wyndham before he came here. He has some beautiful photographs of Egypt hung up in his sitting-room. Would you like to come and have a look at them?"

Helen hesitated; she thought she wouldn't. Then she considered that there was no harm in simply visiting a room to see some fine pictures of a part of the world in which she felt an interest.

"You won't tell him I have been? He might not like it," she said, following the stout, bustling figure of the farmer's wife across an echoing brick entrance.

"Oh, bless your life, he wouldn't mind!" said Mrs. Harbottle. "I took the Miss Rigbys of Lennington in the other day, and he happened to come back unexpectedly, and made himself as pleasant as anything. There, those are the photographs on that far wall."

Helen went up to them, gave a perfunctory look, and walked out, with her chin in its most aggressive attitude. But her anger was all with herself. She had seen a pipe and an old knitted waistcoat flung down together on a table, and, for no earthly reason that she could understand, these signs of his intimate occupation made a sudden tenderness pulse through her from head to foot. Something seemed to ache and smart behind her eyes, and she longed intensely just to lay her hand on that ugly old knitted waistcoat. Oh! She breathed sharply as she came out of the room; she hated herself; she'd been "silly" again, after all.

But the storms and emotions of unacknowledged love remain fortunately invisible, as a rule; so Mrs. Harbottle accounted for Helen's lack of interest by saying, as they went back across the red tiles: "Of course, I was forgetting that you'd have seen pictures of those parts before. Wressle isn't like Muckleby." She was fumbling with a piece of

paper and a blue dish at the dark oak table in the entrance; then suddenly she pressed a small parcel into Helen's hands, glancing over her shoulder as she did so, though the house was empty. "Hush! Cream cheese. Don't name it to Mr. Harbottle!"

"Oh, thank you. We never taste such——" began Helen; but Mrs. Harbottle was away again with a hasty: "Wait! I'll get a cabbage leaf to put round, as you are going on your bicycle." Then came a shriek that brought Helen with a run into the great airy kitchen.

"Mrs. Harbottle! What is it?"

"That fool of a lass has forgotten Mr. Bennett's tea. She's taken all the rest and forgotten his. And now it is too late to catch her up!" wailed Mrs. Harbottle. "I'd sooner Harbottle's own tea had been left behind; upon my word, I would!"

Helen smiled. "Never mind! I'm sure you will have packed up enough for both your husband and Mr. Bennett."

"But they are nowhere near each other. The lad has gone with Harbottle's," said Mrs. Harbottle, in great distress, for a lack of food was a thing which really had power to disturb her. Then she looked at Helen's bicycle. "Which way were you going for your ride? I suppose you couldn't—you wouldn't—— I wouldn't have asked you, only——" For she saw signs of reluctance on Helen's face.

"Can't Mr. Bennett have some of the men's tea?" said she.

"Oh yes. Only I'd put up a bramble cake for him, fresh out of the oven. He likes my bramble cake better than anything. I only didn't want him to miss his treat, poor lad!"

And somehow the motherliness of Mrs. Harbottle's "poor lad" once more caused that same sensation in Helen

which she had experienced when she saw the old waistcoat with the button off. She could not let him miss his treat of freshly baked bramble cake now, any more than Mrs. Harbottle. "All right; I may as well go that way as any other," she replied, saying to herself that it was not possible to be so disobliging as to refuse this simple request.

Mrs. Harbottle's jolly face cleared, and she bustled out with the basket, saying heartily: "You stop and have a bit on with him, Miss Thompson. There's plenty for both. It'll taste right good after your ride."

Helen could smell the fragrance of blackberries and crisp pastry as she cycled along the lanes, and it mingled very harmoniously with that of ripe corn and freshly fallen leaves—the indescribable smell of autumn coming in. After a while the sense of disturbance and irritation left by the interview at the farm died down. She had herself calmly in hand, wondering at the former state of mind, by the time she reached the field of barley where the servant-maid was just handing out covered jugs of tea and three-cornered slices of "pie" to the men. The old pony had gone slowly, knowing the maid was not used to driving, so Helen reached the field only a few minutes later than the cart, and the tragedy of the forgotten cake had but just been discovered. Great was the relief of the maid—who did not wish to neglect the gentleman lodger, though she cared little about Mrs. Harbottle—when Helen called over the gate: "Hi! I've got Mr. Bennett's tea here. Please come and fetch it."

The maid ran across the new stubble at once, laughing and stumbling, while Bennett himself advanced more slowly. Helen saw at once that there would be no need to refuse any pressing invitation to share the bramble cake under a hedge, and she experienced the blank feeling which comes from resisting beforehand a temptation which does not arise.

She gave her parcel to the girl, who had reached her more quickly than Bennett, then called a careless: "Lovely, isn't it?" across his thanks, and was away down the lane, her bicycle wheels flashing in the sunlight.

Her forehead was damp with the hair clinging in dark tendrils, though she was hard and in good condition, before she slackened speed, for a heat of shame and anger enveloped her like a flame as she tore along. He had not been glad to see her. He had not wanted to be bothered with her. He was interested in Maud now, and had ceased to trouble with her. Well, let him! She was glad this had happened. No fear of her being silly any more: that danger was over!

She never thought, of course, being a woman and inexperienced, that there could be times when a man might find even the lady of his dearest dreams a nuisance. But Bennett—soaked with sweat, his face smeared with soil from his scratched and dirty hands, his back and shoulders aching acutely from hard manual labour to which he was unaccustomed—proved in his own person that this is so. He did not feel in the very least inclined to sit under a hedge and sport with any maiden in its shade. He ate his cake, drank great mugfuls of tea, and went back to his work again, grimly determined not to give in before the last man on the field.

When Helen reached home she took her bicycle round to the shed and entered by the back way. The sound of the piano reached her through the open door of the drawing-room, and she murmured: "Wyndham again!" as she trudged rather wearily up the stairs: then his voice floated out. So he had unearthed Tosti's "Good-bye" from among Mrs. Thompson's songs. . . .

CHAPTER IX

"Now let us sing,
In praise of Harvesting;
The Mornings bright,
The Moon at night,
And all the Joys, this pretty time doth bring."

Mr. Thompson stood in a corner of the courtyard bending over a stew-pot. The lid lay on one side of him, a spoon and a basin on the other. A wide space of clean, cobbled pavement stretched between him and the kitchen window. He glanced up as Helen passed on her way to the garage, and said anxiously: "I can't find out if the French feed their snails for market on dry meal or barley paste. These don't seem very well." But he spoke softly, with an eye on the kitchen window.

Helen came across at once, and replied in a low but decided tone—after one glance at the writhing mass in the stew-pot: "I should do whichever you *didn't* do last time." She shuddered slightly. "But for Heaven's sake, keep them out of Mathilda's sight, Father. She wouldn't stay five minutes in a house where they so much as dreamed of eating snails."

Mr. Thompson put on the lid of the stew-pot rather quickly, and straightened his back. "Raw oysters wouldn't appear an agreeable meal if you had never eaten them," he said. "No doubt the man who first introduced them had a good deal of prejudice to fight against, though he now de-

"Oh, I think so. Oh, no doubt I c
the first one," said Mr. Thompson: th
off with a jest. "Ha! ha! Ce n'est q
coûte." But the attempt was a sorry
self.

"Father," said Helen, with suddenly
don't throw those creatures away I s
hear? I shall be actually, physically il

Mr. Thompson started at her vehem
am sorry to have upset you like that.'
from the ground. "Never mind. We w
ment for to-day, my dear."

"Thank you, Father," replied Helen,
tude. But she could not fail to notice t
open face betrayed some relief as he
the yard to place the jar with its occu
behind the cowshed.

So this means of increasing the sup
in England was dropped until Mr. Tho

mice employed by the Chinese, and they all trembled daily lest he should make some such suggestion in the hearing of Mathilda Bain. For if she had considered the Vicarage a "bad-living place," what would she think about one where the master talked of eating mice? She would leave at once and for ever, spreading reports about the Grange which would prevent any other servant from ever coming near. If the "something cold" which had caused the Grange to be boycoted by night were to be followed by awful rumours of roast mice by day, the position would become truly serious. They would be able to secure no domestic help in that great house for love or money, and would probably end by being obliged to leave Muckleby.

About this time Mr. Thompson walked out one morning to see the harvest operations which were taking place on his land. He began to feel that "leaving it all to Harbottle" had a tendency to render the whole thing rather too impersonal. And this feeling was accentuated as he stood alone on stubble already bleached by sun and wind, for the slight resemblance of this flat, silvery space to a platform roused in him vague regrets. All the same, he possessed common sense enough to know that he must learn more about farming before he could take the management of the place into his own hands. So he stood there on the stubble, frowning at the universe.

Then a tiny unit out of that immensity drifted across his field of vision, and he became aware of the doctor's ramshackle old car snorting on the other side of the hedge. "Well, Mr. Thompson? Satisfied with your first harvest?"

"Oh yes." Mr. Thompson walked up to the hedge and stuck his fingers in his armholes, his legs in polished gaiters wide apart; for now that he had an audience, he was himself again. This was *his* harvest field. If he had not sown and

..., which is about the most u
Fairy Godmother can possibly besto
going into the medical profession, whe
mend the liver wing without the sus
the cheek is the talent to be desired fir

"You find a farmer's life to your t
"Ah! Well, I can just remember ol
used to lease that land. They were t
here to keep up harvest home. I've
Wilson in the church cottages talk ab
barn scores of times."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Thompson, prick
am sure the decay of such customs has
between the farmer and his men. W
together after the last load was gathere
ing table before them, and old songs goi
bound to be a growth of kindly feelin
his subject, and addressed the doctor a
the slight elevation of the field as if he w
again. "Those of us who realize this

"Quite so," said the doctor. "Well, good-bye; glad you're pleased with your venture." And his old car jerked and snorted away down the lane.

Mr. Thompson walked away also, not certain whether he liked the man or not; he had an uncomfortable, unformulated feeling that this doctor's sense of proportion was not properly developed, and that his attitude towards old Granny Wilson of the church cottages and towards Mr. Thompson of the Grange would be precisely the same. Not that one *wanted*—but still . . .

Mr. Thompson's thoughts reverted with approval and regret to his medical attendant at Wressle, who had been good to all, but knew how to vary the flavour of his goodness.

However, the idea suggested by Dr. Wakely remained after the other fleeting reflection had passed away, and before Mr. Thompson got home to lunch, he had made up his mind to give a harvest supper to his workpeople. A passing shadow cast by the intrusive recollection that they were not his, but Harbottle's, he dismissed almost at once. He paid the wages, and he was entitled to consider himself the employer.

Just at first, the suggestion did not appeal to his family. But most happily for the success of Mr. Thompson's scheme, Tom Stainton chanced to be lunching at the Grange, and he took it up with enthusiasm, answering every objection in turn.

"The floor? Oh, Maude, I'll see to the floor. It won't be tophole, but it'll be all right." Then to the worried lady of the house: "Mathilda killed with cooking? Nonsense. She'll love it. Besides, there's Mrs. Harbottle——"

"What will Harbottle say?" asked Helen.

"He'll be glad enough so long as it costs him nothing.

Tom laughed. "Just you wait and
classes to learn jazzing in the village
ter."

"I shall insist on opening with Si
Thompson in a determined voice from t
and so it became evident that the harv
to take place.

During the early afternoon, the girl
Stainton to the church cottages, to
Granny Wilson about the correct me
Tom was a favourite with the old wom
had failed, and she could not remembe
tioned point-blank.

"I can't think on now, Master Tom,"
at the latch with trembling old fingers.
granddaughter's bairn: if aught comes tc
her up to Grange with a message."

They thanked her and went away; a
felt really very grateful to the poor old
came to the back door and

yard on the homeward way when Helen caught her up and gave her a pear.

"I think it awfully nice of Granny Wilson to take such an interest; don't you?" said Helen, going back to the sitting-room.

And they all agreed that it really did show a most delightful spirit—a spirit which, as Mr. Thompson said, he very much hoped to do something, however small, to help to revive.

Then they had supper, and as they strolled in the garden afterwards, Mr. Thompson thought he heard a movement in the walk beyond the rose-bed. Immediately on that, a small figure emerged and stood stolidly before them in the twilight. She began once again, in precisely the same way as before: "I was to say they hinged green boughs upo' the barn wall; and not to stop a minute, becos it's time I was in bed, Granny says." And away she went again, toddling as hard as she could go across the grass.

"Funny little kid!"

"Do you think she ought to go home alone at this time of the evening?" said Mr. Thompson, glancing after the tiny figure.

Tom Stainton laughed. "You trust Betsy! She lives with her Granny, and has sense enough for fifty. I'd far rather send her on a business errand than most girls I know. But I must go home to read now." And he sighed at the thought of the greeting he would receive after this idle day. "So I'll just keep an eye on the lady."

Mr. Thompson watched Tom's departure gravely, then turned to his wife. "That young man wastes far too much of his time here, Henrietta."

"Well, I can't help it. If he is here at a meal-time, you can't tell him to go away," said Mrs. Thompson, who had

suggested by that pause, and calle
the dew was falling heavily. Very soo
ringed by the misty fields.

But Mr. Thompson had scarcely butt
of toast next morning when he becam
of dark eyes staring at him through the
disappeared abruptly, as if their own
tiptoe, then reappeared.

"It's that child again!" he exclaimed.

"I was to say"—Betsy spoke rather
the difficulties of her position—"they ha
apple pies, and 'Tom's a sailor home
feyther could sing it."

She offered no reason for her appear
she volunteer the true fact that she had
unable to make any one hear. Neve
explain: this wise maxim evidently f
panoply with which this fully armed
the battle of life. By the time Helen re
was already trotting solemnly down th

"But it is extremely attentive of the old lady," said Mr. Thompson. "I must call and thank her. I must call and thank her."

So later in the day he did this, when she betrayed an attitude towards the master of the Grange which was in every way right and suitable. He placed a ten-shilling note on the mantelpiece at the conclusion of his visit, murmured something about tea, and went away well satisfied both with himself and Granny Wilson.

That same afternoon Wyndham called at the Grange after an absence of a few days, and he mentioned to Maude that the path by the edge of the lane would not be so damp as the lawn near the house. Maude agreed with him, so they paced slowly between a thick hedge of filberts on one side and a low iron fence on the other. Two people walking on this path must inevitably be close together, unless they went single file, and necessity, therefore, obliged an attitude which might have looked lover-like to any outsider who did not know the reason.

"Was it only last Sunday? I feel as if I had been away much longer than that, Maude," Wyndham said. "That is the worst of being friends; when you have to be apart, you only seem to live half a life, somehow. Don't you feel that?"

"Oh, I don't know." She laughed a little. "You sentimental old thing!"

"But you *do* feel we are real friends?" He put his hand through her arm; the flickering light and shadow fell through the branches on her face as she looked down.

"I suppose so," she said.

"You know——" he began with ardour, when a childish voice over the fence suddenly piped out: "Granny says they had red apples——"

... existence she had frequer
ladies before who were vexed when
"sweethearting." She regarded this
inconvenient at times, but there it was
and tell the other one," she conclude
and trotted off forthwith.

But she left the mental atmosph
entirely changed by her intrusion.
all sorts of irritations, resentments, wit
she was out of sight, Wyndham looke
Jove! no idea it was so late. I must r
to-night. The pleasures of your socie
nervously excited laugh.

Maude said nothing, walking on a l
paused in the full light at the end of th
entirely her composed and languid s
too," she said easily. "I promised to
Tom at half-past five. He must be look

Wyndham's face changed as he ca
make a perfect fool of that boy!"

She ...

device for escape from a situation that was getting a little beyond him, had had no more truth at the back of it than Maude's counter-stroke about meeting Tom Stainton. And she also thought things over as she stitched alone at that same hour in the drawing-room—Mr. and Mrs. Thompson being in the study before a wood fire.

After a while, Helen came in and sat down rather wearily. "There! That's done! But we couldn't have all those plums wasted, when we had the sugar to jam them with."

Maude looked up from her work—she was a beautiful needlewoman—and her idle glance sharpened. What was the matter with Helen? She must work too hard. "What's the use of killing yourself to keep the place going?" she said. "You are at it from morning to night."

"Somebody must," said Helen shortly. "Besides, you don't suppose I could stick it out in this hole if I hadn't a definite job that really wanted doing. I should go and find one somewhere else."

"But I thought you liked Muckleby?" said Maude.

"Oh, I don't object to it so long as I have plenty to do," said Helen, restlessly getting up to move a plant pot. "That's a lovely blouse you are making!"

"Like it?" said Maude. Then—though she was by no means overflowing with sisterly feeling as a rule—she suddenly had an idea that she would like to do something for Helen. "Here, you shall have it! It is just your colour, and I can easily make myself another." And she shook out the folds of the filmy silken stuff in the lamplight.

"Nonsense!" said Helen. "Thank you all the same, old girl."

"But I want you to have it," urged Maude. "You get no time for making your own blouses. Do—to please me."

So Helen accepted the offer; but she did so a little

field——" when she managed
"Well?" said Maude, bendin
"The—the harvest is nearly
rather dizzy feeling, as if she h
precipice. She knew now, she
going on being one; but she *wou*

CHAPTER X

"Rain, wind and sun,
Well done!"

The splendid barn belonging to the Grange was older than the house and finer than any in that part of the country. It had been cleaned and garnished with boughs of evergreens and bunches of paper flowers according to Granny Wilson's instructions—and now Granny herself sat in an arm-chair at the corner of the table, nodding and smiling and pleating her clean handkerchief with trembling fingers, while she waited for Mr. Thompson to conclude his speech of welcome.

He, himself, was gloriously in his element. The ring of listening faces round the table; the sense of being jollily, without question or effort, the principal figure on the scene; the place, the hour, and the opportunity for letting out streams of information about country life and how to improve it, gave to his round face, and patterned waistcoat, and bucolic-looking tie, a radiance that positively acted like a sort of spiritual limelight.

The proceedings before this point had been so exactly right. The very moon had done the proper thing, as if it saw that Mr. Thompson's harvest home was an occasion to be royally smiled upon by any heavenly body with a love for the traditions of the past. For just as the last waggon creaked with its rich load along the lane past Mr. Thompson's garden end, a silvery light began to shimmer across

could bring things back that a
live again.

Unfortunately Betsy—with
characterized her—had sat do
with her booty in her pinafore,
of bliss before it could take wi
she now suffered at a neighbou
Mr. Thompson's table, listenin
speech.

But the dammed-up speech-m
have its way, and some of the
great caution and circumspectio
heaped dishes before them. Th
ever, all unheeding, did but sniff
like an old war-horse smelling p
second wind, cantered on at a b
friends, we gather round this bo
the return of Agriculture to that
in every nation that is truly gr
despised by the greater part of

delivered himself of his stored-up eloquence. Even a vague idea that Ceres was not exactly the deity he wanted, only bothered him fleetingly; for if Ceres were not the presiding genius of Agriculture, she was certainly a near relation. He sat down, feeling happier than he had done ever since he left Wressle.

Then Harbottle responded: bluff and hearty, with such a jolly frankness about him that anybody save a Muckleby man must have felt he quite liked paying his labourers the extra wages now demanded. And after that, Mr. Thompson on his feet again—asking the company to bear with him for a moment longer while he told them how deeply and truly Mrs. Thompson associated herself with him in this enterprise, as in all others. He need not tell such an audience as he saw before him that evening, that the brightest ornament which could adorn any man's hearth and home was a good wife.

"Hear! Hear!" said everybody again; while the brightest ornament of Mr. Thompson's life smiled placidly, so used to the limelight of her husband's platform eloquence playing about her that she took it as a matter of course.

The heavy part of the repast was now over, and the table groaned with dishes of apples, pears, nuts, gingerbread, biscuits, and such-like, as Granny Wilson had said it should do. The walls of the high barn, as well as the timbered roof, were in a sort of twilight, because even the many candles stuck in the old iron sconces could not illuminate so large a space. Thus the long table made of trestles set together, with the brilliant lamps from the house upon it, and the heaped-up fruit, and the faces reddened with wind and sun gathered round, seemed to lie in a pool of light amid the shadows. The great boughs of evergreens which hung near the sconces could just be faintly seen, and their

girls made a delicate contra
though Tom Stainton's round
the freckles powdering his sr
sat by Helen, was dyed a n
matched his hair and eyebrow
which Helen deplored—when s
the lamplight with the effect
like and blooming.

A man opposite asked for nu
Helen started up, then felt a l
She turned, surprised, and Ben
down at her with that pleasant d
his mouth and eyes which wou
when she lay in bed in the dark.
pulling her shoulder from his gr

"Martha!" he murmured, his g
cheeks. "Just you sit still. If
surely I can fetch them."

"Oh!" Helen sat down to e
hand, which

she said lightly. "Got to be on the move. You'd like me to sit in a slug-like torpor eating chocs and reading novelettes until Mr. Right came along, I expect. Isn't that the attitude?"

Maude turned, laughing. "What on earth are you talking about, Helen?"

"I'm describing the maidenly attitude that Mr. Bennett admires," said Helen.

"You'd really wonder our grandmothers ever *could* have been so silly," said Maude.

Then Mr. Thompson's voice came booming with pleasant importance from the end of the table.

"Now, will some one give us a song? Don't be shy! Don't be shy, or I shall have to lead the way myself." He turned at a sound from Granny Wilson and beamed upon her, all cordial condescension. "Well, Granny, and what is it? Always anxious to have suggestions from the fountain-head, you know."

Granny Wilson leaned across the space between them, pulling him by the sleeve. "Where's the ale? You can't expect 'em to sing w'out any ale," she said in a wheezy whisper.

"Ale?" he said aloud; and many ears grew suddenly attentive to the host's lightest word. "Oh, I'm afraid we can't oblige you there, Granny. Not to be had in these days, you know. Not to be had! But plenty of tea and coffee and lemonade and whatnot, I trust."

"Ah!" said Granny. "I thought we were gettin' no forader!" She laughed a high, crackling laugh. "A harvest home with buns and—and what-not!" And it is impossible to convey the startling venom of that harmless compound word as it issued from Granny's lips.

"Hush! Hush!" murmured Mrs. Harbottle, bending her

opulent, creaking person across the table. "You mustn't talk like that. you know. Mr. Thompson's given us a beautiful supper. I never sat down to a better. Nor you didn't either. I'm sure you don't mean to be rude; do you, Granny?"

But it became alarmingly evident that the lack of ale had touched Granny's pride of hospitality in a vital spot—she by now feeling herself almost responsible for the festival which she had to such an extent stage-managed—and that she meant to be very rude indeed. "Might ha' known—jumped-up folks from the town——" she began to mutter.

"Eh? What's that?" said Mr. Thompson, still blandly beaming. "I am truly sorry that you are disappointed in——"

"I say," whispered Tom Stainton in Maude's ear, "I must stop that old woman or there'll be worse——" He jumped up. "Mr. Thompson, I'll sing if you like, just to start 'em off."

"Ah! Thank you! Thank you!" said Mr. Thompson, feeling that Tom was rather pushing, and with no idea at all what he was being saved from—he having only encountered as yet the smooth side of Granny's tongue. "Yes, we shall be very pleased to hear you, Tom."

Tom reflected a moment, hands in pockets, all faces turned towards him. It must be a very long song to give Granny time. Then he began to sing about the love affairs of certain young men of Yorkshire to a well-known tune, though the words were new to the audience; and at the end of very verse came the chorus:

"But Jo Barker he winks, and says he:
You can all take your lass,
If you leave me the brass,
For it's love in the pocket for me!"

"Now then," shouted Tom, clapping his hand upon his slim thigh, "over again. 'It's love in the pocket for me!'" And the old barn rang to the echo of jingling pockets, even Granny hitting the arm of her chair as she piped the inspiriting refrain; while Mr. Harbottle's voice rang out with the strange fervour of those who find themselves suddenly grown lyrical in praise of their heart's hidden but deepest convictions.

By the time the song was over, the threatened dullness which every entertainer knows and dreads, and which nothing can fight against when it is once there, had passed away, and the spirit of hilarity had returned to stay. Young men jogged each other sheepishly, chuckling: "I lay Master Tom knows summat about thoo and Sally Watts;" or, "That was a good bit about Jim giving his lass a fender i'stead of a ring, because it would come in usefuller afterwards. Gosh! He did hit 'em off."

"Surely you don't think as he made it up hisself?" said the postman, rather superior. "No. No. It was just co-incidence. There's a lot in co-incidence, you know."

But whatever it was, it had not been to the taste of Mrs. Stainton, poor lady, and she wondered for the millionth time whence her beloved son could have derived certain characteristics which he possessed. And she sighed as she saw him sit down again, turning his happy, excited face to the girl by his side, without a thought for the woman who bore him.

"There!" he said. "That's given 'em a start, I think."

"You're rather a bright boy sometimes, Tom," drawled Maude, smiling at him. And the lad was in a seventh heaven as he felt her nearness and the subtle emanation of all the woman in her with which she unconsciously surrounded any man she favoured for the moment.

"Didn't know you were a poet, Tom," murmured Bennett.

Then Mr. Thompson, from the end of the table: "Thank you, Tom. One can picture that ballad being sung on many such an occasion as this in the past. Where did you first hear it?"

"I believe in this very barn, sir," said Tom gravely.

"Well! Well! What a coincidence!" said Mr. Thompson in his hearty committee-room manner, keeping the ball rolling.

Upon which the postman remarked in a low voice to his neighbour: "There! What did I tell you? Co-incidence, all through."

So with everybody in good-humour it was simple enough to find more singers; bold men giving of their best, and shy men suddenly standing up, to everybody's surprise, and beginning to roar or rumble some ancient song which seemed to have been boxed up a long, long time and only burst forth in jerks now owing to the heated state of the singer.

At last everybody was replete. Humorous suggestions were heard about running round the table and shaking down the assorted booty so as to make room for more; and the invariable reply was: "I couldn't do another one; not if you was to pay me." So the lamps were carried away, tables cleared in less time than appeared credible, and the long wooden benches placed by the side of the rough, evergreen-hung walls. There was no light now but what came from flickering candles in the old iron sconces, and with that change in the lighting there seemed to come a change in the mental atmosphere. The whole scene somehow retreated backwards from the light flare of the twentieth century and became part of a dim past. All sorts of things might be hiding in the shadows. . . .

"Come! Come!" cried Mr. Thompson, taking Mrs.

Harbottle by the waist and speaking over his shoulder to the Vicar's wife at the piano. "A polka to warm us all up. Take your partners, please." And he jogged solemnly round without great regard to the time of the music, while Mrs. Harbottle murmured gaspingly: "I shack—like a jelly —but I'm always ready—to show willing—Mr. Thompson!"

The rest of the company followed their host's example, Tom careering madly with Mathilda Bain, who exhibited an altogether unexpected prowess in the dance, hopping like a grasshopper from one end of the room to the other. Bennett was equally a surprise, guiding Lillie Kerman with skill and agility in the somewhat intricate steps which that experienced young lady had learned while living in a town situation; while Maude looked over Mr. Harbottle's shoulder with quickened interest and made up her mind to dance with Bennett as soon as she was free.

But when the opportunity did come, he at once went up to her sister, and she had to content herself with Tom for the time being.

Helen was also surprised that Bennett should dance well, though she could not have told why. It did not seem in some way to fit in with her preconceived idea of him, though his shortish, well-knit figure might have told her that he would excel at any exercise requiring complete command of the muscles. And the sense of security which she felt as soon as she was encircled by his arm; his touch, light but firm; the perfect certainty of every step he took;—all contributed to make her give herself up to his guidance passively without thinking what she was doing. Her thoughts seemed asleep. She was only conscious of the great, dimly lighted, vaulted place, with the many moving figures and the sharp fragrance that evergreens give out in a warm air. It was almost a shock to her when he remarked, waking

her out of that dreamy acquiescence: "You were not offended by what I said at supper?"

She had to wait a second before she could remember. "Oh, about my being a Martha? Of course not. I've always felt the deepest sympathy with Martha. She *did* things."

He danced a few steps, light and sure. "Perhaps she missed things too, Helen."

She started at this first use of her Christian name. "There isn't——" She paused, feeling unable to go on; then she made herself finish. "You need not be hard because you are active: exploded idea."

"I know that," he said, looking at her averted face. Then he added quickly, apropos of nothing, as it seemed: "I shall be freer now that harvest is over, but there is no tennis to be had, worse luck!"

"No. We generally go for a tramp in the lane at that time now," she answered. And she felt his hand tighten on hers, just as the music stopped.

Immediately Maude was on her other side, slipping a hand through her arm and speaking across to Bennett. "Great fun in spite of the floor, isn't it? Here, Tom, you and Helen must have a turn now. I'm going to dance with Mr. Bennett." She stepped forward. "Where did you learn all that, Mr. Bennett? Among the dervishes, I suppose?" And she smiled at him from under her heavy eyelids.

Thus Helen was left with Tom, who seized her gaily and began to prance round as he had done with Mathilda Bain —feeling, no doubt, that she did not merit the almost religious fervour he put into his efforts with her sister; and it was true enough that she only danced like the ordinary ballroom partner, while Maude had the genuine gift. Now

she suddenly stopped with such a deeply flushed face that Tom exclaimed: "I say! I'm afraid I've been going too fast for you. Awfully sorry!"

"Oh no! A bit hot in here," murmured Helen, fanning herself with a little branch she took from the wall.

But she was really aflame with intense self-disgust. Why had she done it? Why had she been such an utter, utter fool as to do it? Bennett had only to hold up a little finger and she was ready to fall on his neck. Oh, she hated herself for being such an idiot. She had not meant to suggest his meeting her in the lane. . . . Then her honesty made her realize that she had meant it, and that the responding pressure of his hand still thrilled her from head to foot.

As a matter of fact, she was fighting fiercely against the ordinary processes of falling in love. For when she and her sister were children, she had experienced such a hearty schoolgirl's contempt for Maude's habit of "running after boys" that the effect of it had lasted on into her womanhood. So now her own pride was roused in a minute by the slightest suspicion that she herself was "up to Maude's tricks"; and she consequently had far less idea of how to deal with a lover than, for instance, the fluffy-haired girl of seventeen opposite who had scarcely ever been away from Muckleby. Despite her wide reading and frank discussion of sex questions, she really knew far less about men than that pretty, smiling creature; her instinctive knowledge seemed to have been lost in a maze of information.

But as she looked across the room at Bennett, she felt at least relieved to think that the man who had caused all this trouble *was* a man; not just any peg taken at random on which to hang unused emotions. Her pricking anger with herself was soothed by this reflection, and she resolved that she must simply keep away from the lane after tea for a

few weeks, until the early darkness decided the matter for her. At any rate, there were lots of things in life besides being in love, and she was jolly well going to make the best of them.

In pursuance of this resolution, she joined the group at the upper end of the barn, where Mr. Thompson was urging every one to take partners for Sir Roger de Coverley, with which dance the festivities were to come to an end. Granny Wilson's long nose had been long nod-nodding with fatigue and want of sleep, but she absolutely refused to go home, and revived now to a degree that astounded all witnesses, insisting on standing up with the rest, and very severe indeed with her partner, Mr. Thompson, because he ceased for a moment to jig up and down while the other pairs were performing their figures in the middle of the two long lines of dancers. Marvellous indeed, to see her grab her wide woollen dress at either side, step stiffly halfway down the long alley, turn with right arm linked in that of Mr. Harbottle, and so back again. After which Mr. Thompson chasséed beaming to meet the pretty labourer's daughter, and they twirled and off to their places once more between lines of laughing dancers. Then there were Granny and Mr. Thompson holding hands to form an archway through which the other couples streamed, laughing and nudging each other, and so in line again, all flushed and happy and rather breathless. Now Tom's light figure came flying along to meet Helen, whose partner, the gardener's boy, stared at her while he jigged as solemn and speechless as ever, giving no sign at all that his heart was beating high, almost to bursting-point, because Helen had chosen him.

Then Maude, the very spirit of youth and simple gaiety, with her usually heavy look gone and her eyes wide open and shining. Mrs. Thompson felt an odd thrill of pride

and regret in her calm bosom as she looked on from her arm-chair: pride in her girl, and regret—— She did not know what the regret was about; but a vague pain and sweetness—like the scent of flowers we used to have in the old garden at home—filled in that pause in her thoughts.

So the harvest home was over, and the guests began to stream out through the door into the beautiful moonlit night: laughing groups going gaily down the middle of the road, and whispering couples seeking the grass-path in the shade of the autumn hedgerows that stood up black against the radiant sky.

Mr. Thompson, taking Granny home in the car, dispersed them all for a moment like a flock of startled birds; then the stillness again, and the harvest moon so brightly shining.

Helen looked up at it too as she came out of the barn with the key in her pocket, leaving the clearing away to be done next day; and the beauty of the night seemed like a hand laid on her restless spirit. She stood there for a minute or two, her nerves gradually quieting—quieting; then walked after Maude and Tom, who were in front. As she rounded the henhouse, her steps sounded clearly on the stones of the yard, and the other two waited for her.

"Well, Helen?" said Maude easily; for a kiss snatched by a boy in the moonlight was not a serious matter to her.

But Tom could not speak, and turned his face away. How had it happened? Would she ever speak to him again? He trembled from head to foot with fear and rapture.

At the door of the house he parted from the girls, who went up to bed immediately their father came in. Mrs. Thompson had already retired, and when her husband suddenly appeared at her bedside in shirt and trousers, she blinked drowsily at him.

"What is it?"

Does Maude know?"

"Can't say, I'm sure." He marche
stood there, firmly planted. "Well, a
my best. Actions, not words, is my
talk in the world at the present time

But soon Mrs. Thompson ceased tc
the rise and fall of his voice as he di
ings the great question of making ru
time he finished she was practically sl
habit enabled her to murmur almost i
agree, William."

CHAPTER XI

"The thriftie Yeare now puts her Wreathes away,
Till dancing Spring comes back again to stay."

When Mathilda Bain came next morning, rather later than usual, Mr. Thompson found he had an errand to the kitchen. The errand was genuine—glue to melt on the stove—but it coincided with his desire to hear what Mathilda had to say about the harvest supper. For that is another of the joys of living in little places: that so many people who would otherwise have been but shadows on a wall, stand out as real and exceedingly interesting human beings. Mr. Thompson, for instance, had never been even faintly interested in the conversation of the parlourmaid at his villa-residence in Wressle.

But this morning Mathilda Bain was the voice of public opinion; and as such Mr. Thompson waited for her words with some eagerness, while he hung over his glue-pot with an indifferent-seeming back to the kitchen.

"Ah! Hope you enjoyed your evening, Mathilda?" he said, stirring industriously with his little stick.

Then he heard the pleasing verdict for which he had hoped. Everybody enjoyed themselves. Folks thinking old times was come back again. And—highest praise of all—"Miss Milfred Fox ought to have been there: Milford Foxes in their palmy days couldn't have done it better—except for the beer. But that wasn't your fault, Mr. Thompson. You weren't on the board for letting folks

have beer, or I make no doubt you'd have got some by hook or by crook for the harvest supper, for you're a public man and knows how things is worked. And so I telled them all last night. Ah, it was a rare do, and enough to make a cat laugh, to see you and Mrs. Harbottle and all them dancing, so it was! We don't often get a bit of anything funny in Muckleby, Mr. Thompson; but when we do, we remember it; and to our dying day we shall all picture you——"

"I am glad," said Mr. Thompson, removing the glue-pot and speaking with some dignity, "that my entertainment was appreciated."

But those who started the stream of Mathilda's eloquence, when she was in the mood, did not find her so easily checked as that. "Aye; and no wonder Granny Wilson was full of it all, when Miss Milford Fox called to see her, after the way you *con*sulted her about everything. I aren't surprised myself that Miss Milford Fox was a bit jealous, seeing how she feels about the Grange an' all; but I do think it was going a bit too far to say the house would always be more hers than yours."

"Poor lady!" said Mr. Thompson, crossing the kitchen with his glue-pot and trying to be just. "I am sorry for her. I fear she is not quite responsible for her actions."

"I suppose not. But she and that Mr. Kirke that's father of the young lady Mr. Wyndham is after—they're always putting their heads together about this haunting business. And I give you my word, Mr. Thompson"—her voice deepened solemnly—"that Miss Milford Fox told Granny Wilson as a gospel truth that she sent her soul all round the house every week to see you was keeping the place in proper order against the time when the Milford Foxes get it back again. She says she can send her soul off on errands like that while her body stops at home, as easy as wink."

"Absolute nonsense!" said Mr. Thompson, nearly at the kitchen door.

"Oh, I dessay it is," said Mathilda, slightly nettled by his tone. "Still, she did tell another person I know that she'd actually seen you shaving yourself by a little round looking-glass on a high stand, as plain as day; and you with a flannel suit on. And there's no denying you do shave at a glass like that; and you do wear flannel sleeping-suits. I sometimes think there's perhaps more in these things than what we——"

"Mathilda," said Mr. Thompson, turning round, "I am surprised that you should even listen to such foolishness." And he walked out with his glue-pot.

Ridiculous to think of that woman's soul trailing through his house at will. Really enough to make any one feel amused if it were not so sad. Not a thing to pay the slightest attention to, of course. . . . All the same, a vague mental picture of Miss Milford Fox's soul—very tall and grey and wispy—presiding from some shadowy corner of the old house over his toilette, would linger uneasily in his mind. She was really a most unpleasant neighbour. He wished very much indeed that she would go away again to visit her relatives in the South of England.

As he crossed the hall, he heard Mrs. Stainton's voice asking for Maude; and though he felt he owed that lady every attention after her kindness in playing the piano on the previous night, he did not at the moment feel in the mood to bestow it. So he nipped rather nimbly through the side door, calling to Helen to come and help him with his carpentering operations.

Maude chanced to be coming downstairs with an armful of needlework, and she advanced at the sound of her own

name. "That Mrs. Stainton asking for me?" she said in her slow, casual tone.

"Yes," said Mrs. Stainton, rather tense and pinched about the nose. "Yes. If I could have a word with you."

"Mother is in the——" began Maude.

"No," said Mrs. Stainton, seeming to find a difficulty in breathing. "I want to see you—private——" She put her hand on her chest.

"Oh, very well!" said Maude, a little surprised, opening the breakfast-room door. "Please come in here."

Mrs. Stainton entered, went back to close the door which Maude had left open, and stood by the table.

"Won't you sit down?" said Maude, seating herself and crossing her slim feet.

Mrs. Stainton hesitated, then took a high chair near the table. "I have come on rather an unpleasant errand," she said. "I daresay you can guess what it is."

"I'm afraid I can't," said Maude, inspecting her shoes critically and recrossing her feet.

Mrs. Stainton's colour rose. "You must be perfectly aware no mother with any feeling at all can fail to be distressed to see her son making an utter fool of himself."

"Has Tom been doing that?" said Maude, in a tone of polite interest. "What a pity!"

"Pity!" exclaimed Mrs. Stainton. Then she burst forth —the long sleepless hours of the previous night, on the top of weeks of worry and annoyance, having wrecked her self-control: "Must you care about pity! You knew perfectly well all this time that you were ruining that poor boy's chances in his examination, and therefore his prospects in life, and yet you kept him trailing after you just for your own amusement. It's not as if you cared twopence for him, but you can't leave any man alone who comes within reach

of you. You—you ought to be on the stage, and not in a quiet little place like Muckleby where we were so happy——" She broke off, ever truthful: "At least, it seems like happiness now, looking back to the time before you came."

Maude looked at Mrs. Stainton under her heavy eyelids. "You mean, I tried to get your son to come here? Why, I've sent him off dozens of times. I couldn't keep him away. He'd crawl from the Vicarage here on his hands and knees, if I told him to." She smiled. "But I never did, Mrs. Stainton. I'd too much consideration for you and the Vicar."

"You rude girl!" retorted poor Mrs. Stainton feebly, nonplussed by being attacked where she only expected defence. "Not content with ruining my boy, you laugh at me. If ever you are a mother, I hope this day and this hour may come back to you, and that you may feel the shame then, which you ought to feel now."

"You exaggerate," said Maude, rather uncomfortably. "He'll get over it all right. Surely you must know very little of life if you take calf-love like that seriously. All boys have to go through it."

"Tom is not like other boys," said Mrs. Stainton, using the mother's invariable formula. "He seems so casual and light-hearted, but there are depths behind it all that you know nothing about, and he is giving you everything. He will never care for another woman in the same way again. You're taking the gilt off the gingerbread for all his life."

"You make too much of the whole thing," repeated Maude, not unkindly. But that very tolerance exasperated Mrs. Stainton more than any amount of abuse. She suddenly felt as if she must administer a stinging slap to that pale, rather sallowish cheek. But she curbed herself to say, trembling:

ı ve hated——" She pre
forced back a measure of sel
that. You know him well,
He"—she choked a little—"h

Maude swung her foot b
eyes bent down. Then she loc

"What do you want me to d

"I want you to leave him
with his studies when he goes b
His head is so full of you now,
The Vicar says he is doing no
and Greek." She paused, and
fought down her pride becaus
"If you would only give up en
popular up there, and he woul
not hear from you."

"Very well," said Maude.
you can have your wish." And

Mrs. Stainton rose too, her fl
ward. "But

"Oh yes," said Maude.

"And perhaps you might keep it from your family? Not that I wish to counsel deceit, but the Vicar has so many difficulties, I should be very sorry to add to them. And of course Mr. and Mrs. Thompson might resent——"

"All right. I won't say anything," answered Maude.

Mrs. Stainton held out her hand. "That is very good of you. I expect you simply did not think. Girls don't think that what is a game to them is death to the frogs, of course." And thus she grotesquely tried, poor woman, to conclude the interview on a light note—remembering, now it was all over, that the Thompsons were good neighbours and parishioners.

Then she straightened her hat and went away home, feeling upset at first, but with a gradually growing sense of her own cleverness and superiority in worldly matters to the Vicar, whom she thought it best to leave in ignorance about her recent interview. He might feel a little awkwardness in meeting the Thompsons if he knew, and there seemed no need to make him more inclined to retire into himself than he was already.

A few minutes after she had left the Grange, Mr. Thompson repented of not having stepped forward to talk to her, and came to see if she were still in the house. But he was informed that she had only run in for a moment to see some blouse pattern of Maude's, and had already gone.

"Well! Well! I daresay we shall be seeing her again," said Mr. Thompson, looking round at his wife and two daughters and thus dismissing the Vicar's wife from the conversation. "By the way, I saw Mathilda Bain in the kitchen this morning. I suppose she has been talking to you all as she did to me. Preposterous nonsense!" For he was still full of the unwelcome intrusion of Miss Milford

Fox's soul into the sanctities of his home-life. "Don't believe a word of it, of course; but it's preposterous nonsense, all the same. Never knew such a hotbed as Muckleby is for this sort of thing in my life."

Helen laughed. "Mathilda says it is much worse since we came. She never heard half the talk about such things until you started to put a stop to it."

"I don't know how she makes that out," said Mr. Thompson, none too pleased by his daughter's jest.

"I know," replied Helen. "She said 'it was just like when folks got a queer complaint that nobody had ever heard tell on before—you found out before long that everybody's aunt and cousins seemed to have had it.' That is how Mathilda put the matter."

"I fail to see the connection," said Mr. Thompson.

"Of course, one has to acknowledge there *are* things——" murmured Mrs. Thompson.

"Well——" began Mr. Thompson rather hotly; then he refrained. He felt somehow reluctant—as if it detracted from his dignity—to discuss the rumour about Miss Milford Fox and his pyjamas.

"I know there are such things," said Maude.

"What? Pyjamas?" he said irritably.

"You know what I mean," said Maude, with conscious superiority. "It is simply that you are not sensitive to such influences, or you would feel them in this house."

"Henrietta!" said Mr. Thompson, knowing that he would have more effect on his wife than on either of his daughters, and wishing ardently to make some one uncomfortable. "What did I tell you about those rubbishing books of Maude's? Didn't I order them to be burnt?"

"They were library books, dear," said Mrs. Thompson. "I don't think you would care to pay——"

"Pay?" shouted Mr. Thompson. "What is money compared with my daughter's principles? I am surprised at you, Henrietta; surprised——"

"Hush, Father! Tom is coming across the lawn. He will hear you through the open window," said Helen, thankful for a diversion.

"Always hanging about the place," muttered Mr. Thompson, lowering his voice. Not that he objected to Tom's presence in a general way, despite the slight constraint which had followed, for a time, that discussion on their way home from Muckleby Hall about the episode of the library door; but he was out of humour to-day.

"I expect he has come to say good-bye," remarked Maude, going out of the door.

And a minute or two later, Mrs. Thompson saw her going with Tom towards the nut-trees, which now—in this still weather—were covered with yellow leaves all ready to fall in the first gale. The ground of the walk was all carpeted with them, and Tom had gold under his feet and above his head as he went along there to say good-bye to Maude. It was unlikely that, so long as he lived, he would ever cease to feel a little tug of the heart at the sight and smell of yellow nut leaves on such an autumn day.

But Mr. Thompson was taken up with himself and his efforts to lighten Muckleby darkness, and never for a moment realized how the younger generation of his own family were engaged in shaping the whole course of their future lives by means of thoughts and actions that seemed in themselves too trivial for notice.

Thus Maude annoyingly went out of the room when he desired her presence at a paternal lecture, and walked with young Tom Stainton in the garden, and returned before long saying Tom had not time to come in and say good-bye.

But there appeared to be nothing in that, excepting another proof of the atrocious casualness of the present-day young men and women.

"After all the hospitality we have shown him, I certainly do think it was the *least*——" agreed Mrs. Thompson.

. . . . . .

Tom Stainton opened the door of the Vicarage very softly and had begun to creep across the hall towards the staircase, when his mother came out of the sitting-room, saying with brisk artificial surprise: "You here, Tom? Well, you are just in right time for tea; and there are some lovely hot tea-cakes; those little ones you——"

"Tea-cakes!" He swung round, facing her, his eyes dark with pain and rage. "Then you knew I was coming back! And I told you I should stop on at the Grange. You knew!" He could not say any more, wrestling with an emotion that choked him.

"What do you mean?" said Mrs. Stainton; then without waiting for an answer: "Do come to tea; the cakes are getting cold."

"D—— the cakes!" cried poor Tom, using a word he had not before employed in his mother's presence. "It's no use your talking. You know you would never make hot tea-cakes if you had not expected me. Fancy you sitting down to hot tea-cakes with me not at home!" And he gave a scornful laugh, having no thought at all of the love he witnessed to by these words. "I knew you had a hand in it. You were always jealous of her, and now you've been jawing to her about spoiling my career and all that. It's no use talking. I know you have, just as well as if I'd been there. But let me tell you, it's you who will have spoilt my life! Not her! Not her!" And he spoke so loudly that the words echoed through the empty house.

"Tom!" said Mrs. Stainton, aghast. "How can you speak to me so? Are all my years of love and care for you to go for nothing because—because I gave a hint that you were neglecting your work when I was at the Grange yesterday?"

"Don't lie to me, Mother. You went on purpose." He walked past her towards the stairs, with his young face very white and his eyes blazing. "Well, you have got your way. You'll be glad of that. She never gave any reason —she is too honourable; but she won't let me write to her." He paused. "She—she wouldn't even shake hands with me when we said good-bye. She wouldn't do anything to hurt my future for anything in the world. Oh, Mother, you don't know what she is!" He went up another step or two, then turned round and shouted back at her, suddenly anxious to stab cruelly because of his own rage and anguish. "But you've done for yourself too. I can never think the same of you again. Never!"

He slammed his own bedroom door, and his mother stood there listening to the silence that followed. A clock ticked in the hall. A mouse ran somewhere in the old wainscoting. . . .

Then she went into the room and tried to eat some of the tea-cakes, because good butter was so scarce and she felt they ought not to be wasted. But they tasted dry in her mouth.

CHAPTER XII

"The Immortal Game
Remains the same,
Though all the world be changing;
I love my Fair,
She loves elsewhere—
Blind Chance brooks no arranging."

Mr. Thompson stood on a ladder gathering the last of the winter apples. Round him on the grass were grouped Helen, Maude, and Sam Kerman, while Mrs. Thompson sat on a doubled newspaper placed on a seat a few feet away, the garden being already damp with the heavy moisture of autumn. Sam and Helen could have gathered these apples and stored them in the apple-loft, as they had done all the rest; but Mr. Thompson was at present suffering from an attack of "Do it yourself and do it now"—a form of double hustleitis that is acute though spasmodic, and to which middle-aged gentlemen of no definite occupation are especially liable, particularly just after signing cheques. Therefore, as Mr. Thompson had got it badly, he developed the not uncommon symptom of being irritated by the sight of any of his family sitting still and doing nothing: if they are not working, they must at least be uncomfortable.

Mr. Thompson peered down through the branches of the low apple tree from the top of a pair of housemaid's steps at Sam Kerman just below. "I suppose you are grading them?" And Sam made a sound in his throat indicative of the fact that he had not graded them, and was imperfectly

aware what grading was. Then Mr. Thompson shouted in a loud tone: "Helen! Surely you don't mean to tell me those apples have all been put away in the loft without being graded? Never knew such a thing! No system. No thoroughness anywhere. Maude, fetch a curtain ring two inches——" He paused. "I suppose it is two inches? Bless my soul! Can none of you tell me the proper size apples ought to be for sale at the maximum price? Never knew such——"

"Which curtain?" said Maude indifferently.

"What d'you mean?" said Mr. Thompson. "I don't want a curtain. I want a curtain-ring."

"But I don't think there are any loose ones. And until you tell her the size——" said Mrs. Thompson.

"Oh, leave it! Leave it!" said Mr. Thompson. "Always the same. No wonder we are losing money every day we stay in this place. But I am determined this state of things shall not continue. Helen, I want you to drive me into Lennington. I am going to take a load of apples to sell; and I shall very likely look round for a cow, while I am at the market. Preposterous our buying butter—with every convenience for producing it! The man can milk it, and surely between you, you can manage to look after the dairy. But it all tallies with what one has read *ad nauseam* in every paper: farmers' daughters don't want to work; they want to play the piano."

"I'm sure, William," retorted Mrs. Thompson, defending her daughters from this most unjust attack, "you can't say that of them. Why, you are always finding fault because they don't keep their music up. And as for buying a cow, I do think you should take the Harbottles' advice first. It seems simple enough, but it is one of those things——"

"I shall not take any one's advice. I suppose I can ask

a few plain questions as well as Harbottle or any other," said Mr. Thompson, still more truculently. "Strange as it may appear to my family, I am not without a certain modicum of common sense."

For Mrs. Thompson's speech unwittingly suggested the cause of Mr. Thompson's attack, which had been a visit from Mr. Harbottle on business the previous evening, when that frank-mannered farmer presented his accounts. It had been arranged—by Mr. Harbottle—that the end of harvest was the only right and fitting time for such accounts to be produced, because you then knew where you were, and could judge of the thing as a whole in a business-like manner. And the whole had, to be plain, staggered Mr. Thompson. Never had he dreamed that the hire of men, horses, ploughs, harness, reapers, and binders could have reached such a stupendous total. In vain did Harbottle point out that something substantial must come in when the corn was threshed, though the crop was a light one, and further, that no farmer looked to make anything the first year. Mr. Thompson only replied, with a very red face, that no farmer looked to be ruined the first year either, or there would be not one left.

Then Mr. Harbottle sat down to the table—more in sorrow than in anger—and put down on paper, with a stubby pencil, a list of things which he might and ought to have charged for, but had refrained because of his opinion that Mr. Thompson had done a sporting thing in taking the old Grange. He—Harbottle—had a feeling for the old Grange from the time he was a lad stealing apples out of the orchard, and he wanted to do what he could to help the man who had been plucky enough to tackle it. He had not talked about this, because he was a Yorkshireman, and Mr. Thompson, being Yorkshire himself, would maybe understand why he didn't care to make a song about any little

thing he did. But many was the trifling amount for this and that, and the bit of manure and so forth, that he had just let go and taken no account of. He didn't want gratitude—that was not in his line, and he didn't want it—but he did feel it a bit hard that, after all that, Mr. Thompson should look at him as if he had been charging more than his due. Then he went away, leaving Mr. Thompson's mind divided into two parts: one half being hesitatingly grateful to Mr. Harbottle, and the other half conscious of having been "done" in some perfectly honest way which no man not brought up as a farmer from youth could unravel. But after a couple of hours' reflection, the two halves clashed together in a sudden and absolutely firm determination to have no more of this; to start immediately gathering the reins into his own hands, and so fit himself by degrees for managing the whole. He could not break with Harbottle yet, but he could be very, very keenly on the look-out; and in the meanwhile, money must be made somewhere. Impossible to continue with everything going out and nothing coming in. He and his whole household must imitate the thrift of the French peasant and the old-fashioned farmer, who grudged no trouble to earn a penny here and a halfpenny there. Little by little, in this way, you built up the solid prosperity of a country, not by piling up huge fortunes. . . . By the time Mr. Thompson fell asleep, he once more saw himself in the right light; strengthening, by a life of frugal toil, the backbone of England.

So the next morning, he stood on the hearth-rug after breakfast delivering the result of his nocturnal meditations to his family. He always regretted the disuse of family prayers on occasions like this, because then he could have detained the staff for a few words, and given them, too, the benefit of his wisdom. However, he made the best of his

wife and daughters, and the result was that Arcadian scene in the apple orchard, with the low autumn sun slanting an amber light across the trees, and the girls' voices sounding very clear and fresh through the keen air.

By half-past eleven, the car was loaded with several stones of apples, and Mr. Thompson sat buttoning his coat with determination by the side of Helen, who was to drive him into Lennington. They had a pleasant drive along the lanes, where some belated farmers were still on their way to market, and Mr. Thompson had an agreeable sense of being really "in it" at last, as he intended to be for the future. All nonsense this playing at farming—as he remarked to Helen—and only tending to make rogues of other honest men. What the country wants . . . And he had not quite finished telling her what the country wanted, when she drew up to the shop where he intended to sell his apples.

The man in the shop was at first affable: not affably deferential as he would have been before the war, but still condescending to be quite pleasant. For Mr. Thompson was not unknown to him, and he expected to carry out to that excellent car a goodly parcel of game, fruit, and possibly choice vegetables. But on Mr. Thompson's stating—standing with legs apart, and unconsciously acting the bluff but honest Yorkshire farmer—that he was out to sell and not to buy, the shopman receded as it were, into a cloud of reserve. He shone no longer—only hazily gloomed from a remoter distance.

"Oh! Ah! Apples? I am sorry to say we are overstocked with apples." Then, as Mr. Thompson's face reddened, he remembered the possibilities of the future, and added doubtfully: "I might have a look at yours. I daresay I could take a few stones to oblige."

So he came out, and the glance he cast over the apples reduced them at once from the loveliest fruit down to something abysmally second rate; but he bought them and paid for them, enabling Mr. Thompson to get into his shining car with a few well-earned shillings jingling in his pocket. "Now," he said to Helen, in excellent spirits, "you see what I meant when I was talking to you after breakfast, Helen. It struck me that you and Maude were rather making light of my suggestions at the time."

"Eighteen and six is a great deal better than nothing, of course," said Helen.

"Course it is! Course it is!" said Mr. Thompson. "Fact is, I blame myself. I have brought you up not to realize sufficiently the value of money. You have never earned any; and only those who have earned it can know what it costs."

"Come to that"—Helen turned a corner, then looked at him, smiling—"I earned more when I was motor-driving than ever you did, Father."

"I gave services to my native town which would have earned me an excellent income," said Mr. Thompson. "Make no mistake about that, Helen. Ah! Here is the cattle-market." For Helen had with difficulty just escaped a wandering sheep.

"You don't think you would wait until another day and ask Mr. Bennett?" suggested Helen. "He is a good judge of cattle—so Mrs. Harbottle says—and I'm sure he——"

"Bennett!" interrupted Mr. Thompson testily. "No, thank you. I have not forgotten the way he behaved when I was looking over the Grange—pointing out all the defects with the obvious object of putting me off. No, Helen, I have an instinct that there is something not quite open and

above-board about that young man, and the less we have to do with him the better."

"His evil qualities won't prevent his knowing a good cow when he sees one," retorted Helen, flushing from chin to forehead.

But Mr. Thompson was engaged in removing his heavy coat and did not notice her remark. "Well, you can do your shopping, and be at White's the confectioner's at one. If I do not turn up by a quarter-past, you can assume I am not coming."

With that he went into the cattle-market, where he soon lighted on a man whom he knew by sight from a village near Muckleby: a Wesleyan and a supporter of that Reverend J. Cassiowary Jones who had attended the sports at which Mr. Thompson made, in a sense, his début as a country gentleman. The fact of the minister being a truly good and earnest man, most illogically influenced Mr. Thompson's estimate of this rather simple-looking follower: the man might or might not be as big a fool as he looked, but he was probably honest. On this assumption, Mr. Thompson stated his business, and went to look at a cow which the farmer had for sale.

"Looks to me a bit under-fed," said Mr. Thompson, spreading his legs and taking out his notebook.

"You don't want 'em too fat for milking," said the farmer.

Mr. Thompson glanced at his notes; he had nothing there on the subject of avoirdupois. But he asked a plain question: "How much milk does she give?"

"Well, they vary, of course. She has given as much as from two to three gallon a day."

"Ah!" That seemed to Mr. Thompson satisfactory. "Is she an easy milker?" he said, feeling very knowing.

The man smiled. "I see you know something about it,

sir, for all you're a beginner. Well, my little girl could milk her when she was nine year old. I can't say no fairer than that. But I aren't persuading you to buy her. Don't you think I am. I can sell her all right. And I aren't saying she's pedigree-bred nor nothing of that kind. She's just a good, useful Lincolnshire Red that I bred myself, and I think she'll suit you."

The red cow blinked in the sunlight as the farmer slapped her and smoothed her sides, Mr. Thompson walking round the while; and eventually the bargain was struck. Then came the question of conveying the animal to Muckleby, and it transpired that an extra sum would be required for a man to drive her from Lennington to Muckleby Grange.

At this suggestion, Mr. Thompson shook his head cannily. "No, thank you," he said. "The distance is only nine miles, and I have to go home in any case. I think it will come cheaper to drive the cow myself."

The man looked at him out of his eye-corners and said: "Have you ever driven a cow? Nine miles is a fairish way to drive a cow."

"I have not," said Mr. Thompson, settling his hat on his head. "But I am neither lame nor decrepit yet. What a labouring man of sixty can do, I can do, I suppose."

"Well, if you haven't never driven a cow——" began the farmer in his rather foolish, drawling way; when Mr. Thompson cut him off sharply, rather annoyed at this persistent attempt to prevent his saving money by doing the job himself.

"I'm not playing at farming," he said shortly. "If you could be so obliging as to drive the cow out into the main road for me, I can no doubt manage the rest."

"H'm!" said the farmer, who had got a good price and

was not without human feelings. "Take this here stick o' mine and let me have it back any time. You'll want it."

"If you expect me to hit the poor creature with that!" said Mr. Thompson, smiling; "however, since you are so kind, I will take it."

"You'll want it," repeated the farmer, and thus they parted: the farmer going into the "Dog and Bone," and Mr. Thompson walking behind the red cow down the broad, somewhat empty road.

Then a car came swiftly round the corner, when both the cow and Mr. Thompson very nearly escaped any further journeying on this mortal plane. The language of the driver still warmed the autumn air when the car was half a mile away, and Mr. Thompson's charge, being a delicate female, seemed nervously upset by the incident.

At the first moment, he had been almost inclined to regret the overcoat left with Helen in the car; but by the time he reached the quiet lanes beyond the little town he was ready to back the climate of Lennington in October against any in the South of England. All the same, he thought pleasantly of the shillings paid him for the apples, and that he was now earning a further amount by his present labours. As he wiped the sweat of honest toil from his brow after foiling Rosie's efforts to enter the "Blue Boar" at Marbury, he felt that nobody could call this playing at farming. The man who sold her had said his children called her Rosie and regarded her almost as a relative, and Mr. Thompson's fatigued brain began to grope idiotically for the connection between the farmer's red nose and the red cow's penchant for public-houses.

But by the time he reached the iron gates leading to the seat of Guy Wyndham, Esquire, his brain was comatose. He thought of nothing but the approaching darkness and

Rosie's constant desire to sit down and rest. Twilight was falling, and dimly he saw a large car loom past with silent ease, bearing his enemy Mr. Kirke, Mildred, and Wyndham. He didn't care whether they saw him or not. He didn't care if Kirke believed Rosie was one ghost and himself another. His only preoccupation was lest that unaccountable animal should seize this as another excuse for sitting down.

But behind it all, still glimmered a light. He was learning to do things for himself. He was learning to be independent of Harbottle.

Darkness came on. Rosie merged into the surrounding grey and green, and he lost her twice when she sat down among the little bushes on the hedge-side. Then he took a gingerly hold of her tail, so that he knew he had her; and thus the two plodded very slowly on, until the stars came out and the blessed chimneys of Muckleby Grange were just in front of them.

. . . . . .

Meanwhile Helen went to the grocer's, and then to the jeweller's, where she had to take a watch which needed mending. As she stood by a counter at the end of the shop with her back to the door, she became aware of a draught of air, of the door opening again, of people entering with a little bustle of talk and merriment, and of the proprietor of the shop coming forth from his desk. She turned to see who was causing this stir, and saw Wyndham with Mildred Kirke at a side counter. There was an air of devotion about Wyndham, and a rather condescending satisfaction about Mildred which left nothing untold. Obviously the brave had captured the fair, and the shackles were now being purchased. From the proprietor to the girl at the cheap brooch counter, all participated in the sort of matrimonial atmosphere produced by that case of glittering rings. But

even when it became evident that nothing handsome enough was in stock, Miss Kirke still maintained her proper desire to encourage the local tradespeople, and suggested that more suitable rings might be obtained from London on approbation. "I shall always hope to deal at Lennington as far as possible," she said, and drank in as her just due that appreciation of her generosity and her greatness, which she would perhaps have had more difficulty in obtaining elsewhere.

The attention of the assistants was so taken up by this episode that Helen and her watch were for a time neglected, and she had an idea of slipping quietly out of the shop. For the certainty of Wyndham's engagement to Mildred Kirke put everything out of her mind but the thought of how she was to tell Maude. Perhaps, after all, Maude had not really cared so much as she feared. It was not a very long time since the poor boy had died whom Maude had hoped to marry; deep down, she must still have the memory of him to keep her from giving everything to another——

But here Mildred Kirke turned towards her. "Oh, Miss Thompson!" she said in her loud, clear voice, across the shop. "Lovely day, isn't it?"

"Lovely," echoed Helen, crimson in spite of herself, and furiously angry that it should be so.

"Expect you can guess our errand?" said Wyndham, with a laugh, and a rather overdone carelessness.

"I suppose so. I must wish you both every happiness," said Helen. And then she did escape, leaving her watch there on the counter.

She had left the car outside, and now ran it up to the confectioner's, as arranged; but Mr. Thompson was at that moment escaping annihilation at the other end of the town, and after waiting a quarter of an hour, she started for

home at a pace reminiscent of days when she drove generals and—at times—ignored speed limits.

But on reaching the end of the long, straggling Muckleby village, she began to slow down. The interview in front of her seemed very difficult, now it was so near. Could she rush in and blurt out: "Wyndham's engaged!"? No, she could not. But, judging by herself, roundabout ways were far worse: for you could bear anything when it came with a bang, but to have to keep quiet while it trickled out bit by bit . . . Then she saw Maude before her in the lane and her heart went into her throat, so that it became impossible to speak for a moment. She felt—for no reason at all—absolutely certain that Maude loved Wyndham, and with a passion never experienced for the one who had died. She felt as if she were doomed to stop that car and strike her own sister, who waited so unconsciously there. But it had to be done. If any one else told Maude, she might give herself away; and she must at all costs be guarded from that. Thus Helen argued, endowing Maude for the moment with her own intense pride.

As she slowed down, searching desperately for a way to begin, Maude approached from the roadside and said casually: "Well, seen any one?"

"Yes." She paused; the opportunity was there, but how hard to use it! "I saw Wyndham."

"Where? Did he say when he was coming?" Maude's restrained eagerness under the casual manner made it all the harder.

"It was in the jeweller's shop. He was with Mildred Kirke. They were buying the engagement ring."

She could feel the short sentences falling thud! thud! on her sister's heart as she spoke, and she looked away across the stubble. At last Maude answered:

"Oh, well, I wish them joy of each other. Of course, he's after her money."

"I don't know how any young man could sell himself like that!" cried Helen, angered and distressed by the whiteness of her sister's lips and the trembling of the hands grasping the walking-stick. "When one knows that he—that you——"

"What do you mean?" said Maude in a voice like ice. "You never have men running after you, as I have always done. You can't be expected to understand that it meant nothing. You're always on the look-out for a wedding. I detest such vulgar——"

"Maude!" said Helen.

"Don't stare at me like that!" cried Maude. "I won't have it. I told you the other night I could never think of anybody again after poor Arthur." And she began to cry.

Helen remembered the odd scene between the dairy and the kitchen that night; but her clear vision became blurred, and she could not really tell which lover Maude was weeping for. Then the indignant pity which she had been used to feel during the war whenever she heard of life and love being ruthlessly snatched away from young lovers, swept over her more hotly than ever before. Poor Maude! Poor Maude! It was cruel—cruel! No wonder she was queer and unsettled after all she had gone through.

"I say! I should get away for a bit, old girl. Don't you think you want a change?" Helen began again, choking down those burning thoughts.

Maude removed her handkerchief and glanced at Helen with those heavy, reddened lids narrowed over her eyes. "Take myself away from the unbearable spectacle of their bliss!" she said. "No, I'll try to bear it, Helen."

"Nobody could think that, of course," faltered Helen.

"Couldn't they?" Maude walked on a step or two, then turned round. "Anyway, I'm not going. It's no use your talking it over with Father and Mother, because I am not going."

"All right." Helen prepared to start. "Are you coming with me or will you walk up?"

"I'll walk."

The car moved slower, then faster; and at the corner Helen risked an upset by looking back over her shoulder. Maude was standing quite still in the same place, seeming to wait impatiently until the car was out of sight.

CHAPTER XIII

"Now we, with rustical delights,
Will shorten our long winter nights,
Tell tales, sing songs, and at our ease,
Exchange old whims and pleasantries."

In spite of the stiffness which Mr. Thompson endured after bringing home Rosie, he still stuck to his determination of managing his own farm in his own way at an early date. It may seem strange that he hesitated even so long as he did, because owing to his experience with the various public bodies of Wressle, he was quite accustomed, of course, to managing things of which he knew nothing; but there he had spent the taxpayers' money, which makes all things possible.

His first feeling that he never wanted to see Rosie again after closing the stable door on her, gradually gave place to a legitimate pride in her personal appearance. She was, as Mathilda Bain remarked, the remains of a very handsome cow; and if she failed to give as much milk as Mr. Thompson had been led to expect—— Well, there was always something, as Mr. Thompson must know—and when a cow had brought thirteen into the world, she might well feel she had done her bit. It wasn't poor cow's fault——

And with this conclusion, Mr. Thompson was forced to agree. But he was very emphatically of the opinion that some punishment ought to be meted out to the farmer who had sold the cow.

"What for?" said Mathilda, standing side by side with Mr. Thompson and eyeing Rosie in her stall. "You wanted to make best bargain you could. He did same. You can't blame him."

"Perhaps you are mistaken. There are a great many red cows. This may not be the animal you are thinking of," suggested Mr. Thompson after a pause, more hopefully.

"Not know Rosie!" Mathilda Bain laughed. "See that scar on me forehead? Well, I got that when she knocked me over on the cobble floor, first time I was out in placing. I lived servant with that chap you bought her on. Aye, Rosie had a lot o' spirit in them days, she had." And here followed an affectionate slap on the red cow's side. "Hadn't tha, owd lass?"

The owd lass turned her dark eye in evident appreciation, and then Mathilda bustled out of the cow-stable, leaving Mr. Thompson to his meditations.

His thoughts wandered from Rosie to the quality of her milk, and from milk to Maude, where they broke off in impatient anxiety. Why the dickens didn't she drink more milk? Nonsense to say she didn't like it. Everybody ought to drink milk. Nature's food—— But with all his blustering he could not hide from himself the fact that he felt very anxious about his younger daughter. She didn't pick up in the country as he had hoped she was doing in the summer. Come to think of it, he did not know when he had seen her look so well as she was doing in the late summer—— And now she looked heavy and sallow. Perhaps it was liver. She ought to go to Harrogate, if that were it. But there was no persuading her to go away. He sighed deeply, tramping out of the cow-stable, and wishing the poor girl could get over that tragic outcome of the war. But there was no end to the troubles. He had always felt cer-

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When the reply came, it appeared that conjurers, like everything else, had gone up with the war, and the price, including fare and a young lady assistant, was a stiff one. The assistant might be dispensed with, but the show would not be so good.

Mr. Thompson managed to refrain, though a truthful man, by some means of mental arithmetic known to the best husbands, from mentioning the exact figure to Mrs. Thompson. But an idea had come to him when studying the feats that this gifted couple were able to perform, which made him determined to engage them at any cost. He saw a prospect of being able gloriously to combine amusement with doing the Muckleby people good, and he forthwith wrote to the stores, and ordered beds at Lennington for the conjurers: it being his intention to take them there in the car after the performance, whence they could go up to town on the following morning.

Then he interviewed his family, refraining—as has been stated—with a mental agility which would have surprised the Council at Wressle, from stating the price of the entertainment, but giving them to understand, in a casual way, that it was a whim of the moment, aroused by the spectacle of men emerging from the Muckleby public-house. His deeper plan he kept to himself, because he felt that if you don't tell a woman a thing, she can't interfere or tell any one else—for his views of the female sex remained mid-Victorian, in spite of Helen and Maude: and he also felt that it would be agreeable to see their surprise and admiration.

The next move was to ask the Vicar if the schoolroom could be obtained, and he set out on a rather damp, raw morning with this end in view. His coat collar was turned

up, and he carried a brace of pheasants in his hand, because he wanted to do something for the Staintons, and the most ticklish pride could not be offended by game you carried yourself. The road was fairly dry, and he tramped cheerfully along in spite of the unpleasant day, taking rather a pride in his rough tweeds and thick boots and general country-gentleman imperviousness to the weather. He felt pleased to be taking the pheasants to the Vicarage, partly because he was a generous man, and partly because he liked to think that the Vicar of Muckleby benefited by his presence in the parish. He reflected that it was really wonderful what a man could do if he tried, and did not just sit down to let the world drift as it liked. He saw a picture of himself going down that lane, with the pheasants dangling from his finger, which was very pleasant.

But there existed beneath all this, a genuine response to that dream of Merry England which has inspired the pen of English poets ever since Chaucer. Very likely such a time never existed; but the belief in it has had an immense deal to do with the character of the average Englishman. Perhaps even, it may be at the bottom of that quality in us which other nations cannot understand—for what rests upon a dream must be incomprehensible.

Anyway, Mr. Thompson was certainly influenced by some vague feeling of this origin as he went up the path to the Vicarage door, and he got a hearty smile all ready against the moment when the Vicar or Mrs. Stainton opened the door. But though he heard footsteps inside, they seemed rather long in coming, and he was just beginning to be impatient when the door was opened and Mr. Stainton stood on the threshold. At first the Vicar looked expectant, gazing with an unusually sharpened glance into Mr. Thompson's face; but evidently failing to find there what he ex-

pected, he resumed his ordinary expression of apathetic gravity and said: "Good morning."

"If I could just see you a moment? By the way, my wife thought perhaps this brace of birds—— Don't shoot myself, you know, but Wyndham shoots over my land, and out of compliment——" Thus talking, Mr. Thompson followed the Vicar into the study, where he stated his errand, and was assured that it would be all right about the room.

At this juncture a poor woman with a baby went past the window, and Mr. Stainton looked out, murmured a hasty, "If you'll excuse me one moment. Back again immediately," and was gone.

Mr. Thompson glanced round him at the few rows of well-thumbed books without being aware that he saw the way of escape from a prison-house, though it appeared only an ordinary bookshelf. Then he heard a sound, and Mrs. Stainton was in the room with a duster in her hand, evidently not expecting to find him there. "Oh, good——" he began, when the words literally died in his throat; for it seemed incredible that any one should be dusting with a face like that. He could not even pretend to be unconscious of the blank tragedy in that drawn mouth and those reddened eyes. "Have you—I'm afraid you have had bad news?" he said, abashed in the presence of stark misery, as men mostly are.

She said nothing, and stood there biting her lips. Mr. Thompson felt an acute discomfort—his discomfort was even more prominent in his mind than his sorrow for her. "I'm very sorry. Perhaps I'd better——" and he clutched his hat.

"You"—she seemed to struggle for speech in a way that physically hurt her thin throat—"you don't know, then? He has not told you?"

[illegible]
[illegible]
money."

"But how very unfo
said Mr. Thompson, "a

"*You* needn't blame h
painfully all over her g
forth with a rush, let lo
daughter Maude has driv
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you want to see the letter
you shall hear it! You shal
"I can remember the word
until I die. He says *I* spo
for him to look at a book;
should have made him com
a coward. Oh, I can't——

"Mrs. Stainton!" pleaded
understand that you [illegible]
my [illegible]

ways lead down to hell. Only she belongs to the new kind, that stands at the top smiling while——"

"Mrs. Stainton! I can't allow this! I can't allow this!" said Mr. Thompson, crimsoning. "You must be mad. With all due allowance for your great disappointment, I will not and cannot allow you——"

"You can't stop me! She made him wild about her, and then when I said a word about his neglecting his work she took this revenge. She sent him away without a kind word, without even shaking hands."

"She was naturally annoyed at such an accusation," said Mr. Thompson.

"Didn't he neglect his work? But you must have seen it. Only you didn't trouble. Your girls were amusing themselves. I wish to God, Mr. Thompson, that you had never come near this place!"

Then Mr. Stainton returned and was standing in the room, looking with apprehension from one to the other. She answered his look in words. "Yes, I've told him what I think. I've spoken the whole truth to a satisfactory parishioner for once in my life. And if he gives up all his subscriptions, he does!"

The Vicar and Mr. Thompson looked at each other, and there was—in spite of all things and quite unconsciously—a passage of that sympathy which two men feel for each other in the presence of a scolding woman, be her injuries what they may. Mr. Thompson spoke first. "Mrs. Stainton is naturally very upset. She blames my daughter for this disaster, and has said things I could not overlook under less unhappy circumstances. I am sure you realize that there may have been some youthful foolishness and thoughtlessness on my daughter's part, but nothing more. Nothing

distressed indeed," said Mr
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Mr. Thompson turned away
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hurt about that as he plodded along, and it came on to rain heavily before he reached home, soaking even through his impervious tweeds. But, strangely enough, he felt comforted to think that he was getting wet through and risking rheumatism in the service of the Muckleby people. They might never be aware of it, but this was only another instance of his desire to make things brighter for Muckleby.

By the time he had had a hot bath and was able to seek Mrs. Thompson's society, he had decided not to repeat to her verbatim Mrs. Stainton's remarks concerning Maude. As a matter of fact, they were no longer clear in his memory, excepting that one allusion to the Proverbs, and even that, he vaguely recalled, was tempered by Mrs. Stainton's admission that Maude only stood at the top; she never inferred anything more unpleasant than a view from a distance. And that, for a woman who was clearly off her head with grief and shock and disappointment—— He dressed, after a good rub down, and descended the stairs in a pleasant glow.

"My dear," he said, coming upon Mrs. Thompson with her daughters awaiting the midday meal, "I have a bit of bad news for you. Poor young Stainton has cut Cambridge and run away to Australia." He hesitated, but it had to come, of course. "I fear Mrs. Stainton rather blames Maude. It appears the poor young fellow was very much in love with her."

"Oh, poor Tom! How dreadful!" cried Helen, speaking first. "He was so full of fun."

"He was so full of fun," echoed Mrs. Thompson. "You would never have thought——"

And in her pause his gay young face rose before Helen, just as she had seen it when he was singing at the harvest festival. She felt for the moment as if she almost disliked

"All the same, I am sorry,"
was something about that bo
"So did I," said Maude. "
turned away from them with
defiance on first hearing the r
ing behind a real regret. But
a young man in a novel who
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Later in the afternoon she
a good deal of regret, and a littl
Mrs. Stainton was the one real
herself. Helen, detecting the
towards her sister, and thus wa
Maude returned at tea-time, m
late, with Bennett in her train.
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he will cable to them to meet
he looks round. Isn't it splendi

to men wandering about the earth in their youth instead of staying quietly in their own country. If Bennett had never left Yorkshire, for instance, he could not have been in Australia.

Helen kept rather quiet, wondering whether he and Maude had met in the lane, and if he might have been expecting to meet somebody else. The remembrance of that hand-pressure at the dance when she had told him she walked in the lane returned to her; but that was some time since, and the afternoons had grown too dark to wander there after tea. Then she noticed how the little lines in his lean face crinkled round his eyes as he smiled, and suddenly all the blood seemed to rush to her face and away from it as suddenly, leaving her quite pale. But she said the next minute in a quick, decided tone: "None of us can go to the Vicarage. Poor Mrs. Stainton thinks we are to blame for Tom going. I suppose Maude has told you, Mr. Bennett?"

"Yes," said Bennett, glancing at Maude with kindly interest.

"I explained it all to Mr. Bennett when I met him in the lane," said Maude, rather hastily.

Helen glanced from one to the other. The scene in the lane was as clear as daylight now. She could see it all as if she had been there—Maude's confidence enhanced in value by her habit of not talking much in general company, and her real liking and regret for Tom making her shed a tear or two of which no one could doubt the genuineness, not even a man who was inclined to distrust her. Bennett's strong sense of justice would incline him to want to make up for a possible injustice in the past. Indeed, his whole attitude proved this to be so, as he turned to speak to her.

"I think I can get the name of the ship from the Staintons,

Stainton's face. "We can't

Bennett looked across at M
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"I don't think he would h
end," said Maude. "He ha
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"Did he tell you that?" said
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Maude smiled faintly with
Thompson began: "I unders
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Bennett rose to go, and his host went with him to the hall door, more pleased with his visitor than would have seemed credible yesterday.

When Mr. Thompson returned to the drawing-room he was rubbing his hands. "Upon my word," he said, "I begin to think there is more in Bennett than I imagined. One does not know the cause of difference between him and Wyndham, but perhaps there were faults on both sides. His behaviour as regards Tom Stainton strikes me very favourably—very favourably indeed. And I am exceedingly thankful to know that things are turning out better than could have been expected."

"We have not heard if Mrs. Stainton has the ship's name yet," said Helen.

"No. No," said Mr. Thompson, rather taken aback; then he added somewhat testily: "But she is sure to have it—sure to have it."

"Mr. Bennett promised he would come in to-morrow evening to let us know," said Maude.

"Ah! That's right," said Mr. Thompson. "It is wonderful how things turn out. Now, instead of this being a misfortune for the Staintons, it may in the end be the greatest piece of good luck. Tom is a sharp fellow, for all his nonsense. I have no doubt he will do exceedingly well out there."

"I believe the Australians like somebody cheerful," agreed Mrs. Thompson, looking up rather absently from her crochet.

And before Mr. Thompson went to bed, he was able to believe that those rather terrible words of Mrs. Stainton's would one day be turned into a blessing. Maude and Mrs. Thompson also felt relieved from much further anxiety;

but Helen could not get to sleep that night for various reasons, and every now and then she kept seeing upon the darkness a boy's miserable face, turned towards a dreary expanse of ocean.

CHAPTER XIV

"Snow's in the air!
I feel her there,
Though sight of her's a-missing;
She is so cold,
One might have told
Young Frost and she'd been kissing."

Bennett came through the earliest snowstorm of the year to bring the good news that Tom Stainton had indeed scribbled the name of his ship at the very end of his letter. The poor lad had evidently meant to go out dramatically into the void, leaving no trace, but at the last minute some thought of his parents' suspense and sorrow had made him tell them so much. Now all that remained was to wait through the long weeks until he should arrive in Melbourne, when Bennett's friends would no doubt cable news of him. But though this view satisfied the Thompsons to a certain extent, and also comforted the Vicar and Mrs. Stainton, Bennett's wider knowledge of the world caused him to feel various doubts which he kept to himself. He, too, had had experiences in his youth, and he could understand the clamour and heart-break and sudden whirlwind of emotion which drives a boy into a course of action that seems rank madness. The fact that he himself had got through the storms without any serious damage, did not prevent his feeling a good deal of anxiety about Tom, for whom he had taken a liking.

But all felt greatly relieved to know the name of the ves-

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of the party but Mr. Thompson that she spoke in the past tense—as of something gone that was not coming back again.

"I suppose you have heard when Wyndham is to be married, Bennett?" said Mr. Thompson. "I'm sorry he is marrying a daughter of that Kirke—very sorry. I shall not feel inclined for much intercourse with the Hall, and they ought to have been our best neighbours."

"I understand," said Bennett, "that the wedding is to take place early in the new year. Miss Kirke wants certain alterations made in the Hall before she goes to it."

"Rather a rambling old place," said Maude. "I should not care to live there."

"No?" said Bennett. Then after a short pause he added: "I rather like it. But I'm not sure I don't like this house better."

"Do you?" said Maude, surprised. And immediately the thoughts of all four Thompsons went back to that time when Mr. Thompson saw over the place. So his surmise had been correct. Bennett had had a hankering for it, and no doubt hoped it might hang on the market until it reached a price at which he could afford to buy it.

Mr. Thompson's newly established approval of Bennett wavered again. After all, though it was perhaps only rather sharp practice, still—— And a pause, somewhat damning to Bennett, prevented Mr. Thompson from bidding him stay longer when he rose to go.

"We're quiet people—quiet people," said Mr. Thompson. "Not much evening visiting anyway in this part of the world. But I daresay you are like us. You enjoy an evening with your newspaper and so on, at the end of the day." Evidently no invitation to repeat the evening call was forthcoming.

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So Bennett shook hands
Helen, he said: "Been ve
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Mr. Bennett."

But before either he or Hele
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were said, and Bennett went
snow.

man past boyhood—however adventurous a wanderer in the past—long for a fireside and a wife and children of his own. But Bennett might have had all these some time ago, if he had not been blessed—or cursed—with a secret desire for a sort of love that he was not very likely to get, because few girls have it to give, and they not the most easily wooed. He might end, like other such men, in endowing a totally different character with the qualities he desired most: and when he found out his mistake he would blame the common lot, not his wife.

But in the meantime he walked thoughtfully to the Harbottles' front room, where he smoked and meditated about various things until past midnight.

. . . . . .

By the next morning the snow had all gone, and you could trace Mr. Thompson's substantial footprints in the ensuing slush as he bustled about the village during the next few days, leaving little pink cards for every man, woman, and child in Muckleby. This was a tedious job, but he only ceased to find it congenial when the fact gradually dawned on him that these rather slow-thinking people thought they were in some obscure way being "got at." Mathilda Bain finally put the matter in a nutshell. "Surely, Mr. Thompson," she said, "you can't expect folks to believe you've paid all that money and got a conjurer down from London just to give us all a pleasant evening! It isn't in reason that you should, when there's dozens on us you don't hardly know from Adam yet. As Granny Wilson says——" But she stopped short there, and when questioned maintained firmly that she couldn't remember what Granny Wilson said—her own memory being notoriously like a sieve.

So Mr. Thompson pondered a while on what Granny Wilson might have said, and then called a committee to-

gether in order to appoint stewards to show the public to their seats. The meeting was held in the study at the Grange, and consisted of the grocer, the postman, the innkeeper, and several small farmers, besides a ploughman and a shepherd to represent labour. Mr. Thompson naturally took the chair, and the others sat round the table; each with a fair sheet of paper and a pencil before him provided by the chairman. It might be only playing at horses, but to an ardent driver long debarred from handling a team, it was a great deal better than nothing.

"Gentlemen," began Mr. Thompson, rising and throwing out his chest, "I am exceedingly obliged to you for being present here to-night." And he went on to explain what would be required on the eventful night of the various gentlemen round the table, dropping a jest here, a confidential aside there, in his very best committee-room style. Then when they were all in a good humour, he started the peroration which was the real object of the meeting, telling them he had called them together in this room, on this night, at this crisis of our nation's history, in order that he might have their support and valuable assistance in carrying out what was, he took it, one of the most important duties which any body of men could be called upon to perform. He alluded, gentlemen—and here he fixedly regarded the ploughman, who scraped his boots together at such particular notice—he alluded to the brightening of rural conditions in remote country places such as Muckleby. Alone, he could do nothing, but hand in hand with such a body of men as he saw before him now, he could do anything. He had but to suggest—he could only be, as it were, the pendulum that moved the clock; it was for them to go forth from that room on that night and make Muckleby such a shining example of gaiety and contentment and innocent merriment, as would

cast its beams far and wide and start the regeneration of rural conditions in our beloved country.

The postman responded; the grocer responded; the shepherd was heard to mutter that things was a bit dull in Muckleby now you come to think of it, and would do with brightening up.

"Exactly so! Exactly so!" said Mr. Thompson. "Most tersely and ably put. Then I take it the meeting is agreed?" He held up his hand. "The usual manner? Thank you."

After that cigars and cigarettes were handed round. They smoked like lords, they felt like lords—war-profiteering lords, that is, not the common kind—and they went away, feeling far more enlightened than any one down there in the little houses, which they could now see twinkling faintly beneath the stars through sparse clusters of leafless trees.

The task before them seemed sensible and feasible enough at that moment, and they said that what the countryside really wanted was a few more progressive fellows like that, used to leading things in a big town, and public-spirited enough to do as Mr. Thompson was doing. But when the shepherd got home, he found his wife had toothache and was disinclined for conversation; so he kicked the fender, saying an unpleasant word—though he was ordinarily a good husband—for he vaguely felt annoyed with her for making him see that the task of brightening Muckleby was less easy than it had seemed at the meeting.

All the same, that affair had been a great success; now it only remained for the entertainment itself to be the same, and the light in which the committee now placed the matter did—without quite convincing all—place the matter of a good audience beyond question.

And though Mr. Thompson might have a secret axe to grind which he was keeping out of sight, he also had an

object which was certainly open and good. He desired sincerely that his neighbours should work not only for money but also to get some beauty and pleasure out of life, and he did now truly believe that a rural community gave men better chances for this sort of happiness than a town one.

Fortunately, he had fixed by accident a date for his entertainment when the moon was at its full, for he did not yet realize the importance of this planet on such occasions in remote country places in winter. The actual day itself was fine and dry, with frost in the air, and he came home cheerfully to an early evening meal, after escorting Signor Bertini and his lady assistant to the scene of their labours, where certain properties had already preceded them and had been placed in waiting on the platform. A strenuous afternoon had been already spent, hauling in and partially unpacking certain rather bulky cases with the aid of the village carpenter, Helen's assistance being declined.

"No, no, my dear! Thank you all the same. Really nothing you can do." And he had bustled off with an air of wishing to avoid further argument.

The moon shone bright, lighting groups of people converging from every part of the long straggling village—black patches upon the grey road. Excitement and expectation were in the air, heightened by the carpenter's account of the smaller mysterious cases which neither he nor Mr. Thompson were at liberty to touch. A general impression, however, of mirrors, lights, and general splendour had gone abroad. Granny Wilson insisted on being present, and Betsy's wide brown eyes shone nearly as brightly as the moon. The Harbottles had the trap out and drove down, because Mrs. Harbottle did not wish to start an agreeable evening by being "moithered" with the walk, and they gave cheerful "Good-nights" as they passed their neighbours,

the spirited mare dancing in a way that would have alarmed many stout, middle-aged ladies, but to which Mrs. Harbottle was perfectly indifferent. Miss Milford Fox's little sitting-room window was still a square of brightness, and it was evident she did not intend to be present, but the Staintons trudged heavily side by side from the Vicarage, remarking on the coldness of the night, and saying nothing of the subject nearest their hearts. The living-rooms at the Hall remained in darkness, but Wyndham was known to be staying with his betrothed at a country house in Surrey; and so the Muckleby people knew that their Squire would not be giving his support to the evening's entertainment.

At the door of the room stood Mr. Thompson, in the same attitude he had employed in the past when it fell to his lot to receive the public of Wressle. He had not intended to do this until the first beaming group came in, and then instinct drove him to the door with outstretched hand. "Delighted to see you, Mrs. Kerman." "Mrs. Wilson, this is an honour indeed." Then he turned to one of his aides: "Show Mrs. Wilson into a seat near the front." And as Granny Wilson, quite tremulous with agreeable importance, made her way to the front row, Mr. Thompson was miraculously back in his place again, saying the right thing to Mrs. Harbottle.

Before long, beads began to stand on the freshly soaped faces of the stewards, while they barked urgent little sentences at each other about seating accommodation. It looked as if some would even have to be turned away. The only empty seats in the place were those reserved for the Thompson ladies, who had just come in, to be astounded by the audience they saw before them—they having based their calculations on the numbers attending a lecture on bee-keeping earlier in the year. Bennett followed them, and took

up his stand near the wall, after glancing round to see that his services were not wanted. Then a steward bustled down the room. "Make room, please! If you'll allow me——" and whispered earnestly in Mr. Thompson's ear. Mr. Thompson frowned with anxiety, but after a minute's thought his face cleared. "I'll go round to the other door." And in a twinkling he was on the platform. He was used to grasping a situation and acting at once. Witness that occasion some years ago at Wressle, when a boy threw a rotten apple at a successful candidate and it seemed for the moment as if law and order had gone by the board. He had simply removed the apple from the candidate's eye, ordered a policeman to remove the boy, and begun to speak at once on Tariff Reform. Not a second lost.

It was the same now. Before any one could begin to grumble seriously, he raised his hand and asked for silence. "Ladies and gentlemen! I need not tell you what a pleasure and a compliment it is to me to see so many friends here to-night. A magician is here"—he bowed to the Signor, who was already fingering apparatus in the background and returned the bow gravely—"but I fear that even his powers fall short of enlarging the walls of this room. I can only suggest—ha! ha!—that we should fulfil the words of the poet, and draw closer to our friends than we ever did before."

Laughter! Applause! A general squeezing up, which allowed of everybody being seated, even Bennett getting a place to which Maude beckoned him between the Thompson girls. "Must set the example, you know," she said in her easy, drawling tone. "Mind Helen's elbows; they are rather sharp."

"Are they? Oh, I don't mind," said Bennett, and Helen felt the necessary impact between them ever so slightly in-

creased. An electric thrill seemed to pass from his arm to her arm. She sat very still. Was this how every girl felt who was in love, and had it nothing to do with his feeling for her? Then she forgot to question and simply felt happy, talking rather faster than usual, with a bright rose-colour in her cheeks. Everything about the whole entertainment seemed suddenly so amusing and delightful.

Bennett also appeared to be enjoying himself, for he also was rather more talkative than usual.

"Last time I saw a conjuring entertainment," he said, "was on a broiling day in Luxor. An old Indian and a boy had somehow travelled there, and they were in the shade of the palms. They did some marvellous things. But you could almost *hear* the heat rising from the sand beyond."

"All that must have been very interesting, though," said Helen.

"Oh yes. But I like this better. I seem to belong to this." He paused. "The scents and sounds of the East have their fascination, of course, and I was very sorry to leave; but I don't want to go back now. I have come to like an air best that smells of nothing more pungent than wet earth and primroses."

"Muckleby, then? You'd be satisfied with Muckleby?" said Helen, laughing.

"I can imagine myself very happy in Muckleby, he said, with more earnestness than the remark seemed to warrant.

But Maude turned from her other neighbour to whom she had been speaking and made some remark to him: then the conjurer stepped forward, and the performance began.

From the first moment Signor Bertini captured the attention of his audience. He was a really talented and experienced conjurer—as he had need to be for the cheque Mr. Thompson was afterwards called upon to pay—and

he gauged the taste of those with whom he had to deal at once. They did not want semi-intellectual patter—they wanted to see ribbons come out of that wide-eyed little girl's hair in the front row, and somebody's watch appear to be in peril of its life. So he immediately descended, making jokes at which Mathilda Bain laughed—as she said—fit to end herself; and produced dozens and dozens of yards of ribbon out of Betsy's curls. "There, now, we have got rid of that, our little friend can safely go to school again to-morrow." He turned to Granny. "No need for you to go through her hair again before she starts, madam, I assure you. Everything is quite all right." And the audience rocked—or at least the principal part of it did; Mrs. Thompson was not quite sure——

No artist could have failed to respond to such thrilled appreciation, and even the bored-looking girl assistant, who looked as if she lived on biscuits, began to show a very faint degree of animation. Gentlemen were invited—urged—facetiously entreated—to come on the platform and see her securely bound. They giggled, shuffled, tried the knots; and in the end were able to turn and look at the sea of faces as if they had been used to appearing in public all their lives. Relatives in the audience breathed again after moments of proud embarrassment. "Our Willie was a match for 'em when it came to it; let them two make sure of that!" Then a cloth was thrown over—a brief pause—and the lady sprang up free from every bond.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" The Signor led forth the Signorina: they both bowed; they bowed again; they showed the very gaps where their wisdom teeth had been, in their grateful acknowledgment of the storm of applause which shook the pictures on the schoolroom walls.

Before the tumult had quite subsided, there was Mr.

Thompson in the middle of the platform, touched beyond words—as he told them—by this great appreciation of his small effort on their behalf. There was just one more item, and then he feared that the Signor—who was mortal like other men, though one might not think so—must return to Lennington in order to catch the mail train for London. He had hoped the Signor would stay the night, but he was due at a children's party in a certain ducal household next day; so he thought—ha! ha!—that they would all agree the dukes had some privileges left. But—here Mr. Thompson's voice dropped to a more serious tone—they had still one more item before they parted." And it was of this he wished to speak. He knew—they knew—we all knew, that more things existed in heaven and earth than were dreamed of in our philosophy. But there was also a great deal of trickery by which either self-deceived or unscrupulous people tried to lead others astray. He had nothing more to say now about that. It was a subject upon which a certain neighbour of his—as they all knew, he was afraid—had a great deal more to say than he had. But he would just like to point out to them beforehand that the next trick was wholly and entirely a trick. Any one with knowledge and looking-glasses could produce an apparition such as they would now see. There were other tricks of a like nature which he could not show them, but which were liable to be made traps for the credulous. He would say no more. He left it at that. He would now ask the stewards kindly to lower the lights.

Immense applause again. Somebody began to sing, "For he's a jolly——" but was suppressed. The lights were turned out, and Betsy's little heart beat like a hammer under her pinafore. Helen laughed, and yet she felt ridiculously thrilled too, for the spirit of a crowd is a strangely infec-

tious thing. Maude glanced round, no more moved by it than Bennett himself. The schoolmistress began to play the piano in response to a hasty request from one of the stewards. A ghostly figure went slowly across the stage: every one could dimly see a chair behind through her. Then there was a sudden movement at the back of the hall; the shrill sound of a woman's voice; a light suddenly spurted up near the platform and the ghost vanished.

"What is it?" said Mr. Thompson, bustling along towards the cause of the disturbance. "I trust no one is ill?"

"She says it's her Emma!" shrilled Mathilda Bain. "She says she knows there's something happened to her Emma!"

"My good woman," said Mr. Thompson, "I explained to you that this is merely a trick. Look, the young lady is now coming on to the platform again, in exactly the same dress as the presumed spirit."

But the woman, unheeding, began to make her way towards the door, assisted by a friend.

"I know something's happened to our poor Emma," she repeated, shaking her head dolefully. "I told the poor lass when she went away, I should know if anything happened to her."

"Her grandmother," prompted the friend, with a reproving look over her shoulder at Mr. Thompson—"her grandmother always see'd *all* her family before they died, wherever they was. It goes in their family."

"But," protested Mathilda Bain, "Emma is fat now, and wears spectacles. I saw the photograph that came from Canada. She can't be like that one; living or dead, she can't!"

But the woman only wept again. "Emma always wore them frilled skirts for best. Oh dear, I must get me blue dyed black. I know something's happened to our Emma."

"Hush!" said Mrs. Kerman. "You musn't take on so, Mrs. Barker. But Mr. Thompson shouldn't ha' done it. You don't want to meddle with none o' them things. You never know where——"

"Me"—Mr. Thompson choked—"me meddle!" Then his indignation burst forth indeed. "Woman!" he said, "don't you know that I spend my life in trying to combat such nonsense? Why have I provided this entertainment to-night? Why have I put myself to all this expense? Simply and solely to prevent credulous people like you being made fools of."

"I'm sure you do your best," said Mrs. Kerman. "You don't seem as if you could help it. I was sorry I couldn't let Sam and Lillie sleep in. Only I'm a poor woman and I have my family to consither." She paused, staring at him with a lack-lustre but anxious eye. "You always get mixed up in these things. P'r'aps you're like that person in Mr. Kirke's book. You may have catched it somehow. Mr. Kirke——"

But Mr. Thompson could not trust himself to listen further, and abruptly moved away.

All this, however, had actually taken such a very short time that to many of the audience the interruption seemed comparatively unimportant: though deeply interesting, of course, because most people knew all about Mrs. Barker's sister Emma, and there *might* be something in it. So almost immediately Mr. Harbottle began to return thanks for their most enjoyable evening; the Vicar seconded; and the vote was carried by acclamation. Mr. Thompson's speech in reply was perhaps less happily worded than usual, but it sufficed; and after singing "God Save the King," everybody went home highly satisfied with the entertainment.

Every one, that is, but Mr. Thompson. And yet on this

occasion, when he thought to have failed, he had been most successful in one of his objects, at any rate; for Muckleby must be a brighter place until Mrs. Barker heard if her sister Emma were really dead or not: there would always be something to wonder about at every tea-table. And if she had "passed away," Mr. Thompson would be held in some vague manner partially responsible.

CHAPTER XV

"Birds are silent in the lane,
But a Music doth remain,
For the ditch all summer dry
Tinkles past right merrily;
Lovely sounds are ever near
Him that hath the Listening Ear!"

It has to be owned that Mr. Thompson himself waited for the Canadian mails with just the faintest shade of anxiety, lest by a horrid coincidence something actually should have happened to Mrs. Barker's sister Emma. In the meantime, he stood on the hearth-rug before the fire and talked to Mrs. Thompson about Rose. He was explaining with a certain asperity that Rose was a cow and not a co-operative dairy, and that though her milk might not be of the richest quality, he saw no reason why practically the whole of the household butter should still be purchased from Mrs. Harbottle. But it appeared he was blessed with a family that had a mania for milk. He could describe it in no other way. A mania for milk!

"I'm sure I rarely touch a glass," said Mrs. Thompson. "I have always thought milk as a beverage so deceiving. It seems to go down as if it were nothing; but when it once *is* down"——

"And Harbottle's manner when I took him to see the cow was not what I liked—not what I liked," said Mr. Thompson. "The fact is, he wants to keep everything in his own hands; but I am not going to have it."

He seemed to wish Mrs. Thompson to contradict him, but she went on placidly with her crochet, and after a short pause he resumed his *Farming Journal* which had arrived that morning.

But his mind was still on Rose, and from her it travelled by natural stages to the subject of manure. That item had loomed tremendous in Harbottle's account, and something would have to be done. Rose—though perhaps not quite what some were in regard to milk—did all that could reasonably be expected of her in this department; but it was rank unreason to expect one animal to fertilize a farm. He sighed, and turned again to an article on artificial manures. But the number and complication of them were so entirely bewildering that after a very brief perusal he flung down the paper. It was the same with everything. Manure was now no more plain manure than a star was a plain star; and he turned with subconscious yearning towards those earlier, simpler times, when such a tremendous lot was not known about the heavens and the earth and things under the earth.

Then his glance fell on the discarded journal, and he saw in large, plain letters the following legend: *"Manures Made Easy.* A little Manual for the Amateur Farmer. Price 3s. 6d."

Therefore it followed that Helen and Maude were walking, at about three o'clock on a dull November afternoon, down the main street of Muckleby, on their way to buy a postal order to enclose in their father's letter. Helen also wished to purchase cotton-tape and various oddments that were sold at the post office in addition to stamps, and Maude —who disliked the musty, friendly odour of such little shops—remained outside. After a while Bennett came along with a gun over his shoulder, and explained he was engaged in no more noble sport than shooting rats. While

he halted, Wyndham rode by with Miss Kirke; but though greetings passed, the riders did not pause. Then Bennett also went on his way, because he said Harbottle was waiting for him, and Maude remained once more alone in the long, grey village street, where the houses were set blankly upon the road, as they are in this part of the world. It all looked very bleak, solid, and austere on that darkening afternoon, with a tree here and there retaining still a few yellow leaves. Perhaps that accounted for the expression of Maude's face as she stood there gazing idly down it. Anyway, something in her attitude struck Helen in coming out of the shop.

"Tired, Maude? That old thing would have kept me there until Doomsday! But I saw you had Bennett to talk to."

"Yes; I'm all right."

The girls began to walk on and Maude remained silent. At last Helen said, almost with hesitation: "Didn't Wyndham ride past with that Kirke girl?"

Maude nodded. "She looks a sight on horseback."

"I thought she had a pretty good seat," said Helen, willing to be just. "But she is a stick. I believe they are going to have tea with Miss Milford Fox. Mathilda said that Mrs. Harbottle had sent cream up to the cottage, and the maid told the boy they were having Wyndham and Miss Kirke to tea. Queer that Miss Milford Fox is sane enough on all points but one. I expect her brain just happened to be of the sort that can't stand spiritualism. I think as Mr. Kirke is her relative, he ought——"

But it became evident to Helen that Maude was not listening at all, and she also became silent. After that information of Mathilda's, however, both were surprised to see Wyndham coming towards them in the lane which they were

obliged to traverse between the end of the village and the Grange. It was not on the way either from the Hall to Miss Milford Fox's or to the village. He greeted them; and it appeared he had important business with Harbottle—which he must have transacted very quickly—and that he was now going back to the cottage. But he turned and walked a few steps with the two girls. "Seems quite an age since I saw you. You were out when I called the other day," he said; but not with his usual, pleasant ease of manner. Rather abruptly and angrily, as if he resented something.

"I expect we were having tea with Mr. Bennett that day," said Maude casually. "We went to see his beautiful Egyptian photographs."

"Oh, that was a fortnight ago, you know," exclaimed Helen.

"Was it?" said Maude. "I thought it must have been later. I remember every picture so clearly. They were awfully interesting, Mr. Wyndham."

He walked on a step or two. "You and Bennett appear to have got quite intimate lately. I saw you talking to him just now. He seems to be always on the spot."

"He certainly was on the spot when he was wanted, in regard to Tom Stainton," said Helen, with equal abruptness.

Wyndham did not reply to her but looked at Maude. "I thought you didn't care for the fellow?"

"Who? Tom? Why, I was always awfully——"

"You know I don't mean Tom. I thought you didn't like Bennett. You used to tell me so."

"Did I?" said Maude. "Well, perhaps I did. But people change." She left that in the air a second. "Anyway, I like him very much now. He behaved so very nicely about Tom."

Wyndham laughed, sticking his hands deep in his pockets. "So Tom did it! Poor old Tom!" He paused. "Well, it is time I was getting back to tea, I suppose."

Maude said nothing, and he repeated to Helen: "I suppose I must be going back."

"Yes. It is nearly four," replied Helen. Then he said farewell and hopped over a stile. They could see him running across the field when he thought he was out of sight, for a gap in the hedge allowed a glimpse of his dim, hurrying figure in the twilight.

Helen laughed with a certain malicious enjoyment. "He is afraid of catching it from Mildred for being late. She has evidently begun as she means to go on. Serve him right!" But the silence of the quiet country at the approach of evening seemed to have laid its hand on the two girls walking between the bare hedgerows, and for some distance neither said any more. At last Helen remarked to her sister, without looking at her: "It is quite true—what Wyndham said about you and Bennett. You used not to care for him, and now you seem quite great friends."

"Yes. I didn't understand him before."

"But you do now?" said Helen, still looking at the road before her.

"I think so." Maude gave a little smile. "*He* seems to think so. But they all do."

Something in her tone enraged Helen. "Look here! Do you really like him? Or are you just playing him off against Wyndham?"

"I really like him, of course. What do you mean?" said Maude.

"You know quite well what I mean," said Helen. "If you seriously like him, all right. But he is too good——"

Maude waited for more; she rarely interrupted people.

Then when no more came, she said in an odd tone: "Perhaps you'll see *how* seriously, one of these days."

"You—you mean—— You think he——" Helen broke off, staring her sister in the face now.

But Maude would not say any more, and Helen knew that any attempt to force her confidence would be utterly useless.

So they tramped on again; and it is wonderful how much can be thought in a few hundred yards of damp lane, and how entirely a whole life's outlook may change between the old oak stump and the sign-post at the corner, while the person two feet away knows nothing at all about it. Maude could never have pictured—much less understood—the wave of intense self-reproach that passed over the soul near her during those few minutes.

Helen was battling with the sudden realization that she—who had so valiantly declared that no power on earth should induce her to take a job a needier woman wanted—who had laughed to scorn the bare idea that she should ever join the scramble for husbands which the papers talked about as resulting from the war—was actually ready to fight her own sister for Bennett. How her pride had flapped its wings and crowed, as she vowed those things to herself and to the world at large! And now—the blood surged through all her veins and then left her very pale—now, here she was, contending with Maude for a husband—Maude, who had lost so much owing to the war, and for whom she had so often thought she would do anything!

It seemed incredible; and yet she *had* been trying to warn Maude off Bennett, so that she herself might have a little chance of attracting him. The next step would be to try to sow mischief between them, like a girl in a novelette! Never again would she say a word or do a thing to put

any hindrance in the way of Maude and Bennett's friendship with each other. Her bruised pride had risen up more combative than ever by the time they reached that little gate into the Grange garden.

. . . . . .

Next day, urged no doubt by that feeling which prompts some natures to create a little happiness elsewhere when they themselves feel miserable, she set set off on a long-delayed errand to Granny Wilson. The object of it was to take some small dolls and dolls' furniture for Betsy, which had been discovered in an old chest of drawers. Betsy was out, but Granny received them without enthusiasm, and passed on at once to the shepherd's wife who was going by, holding a woolen scarf to a lugubrious face. "There she goes again! You'd think she was going to die with her bit of toothache. But she'll neither hide it and say nothing, nor have it out. She always was a bad bider," said Granny contemptuously.

Almost immediately after that the Vicar came flopping up the street, and he knocked at her door. "Come in," she cried; then murmured urgently, for she loved company: "Now don't you go, Miss Helen. He won't stop no time. He'll only sit and do his duty by me and then go off in five minutes. Don't you go!"

The Vicar confirmed this forecast by also begging Helen to remain, and so she sat down again; while his glance wandered to the very small fire smoking in the grate. "I suppose you are like everybody else, Mrs. Wilson; you have a difficulty in getting coal?"

"Yes," said Granny Wilson. "And I get a bit starved sitting here. I should be all right if I could knock about."

"M' yayse," said Mr. Stainton reflectively.

"Pity," said Helen, "that the hard weather set in so early this year."

"M' yayse," said Mr. Stainton again. "By the way, Mrs. Wilson, we have got a good deal of wood, and we don't seem to need all our coal. Coal-cellar at the Vicarage very small, you know! So if you care for a couple of bags?"

Granny Wilson hesitated, far more anxious and serious than the occasion seemed to warrant. "How many bags did you say?" she asked.

"Oh, about two or so——"

She rose and went to a tin lozenge-box on the old chest of drawers in the corner and stood counting out some coins with her gnarled fingers. "I'm much obliged," she said. "The old coal chap never comes near-hand me, though I suppose my money's as good as anybody else's. I'll get Danny Mason to fetch the coals from your house."

The Vicar looked uncomfortable and pushed away the coins. "No, no, Mrs. Wilson——" But a sudden and fierce glint in the old woman's eye caused him to accept the money and stuff it awkwardly into his pocket. "The coals shall be sent round to-night, then."

"Oh, any time," said Granny carelessly.

Then there were a few words about bronchitis, and the Vicar got up to take his leave.

When Granny Wilson and Helen were alone again, the old woman glanced across at her young visitor. "You needn't look like that. I couldn't tek his coals without paying. He's as poor as what I am. Him and his missis has nobbut porridge for breakfast, and scarce a bit o' fire in the house. He'll catch it when he gets back. *She* wouldn't ha' done it!"

"She has the cooking to do and the fires to make," said Helen.

"Aye, so she has. Well, I don't begrudge the money, though it was what I'd always kept hoarded up for my burying. But things is so dear. I must leave that. I was cold—cold: only I couldn't be beholden——" The old woman's chin sank on her chest as she muttered.

Helen sat silent on the other side of the hearth. She dared not offer the money then—though she was determined that by hook or by crook it should be restored to the lozenge-box on the chest of drawers—for her own cocksureness had dwindled a little. She knew perfectly well that Granny would have accepted a truck-load of coals from Mr. Thompson without more than a decent gratitude, and yet this had happened. And Mr. Stainton with his "M' yayse," who had seemed to be so dull and heavy and unsympathetic—— She felt she could not understand it at all. And yet perhaps she was at that very moment gaining some of the understanding which a certain old Book recommends its readers to mingle with their knowledge. . . .

She got up and stirred the fire into a blaze. "You won't mind, with some more coming to-day, Granny?" she said, smiling.

But Granny seized the poker out of her hands. "Not that a-way! Not that a-way! Never see a lass that could poke a fire properly yet," she cried, all alert again.

And soon after that Helen went home. But she walked less briskly than usual and was deep in thought. How queer everything was—what a mixture people were—not just neatly arranged all through as you would expect! How wonderful the world must be, if you could come across such mysteries in any little village street! She had never felt so unsure of her own judgment, or so aware of the possibilities of human nature, as she did on that walk home in the early December afternoon. Things she had thought big,

dwindled: and those she had thought small seemed great. She felt that life was a less easy and straightforward problem than she had thought it when she was "doing her bit," and feeling certain that she filled a splendid and useful place in the national existence. She had no doubts then, though now they crowded round her as she plodded along. When first demobilized, she had been buoyed up by the feeling that she was still being "splendid." *She* was neither going to grab a job from a more needy sister, nor join in the much-advertised scramble for husbands when there were too few to go round. . . . But now she felt a little lost in a world where all sorts of people were perhaps being splendid in such an entirely different fashion.

Then a phrase of Granny's drifted across her mind, with the tone of contempt in which it was uttered: "A bad bider." Well, at least she need not be that. Whatever happened, she would look life in the face and make the best of it.

So she threw up her chin and began to walk more briskly. A bird in the hedge gave an irritated chirp which said as plainly as any words: "Don't worry me, Jane. I am not in the mood for songs and sentiment." Otherwise the country world lay quiet, but for the clear running of the water in the ditch by the roadside.

CHAPTER XVI

"A thorn there goes
With every rose,
Lest she be gathered lightly;
But two or three
(To such as me)
Make any rose unsightly."

Mr. Thompson felt relieved—in spite of himself—when he heard through Mathilda Bain that Mrs. Barker had received a premature Christmas present from her sister Emma in Canada; for though no letter accompanied the tin of maple syrup, it obviously could not have come from another world. But the little manual of manures, price three and six, which came with exemplary promptness from the publishers, proved to be a source of further annoyance and worry. During an interview with Harbottle which took place immediately after its perusal, there was a certain amount of friction. Harbottle said that persons who engaged other persons to look after jobs for them should show confidence, and not try to interfere on the strength of a twopenny-halfpenny tract written by some feller that had never tried practical farming. And Mr. Thompson said, with a sort of strangled heat, that every man ought to master the whole details of any business for which he paid the piper. It was left at that, because neither party was as yet prepared to do without the other; but Harbottle went home and created one of those "shindies" which passed over Mrs. Harbottle's head like a summer storm over an oak, while

Mr. Thompson made himself unpleasant to his family by demanding to see the household books and exploding at every second page. But Mrs. Thompson also remained fairly calm at heart, though she was a little perturbed on the surface.

Another annoyance was a persistent rumour which soon got about, that the owner of the Grange intended to let all his land to Harbottle, only retaining the house, garden, and paddock. Harbottle's wish, no doubt, was father to this report—he having subconsciously imbibed the methods of certain popular newspapers—and no doubt the fact that Mr. Thompson had begun to sit up, as it were, and take notice, agriculturally speaking, led this astute farmer to see that his palmiest days as agent would be over before very long. But the land was next to his own, and if he could secure it at a reasonable rental, he saw a prospect of making good money.

Bennett's very diffidently suggested advice and assistance, Mr. Thompson declined, without any exact words, but in a way to prevent its being offered again. The master of the Grange was going to remain master, and was not inclined to be influenced by any young man who might, and who might not, be disinterested. Mr. Thomson had never quite lost the impression received when he first looked over the house, and Bennett went out of the way to draw attention to its imperfections.

Another uneasiness concerned Bennett himself; for though a great deal of Mr. Thompson's prejudice had gone, he by no means desired the man to marry either Helen or Maude. A certain amount of intercourse was all very well: only fair, in fact, after Bennett's behaviour in regard to Tom Stainton—but it had to be remembered that nobody in the neighbourhood knew anything about him excepting

Wyndham, who was obviously not too pleased with what he did know.

True, Helen seemed more or less indifferent; but Maude ran after the man. Not to put too fine a point on it, she ran after the fellow—and Mrs. Thompson might argue anything she liked to the contrary. This was all the more apparent because Maude had always before allowed it to seem as if she were the one pursued, and now she actually flaunted her preference in such public places as the church porch; the tea-party at the Vicarage in honour of Miss Kirke, the prospective lady of the Manor; any place where people were gathered together. At the tea-party—which Mr. Thompson had declined to attend—even Mrs. Thompson had been forced to see something so marked in Maude's behaviour that she had confided her disapproval to Mr. Thompson on her return home.

"Mark my words, William, she is going to marry that man. It was altogether a most unpleasant party, and I should not have gone, only I looked on it as a sort of olive branch after the trouble there was about poor Tom. I don't know why, but olive branches so often are——" And she sighed.

"What about Helen?" chafed Mr. Thompson. "I thought at one time he and Helen seemed to be taking rather a fancy to each other."

"Oh, Helen never has bothered about young men," said Mrs. Thompson easily. "Some of these modern girls are like that; and a good thing too, as there are not enough men to go round."

Bennett himself might be excused for agreeing with Mrs. Thompson about Helen's attitude, for in her desire to give Maude a clear field and avoid the hideous indignity of competition for a husband with her own sister, she had gone

to the other extreme. There is a theory that young men pursue girls who keep on running away, but the flight has to be accompanied by that glance over the shoulder which Helen was too straightforward to know how to give, even if she had wished. Therefore when she went to pare apples, or cream milk, or find some other object for her restless mind and fingers which might save her from sitting still and seeing the effect of Maude's "little ways" upon the man she loved, she did not cause him to follow her into the kitchen or dairy. For one thing, she slipped out without saying where she was going; and for another, he was not on sufficiently intimate terms at the house—a certain thus-far-and-no-farther marking the agreeable civility of both Mr. and Mrs. Thompson. But this did not prevent Helen from feeling neglected and miserable when she sat peeling apples alone that she might just as well have left until next morning, for the man or woman who is reasonable in love has yet to be discovered. And it has to be confessed that there was sometimes an edge to her tone when she did return to the drawing-room, which might well discourage a possible lover; while there was no doubt that he enjoyed Maude's society. Not that she said anything at all amusing or striking, but she sat there with her work and managed to cast round him the very potent charm of her own womanliness. She possessed, indeed, an instinctive quality less common in the strenuous, active English girl than in the French woman, and could envelop a man with all that was feminine in her, in the same way that a flower will give out perfume to the dewy evening, and with as seemingly little effort.

Things were at this stage about ten days before Christmas, when Mathilda Bain, who had just left after her day's work, suddenly burst into the kitchen.

"What is it?" said Helen, looking up startled.

"I'm blessed if I'll come to this here place again!" said Mathilda abruptly. "It's all very well being well paid and that; and I can't call it a bad-living place: but there's always something going on in the ghost line. I don't like it. I aren't used to it, and I don't like it. You may find somebody else."

"Really, Mathilda," said Helen, "my father is right. You Muckleby people have got that sort of nonsense on the brain."

"And who put it there? Who put it there?" demanded Mathilda fiercely.

"Why, Mr. Kirke for one person, I suppose; and then there seems always to have been a lot of foolish tales."

"Mr. Kirke!" shouted Mathilda, unnerved and past caring for anybody. "It's none Mr. Kirke! We never had so much of it before Mr. Thompson come to the place. Nobody ever talked a word about it but a few old women like Granny Wilson. It's you folks that's made all the bother. First night you was here, them poor girls of yours felt something cold——"

"Mathilda," interrupted Helen, "tell me what you saw. What has put you into this state?"

"Why, I was near scared to death with that old Miss Milford Fox. At least, I expect *now* it was her. But it give me an awful turn to see a dark figure under them trees in the long walk, waving its arms and going on like a ghost with red-hot pokers in its inside. Anybody would have been scared."

"Of course they would," agreed Helen warmly, most anxious to soothe their only real stand-by in view of Christmastime. "No doubt, I should have been startled myself. I

am so sorry. Sit down and have a cup of tea or something."

"No, thanks. I've just had my tea," said Mathilda, still short in her manner but evidently a little mollified. Then she burst forth again. "How am I going to get home tonight? And a social at Wardle at half-past seven, with my hair to do and my dress to change—and me providing the rock buns. What am I going to do? I daren't go past that —whatever-it-is—again by myself, not for no man."

"Sit down a minute," said Helen eagerly. "I'll come with you. I don't mind a bit." And indeed she would almost have faced an actual apparition in the good cause, for Muckleby Grange was no house for the most energetic to tackle single-handed at Christmas-time.

"I didn't mean that!" snapped Mathilda; but she was obviously still further softened.

"Oh, I shall enjoy the air," protested Helen, taking down a heavy coat and cap which hung in the back passage. "Come on. You'll be in time for the social after all."

They kept very close together as they hurried across the garden to the rather dark avenue of trees which led to the front gate, the side one being at present impassable owing to the overflowing of the ditch in the lane at that point. Then Mathilda gave a sudden clutch at Helen's arm. "There! Look! What did I tell you?" And Helen despised her own unpleasant sensations but could not subdue them, as she caught sight of the tall, narrow figure of Miss Milford Fox buttoned up in a grey ulster, calling down curses on the Thompson family with gesticulation.

Then she forced herself to say, though in a slightly breathless tone: "Just as I thought! Nothing worse than poor Miss Milford Fox. And see, she is going now."

"I don't want anything worse," said Mathilda nastily. "Do you?"

"No. No. Of course, it was very startling and unpleasant," said Helen. "I will always come with you to the gate in future, if you like."

"Oh, I don't know that you need do that," said Mathilda, after a pause. "I can go out by the back way and across the fields, another night. I somehow didn't think of that."

So Helen gathered that her handmaid was not, after all, intending to leave before Christmas, and the two parted on terms of friendliness at the end of the lane. But it has to be owned that she experienced a certain uneasiness in coming back, though she felt sure that Miss Milford Fox had only dropped in to curse during her usual walk between tea and supper. So she was rather startled at the appearance of another tall, slim figure under the trees of the short avenue as she returned to the house: especially as the person, whoever it was, after peering at her, seemed inclined to pass by without speaking. Then a gap in the trees overhead caused a rather stronger light to fall through, and she saw to her surprise who it was.

"Mr. Wyndham!" she exclaimed.

He stopped short at once. "Oh! That you, Miss Thompson?"

"Were you coming up to the house?" she said. "I am on my way in."

"Er—um—er——" He also seemed rather startled and nonplussed—almost as if he had some errand which her unexpected appearance had frustrated. "No, thank you."

"You quite startled me," continued Helen. "Poor Miss Milford Fox has been here this evening, and she was waving her hands about and so on; so I had to come part of the way with Mathilda——"

"Yes, yes," interposed Wyndham. "That was it. I came to look for Miss Milford Fox. I promised Miss Kirke—Mildred, that is—I promised I'd keep an eye—— Sorry for the poor woman, though she must be a great nuisance to you all. Of course you could prosecute, but I expect Mr. Thompson would hardly——"

"Oh no." Helen rather bit off his disjointed remarks. "Well, as you are not coming in, I will say good-night."

"Good-night. Sorry I seem to have seen so little of you all lately. But I have been so awfully busy."

"Oh, we quite understand."

And so they parted, Wyndham going towards the village and Helen returning to the house. When she opened the door, Maude was in the hall.

"Helen! You been out at this time of night!"

"Yes," said Helen; and she told why it was and whom she had seen. "It did seem queer that Wyndham should be searching for Miss Milford Fox in our avenue," she concluded.

"I don't see anything so very odd in it," said Maude carelessly. "No doubt he wants to please the Kirkes."

"But a young man of his type—he did not seem to me at all the sort to take such a job on for any motive whatever," persisted Helen.

Maude, however, went on into the sitting-room without answering, and Helen had again to tell her tale to her father and mother. Mr. Thompson took the view that an heiress of Mildred Kirke's appearance and standing was not picked up every day, and that Kirke himself was a crank, and that they would soon make Wyndham the same. But he promised to provide a really good torch flashlight for Mathilda, so that she could take the back path across the fields without accident. Then he dismissed the matter from

his mind, because he was deeply occupied with plans for reviving old Christmas customs in Muckleby; and he had just then a glowing picture before him, produced by a mixture of Dickens, Washington Irving, the coloured illustrations in the Christmas annuals of his youth, and the stores catalogue—in which latter publication he had been choosing a wedding present for Wyndham, of a value matching less his regard for that gentleman than the other gifts with which it might be expected to compete. He had been—it must be confessed—slightly testy at the lukewarm interest in the comparative merits of cruets and sauce-boats displayed by Mrs. Thompson and Maude, but that was over now, and he sat in great good-humour over the list of sweets and other Christmas groceries which he was making out.

Suddenly he looked up, pencil poised over certain advertisements of hampers ready packed, and exclaimed: "Well, I never! I forgot all about the goose-club. I simply can't understand their having no goose-club in a place like Muckleby." But he reluctantly acknowledged that the present meat shortage—let alone the price of poultry—put the matter out of the question for the present year: and his active mind reverted once more to a forgotten scheme for introducing edible frogs in a swampy spot near a pond in one of his lower fields. Stew the legs well—cover with white sauce—ask a committee to supper, and allow them to think it boiled chicken, and only over coffee and a cigar reveal the actual truth! Far better than the hedgehog idea, and without certain drawbacks which the feeding up of edible snails had possessed for Mr. Thompson since that episode with the barley-meal and the bucket in the back yard.

"Very nice," murmured Mrs. Thompson, allowing the

stream of his talk to wash over her unheeded as usual, while she sat comfortably by the fire.

"Mother!" cried Helen. "A committee of Muckleby men asked to supper here and told afterwards they had had frogs' legs! You think *that* would be nice!"

Mrs. Thompson was rather in an impasse, with Mr. Thompson looking through his spectacles eagerly at her and ready to be very annoyed if she had not listened; but she had been in a similar situation before. "I'm sure those that weren't sick would think it very enterprising of you, William," she hastened to murmur.

"Sick!" said Mr. Thompson, annoyed by this foolish comment, but not so annoyed—as Mrs. Thompson knew—as he would have been by an acknowledgment that she had not been attending to his lightest remark. "Is the Frenchman sick as he sits in his restaurant on the Boulevards? I have never understood so. And I should imagine the men of Muckleby have at least as strong stomachs as any foreigner."

"I'm sure I never meant——" began Mrs. Thompson, when there were sounds in the hall which made it evident to the mistress of the house that she might continue her crochet in peace; her views on the digestive organs of Muckleby would be no longer required.

Both girls looked up, knowing whom to expect, because only Harbottle or Bennett ever came at this hour on these wintry nights, and Harbottle had been on the previous evening.

"I've heard from Melbourne," said Bennett at once. "I have just been to the Vicarage, and I thought you might like to know. The cable simply says: 'Met Stainton. All well.' So Tom has evidently arrived safely."

"Poor Mrs. Stainton! I am so glad, though she was a little unjust about it all," said Mrs. Thompson.

"Yes, yes, I'm truly glad," said Mr. Thompson. "The lad is all right now, and if he remains will no doubt do better than he would have done if he had stopped in England." And he spoke rather trenchantly, as if contradicting some one, because a recollection of certain things he had heard during that morning's visit at the Vicarage rose up unbidden from some deep place in his mind where he had thought it completely dead and buried, and they disturbed the optimistic mood of the present evening. "Blessing in disguise! Blessing in disguise!" he said, standing with his back to the fire.

"Poor Tom!" said Helen, and there was actually a moisture in her eyes, while her usually calm, somewhat assertive voice faltered a little. "Oh, I'm so relieved! I hated to think of him——" And she bit her lip.

Bennett glanced at her, then turned to Maude, who was now speaking. "We all must feel thankful," she said. "Dear old Tom!" And she sighed with a perfectly genuine regret; for she had liked Tom very much, though she had not scrupled to punish him for his mother's words. "I wish I had sent him a Christmas present; but we had no address, of course."

"I'll send him one," said Mr. Thompson from the hearth-rug. "Never too late for a cheque, ha! ha!" And he threw out his chest.

Bennett opened his lips, hesitated, and then said in an embarrassed voice: "Do you think you would, sir? I mean, he might fancy, you know——"

"Of course, you can't send a cheque, Father!" whispered Helen, flushing hotly. "Why, don't you see he'd think you were sending it to make up for his being so upset about

Maude? It would be an insult—the way he'd look at it!"

"Then all I can say is, he must be an even more foolish young fellow than I took him for," said Mr. Thompson, bristling. "If I were to offer a substantial cheque to every young fool who has fancied himself in love with Maude, I should be a good deal poorer than I am at present. But, of course, if you and Bennett both see it in the same light, I had better leave the matter alone. I'm sure I meant nothing but kindness, both to the Vicar and his wife and to their son. But it seems that some people can't be helped."

"Your suggestion," said Bennett gravely, "was most kind and generous. I may be wrong. I was only thinking how I should feel in his place."

Both girls involuntarily glanced at him as he said those words, and, in spite of all Helen's resolutions, she knew that the air between them quivered with something altogether beyond her control; that—do what she would—beneath all words and actions the whole affair had resolved itself into the old duel of two women for one man. The situation she had scorned and ridiculed and forced herself to keep aloof from was yet going on in spite of her.

Something in Bennett's tone, or his words, also seemed to have struck Mr. Thompson, for he became less cordial in his manner and sat down again to his list. He by no means wanted Bennett and Maude to make a match of it. "You'll excuse me—Christmas-time, you know! This has to go off to-morrow!"

So Bennett took the hint and went off too, though Mrs. Thompson remembered that he was a bearer of good tidings and begged him to remain. Mr. Thompson also began to think at the last moment that he had been a little too abrupt; but before Bennett was out in the lane, he had returned to his former preoccupation. If not a goose-club, then what

could it be? Some declining Christmas festivity he must and should revive. Then Helen jestingly remarked that he might go carol-singing—Mathilda had told her only a few children went round now, and that mostly long before Christmas. He pounced on that like a spider on a fly. "Splendid! A fine old idea; men welcoming Christmas morning. Never ought to fall into disuse."

So the following day old Tommy Barker—who was one of the few remaining ancient institutions of Muckleby—went through the long straggling village in his deplorable old suit and battered cap, ringing his bell and calling out: "This is to give notice—that a meeting for men—will be held at the Grange—this evening—at half-past seven—to form a committee—for promoting carol-singing—on Christmas Eve!"

A remembrance of the last meeting drew a sufficient number to enjoy the promoter's eloquence and his cigars and their own importance, on the following evening; and for the ensuing ten days Mr. Thompson was most happily engaged, practising at night and telling everybody about the duty and delight of carol-singing during the day.

CHAPTER XVII

"Bring Mistletoe and Holly bough!
No time for Melancholy now,
So mix your puddings, bake your pies,
The Good Wife's fragrant mysteries—
Then grace them with a Holly bough,
For all the world is jolly now."

For four or five days in the week before Christmas, the weather behaved exactly as Mr. Thompson expected it to do. Hoar-frost made every little twig in the lane a separate loveliness during the day, and at night the moon shone down out of a clear sapphire sky upon the scattered houses of Muckleby village. The whole formed the background for such a simple masque of Christmas as most Englishmen still enjoy in their hearts, and Mr. Thompson certainly appreciated his part in the performance.

Mrs. Harbottle also found this the pleasantest week in all the year, for she now gave reckless rein to those inherited sporting instincts of hers, smuggling away a link of sausages here, a pork pie there, under Mr. Harbottle's very nose; adding them to her private store in a dark corner of the milk cellar; and thus defying all dairy regulations as well as her husband's anger, should he find out, with a consequent stoppage of supplies for this Christmas, at any rate. In the great whitewashed kitchen she wrestled with the sugar shortage and triumphantly conquered it, producing such slabs of Yorkshire perkin sweetened with treacle and

dotted with big raisins; such giant jam tarts baked on meat plates and decorated with pastry trellis-work; such honey cakes flavoured with spices, as no other woman in the East Riding could turn out. Then she would order round the little low cart and the old pony, hurry the maid out with bulging bags and heaped baskets to be concealed under the seat and a spare rug, and off to the village. Here she would stop the pony, drag out a parcel, run up to a door as fast as her feet would take her, and with a panted, jovial "Merry Christmas! Hush! Don't name it to Mr. Harbottle!" she would thrust her gift into the recipient's hand and away again, her opulent flanks shaking like a blancmange in the hands of a nervous waiter. Gee-up! A crack of the whip, which the old pony took as a sign of pleasant comradeship; and off they rattled down the village street, dodging Mr. Harbottle at a corner so closely that his sporting lady thrilled with pleasurable excitement to her finger-tips—though quite equal to an explanation of urgent Christmas shopping. And so home, after a glorious afternoon.

Mathilda Bain also performed festal rites in the kitchen of the Grange, assisted by Helen, with Mrs. Kerman to wash and scour, while Maude sat near the window stoning raisins. The girls were going to give a Christmas party to the children of the village on Boxing Day, with a tree and games and every sort of delight, and even Mrs. Thompson found seasonable occupation in attaching strings and numbers to the articles for the Christmas tree. She was glad to see Maude almost more bright and animated than ever before, though with sudden relapses into a sort of morose silence, when they all felt sorry and spoke very kindly to her, thinking she was dwelling, perhaps, on certain times which could never come again, though others as happy might be in the near future. Helen felt this too, and

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"You vulgar little thir
tormentor had hoped

went to bed at night and when she woke in the morning, and at short intervals during the whole of the intervening day.

Mathilda looked up from her baking and murmured in a low tone: "You don't want to take any notice of her, Miss Maude. She has no parents, you see, and that old woman has to let her run about by herself all day. It's a bad thing for a little lass to have no mother."

And immediately the Christmas angels that had flown away from the Grange kitchen came clustering back again, hovering in the spicy air near the holly boughs above the window. But of course nobody saw them; it was only that the fire burned brighter, and the holly glistened more cheerily, and the mince-pies gave out a more tempting fragrance.

All this time Mr. Thompson went about praising the weather, with a subconscious feeling that he had somehow been instrumental in procuring it for the people of Muckleby, and that it was a successful part of his programme for Brightening Village Life. But on the morning of Christmas Eve the weather suddenly forgot all its obligations to Mr. Thompson. Rain fell, removing every trace of hoar-frost before breakfast was over; and by seven o'clock in the evening, when the Christmas waifs were due to assemble at the Grange, they had to splash their way up to the door through a hopeless downpour. It says much for Mr. Thompson's methods that no less than seven out of the twelve turned up.

Mr. Thompson came forth out of the sitting-room to meet them, and the glimpse of the outer world which he caught through the hall doorway would have daunted a less ardent spirit. But Mr. Thompson was in a mood to brighten Muckleby or die. Now he came to think of it, Muckleby

group of damp Mucklebyi
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had the best voice. "We c
The rest agreed with ala
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rest," he said. "But what ab
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"Oh, we can discuss that
son. "And now—if you are
"Before we start," interp

"If you ask me," said a stoutish, florid foreman after a pause, "I should say distribute it among the members of the choir present this evening. I don't speak for myself. I don't mind. But it seems to me the fair thing."

"Well! Well! Let us discuss that later. I will call a meeting, and we will discuss that later," said Mr. Thompson. So, mollified by the prospect of a meeting, the whole troupe went out into the rain and mud and keen air of an East Riding night in December, the Thompson ladies waving farewell from the doorstep. Only the argumentative carpenter muttered to his neighbour as they splashed down the drive in the thick darkness: "This here Mr. Thompson's all very well. He tries to do what he can for the place, I daresay. What I don't like is, that he will always do it just in his own way."

Their gallant leader, however, was unaware of any such criticism, and he talked jovially—with a profound sense of his hearty joviality in so doing—to any of the party who chanced to be nearest to him.

Fortunately, the first house was the Harbottles', because they could put down umbrellas and sing in the porch in comparative comfort. The farmer and his wife, of course, urged them to go inside; but this Mr. Thompson would on no account permit, despite a visible hankering on the part of his followers, because that would prevent the Christmas carols from floating over Muckleby according to his programme. But even the porch was not an ideal resting-place on such an evening, and, despite the mince-pies and coffee, and Mrs. Harbottle's contribution to the collecting-box, which sounded rich as it fell, Mr. Thompson was in a hurry to move on.

The next lap was trudged in better spirits, and a few jokes began to fly about: such ancient ones that they ought

in-law and Miss Kirke,
afternoon, having been
Kirke by a sudden burst
No plumber could be gc
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and the Kirkes hastily re
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But the rain and wind i
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any farther. And he splas

Mr. Thompson gathered
left, and exerted himself
should do the same. "I
iron or something of that
rain. Always has a curio
he was remarking cheerily
splash he was sitting dow

breach which this accident would create in his ranks if he said a word about his own personal discomfort. So he scrambled up from the ground, with a want of dignity displayed, to his secret annoyance, by the too ready flashlight of that grocer's assistant, and declared, with a certain want of breath, that he was quite all right; nothing at all! nothing at all! He even essayed the quotation about fools walking in slippery places, as he had once seen it in *Punch,* where it turned the joke most cleverly against those who remained upright; but he could not quite remember the point.

He did consent, however, to the Hall being the last place they should visit. For he saw himself that his future activities might be impaired if he and the water from the pool in the lane remained much longer in close contact. Already, he had certain cold sensations running up and down his frame; but he defied them all as the front door of the Hall swung open, and burst forth in the strongest baritone he could command:

"Oh, Christmas is a Merry Time,
Ring forth ye bells, a Merry Chime!"

which was the carol they had practised most thoroughly and arranged to begin with on this occasion.

Light streamed out upon the forlorn groups as they stood there at the foot of the steps under dripping umbrellas, singing this cheerful song. Mr. Thompson kept well to the back, concealed by the umbrellas of the others, who refrained from giving him a more prominent place because they thought he realized that he was no ornament in his present mud-stained condition to any body of men. But he was not aware what a muddy and dishevelled object he really appeared, and he took a back place with such unusual modesty solely because he caught sight of Mr. Kirke, who

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all then retired to a less dra
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Then they finished the hyı
"Good-night, and thank you!"
out bareheaded on the

"only I don't see why we can't settle about the praw-ceeds now, while we are——"

But the grocer's assistant interrupted with business-like curtness: "I thought we had already arranged to put that before the committee? You are sticking your umbrella-point into my eye, if you don't mind."

The carpenter did not mind at all: in fact, he would not have objected to doing this young man further personal injury. But he contented himself with grunting; and at the corner the party dispersed to their own homes, with an inarticulate feeling that dormant village customs, like sleeping dogs, were best left undisturbed to their slumbers.

Mr. Thompson's appearance when he opened the drawing-room door and appeared before his waiting family caused a sensation he had not anticipated at all. Mrs. Thompson actually sprang from her seat and ran towards him, crying out as she ran: "William! William! Has some one been attacking you?"

"No," said Mr. Thompson, stopping short and looking very much astonished. "What do you mean?"

"Look at yourself!" said Mrs. Thompson. "Only look at yourself in the glass! Oh, I know you are hiding something from me! You could *never* look so disreputable——"

"I am not aware that there is anything particularly disreputable in a wet mackintosh," he said rather stiffly.

"No, William," said Mrs. Thompson; "but there is a patch of mud over one eye and your cap all on one side. I insist on knowing what happened. Has that dreadful Miss Milford Fox——"

"Chah!" said Mr. Thompson, his disagreeable physical symptoms coming to a head under this treatment. "I sat down in a pool of water, if that is what you want to know."

Upon which Helen and Maude were sent hither and

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"How odd Wyndham sh
Hall!" said Maude. "Surel
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Maude turned to her fath
dred Kirke was there? Did y

"Yes. She was standing by
way," said Mr. Thompson.
Squire's lady, I can assure yo
had no intention of speaking t

"Of course not," said Mau
rose from her seat.

"What are you going to do?

"Oh, I forgot to address a
want to give it to him as we
morning," said Maude.

Then Mr. Thompson began t
must have a little supper-part...

case it was the cold of the night, but the principle remained the same. Before he went to bed, he could say with perfect sincerity that the weather was a little unpleasant, no doubt, but otherwise it was a great success, a great success! And the men tremendously enjoyed it. He was quite sure that when they got home and talked the matter over as he was doing, they would acknowledge that they had really enjoyed the experience.

So he went to bed, satisfied with himself, his family, his residence, and his activities in the world; and there was really no need for Mrs. Thompson to pause in the act of plaiting her hair—as she did on the stroke of twelve—to wish her husband a Happy Christmas.

Mr. Thompson entertain
singing at a supper on Ne
as reasonable the excuses
never expected him to turn
was in good spirits; Mathil
and excelled herself; the g
health of "our worthy host";
the contentious carpenter pr
lady of the house. Mr. Thon
ond, responding for her; son
and almost before he had fin
again, making a most happy li
stirs the saucepan ruling the
the carol-singing were handso
one pound seven and six to
knocked on the table in a glo
whatever that Muckleby w
grocer's young man might so
great measure owing to their
Then a shy man who had talk
to rise from his seat, swallow
in the face

ladies. He was sure he—they—no one, that is, couldn't say as they didn't make a thing o' this sort, more the sort o' thing—— And here he abruptly sat down, wiping his forehead.

"Hear! Hear!" cried all the rest, hammering their forks on the table again; and in a flash Mr. Thompson was being most witty about the place of young ladies in life, concluding with a few earnest words of thanks for this very kind reference to his own daughters, who had done anything that they had done with an immense amount of pleasure—an immense amount of real pleasure.

Then came songs; "Auld Lang Syne" being sung before the correct hour, because twelve was late for men who wanted to be up in the morning early, but with none the less fervour; and so the company went home, praising Mr. Thompson for his goodness.

But in the grey of the following morning they began to say that anybody could do like that who had the money, and that it was time things was a bit more evenly shared out.

Mathilda also, arriving late for work, partook of the mood which afflicts a good many people in the East Riding of Yorkshire during that blank season between the last of the Christmas festivities and the first snowdrops and crocuses. This is the period when—as the old gentleman said—you don't know what you want, but you do know if you had it you wouldn't want it; others have named the same sensation a divine discontent; but anyway, its effect on the family circle is unpleasing.

Helen was inclined to be more impatient of "nonsense" than seemed at all necessary, seeing that she and everybody else in the world was full of it—all but a few unhappy ones, perhaps. And Maude sat depressed and irritable over her

wanted. One speech led
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spectacle of Mrs. Thon
purple-faced, flinging his
from the room—Helen,
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lies where they have a grai
a week or so, like the dustm
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At lunch-time all four s
had passed, though in differ
in with a sort of elaborate h
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remarking that there was ja
that an offering was beir
softened. Helen made seve
the rain, and the price of f

drizzle was falling, and she made some excuse when Helen offered to go with her. It was plain that the "little black dog" which used to sit rather frequently on that young lady's shoulder in her early youth had returned to its post. But the air and exercise seemed to do her good, for she returned at four o'clock with quite a colour in her cheeks, and in an amiable temper. Helen by this time had also shed her unpleasantly aggressive manner, and—perhaps because of the reaction after the morning—they were very cheerful and happy together. "Never tasted such butter!" said Mr. Thompson on being informed that he was eating part of Rose's very limited contribution, and though Helen pretended to laugh at him, she thought the same.

When tea was over, a further pleasantness was added to the cheerful hour by Maude suddenly saying she would go to the concert at Wressle after all. Both Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, and Helen as well, felt that Maude had thought things over when she was out, and wanted to make up for some stinging speeches she had let fall in her slow drawl in the morning. And they were all a little touched, saying to themselves that no wonder she was rather irritable sometimes after what she had gone through in the past.

"Too late to write to-night," said Mrs. Thompson. "However, that's nothing. We can wire in the morning."

"Oh yes," said Helen. "Any time will do for the Newtons. They are that sort, you know."

"You'd better take your new grey," said Mrs. Thompson. "It suits you so well, and is not at all too much for a concert."

So the next morning Mr. Thompson sent a wire, and later on Helen drove the car down to the station in time for the 12.50. Maude would not let her sister remain to see the train off, because it was late, and those at home would

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"My husb- ..."

"Then she went on to Wressle afterwards?" said Mrs. Stainton.

"Afterwards?" said Mr. Thompson. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, it was only that the Vicar and I were visiting an old clergyman at Arkly—a village four or five stations down the line, you know—and we thought we saw your daughter get out there. I remarked on it, because I was not aware you had any acquaintances there; in fact, there is nobody but the Vicar and his wife; and so I rather wondered. I see I must have been mistaken."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Thompson, with his eyes fixed on Mrs. Stainton; and Mrs. Thompson also sat with her anxious face turned towards her guest, but she could not speak for the turmoil of thoughts hurrying through her mind.

"I rather imagined it might be Maude," continued Mrs. Stainton, "because Mr. Wyndham's car was waiting just outside. I did not see him, but I recognized the car."

"Surely, Mrs. Stainton," said Mr. Thompson, with some dignity, "there is more than one car of that make in the East Riding."

"Oh yes," replied the Vicar's wife. "Then, as we were saying, Mrs. Thompson, it would be better to get a piece of the flannel and then we can use——"

"What makes you imply that Mr. Wyndham's car could have anything to do with Maude getting out at that station?" interrupted Mrs. Thompson, with a sternness that sat oddly on her. "He hardly ever comes here now. I fail to see the connection."

"Quite so! Quite so!" said Mr. Thompson. "I am really surprised——"

"I had no——" began Mrs. Stainton; then she paused.

"Yes." Mrs. Stai
arrow. "No one su
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Mrs. Stainton smile
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believe Miss Milford
Wyndham

she imagined it all. That is the worst of living in a little place." And she rose to go.

"At any rate, you need not say anything about Maude not telegraphing!" interjected Helen. "The next report will be that Maude is missing, and of course there has been some quite simple misunderstanding somewhere."

"I am not in the habit of repeating what I hear from house to house," said Mrs. Stainton; and this being perfectly true, the Thompsons were able to see her depart without fear that she would set afloat idle rumours.

A couple of hours later, the telegraph boy came up the drive; and immediately everybody saw how silly they had been to feel anxious. "Just like you, Henrietta," said Mr. Thompson, as Helen ran to the door for the telegram. "You will always make mountains out of molehills!" Which was very unjust, because Mrs. Thompson's inclination was more to take mountains for molehills.

Helen tore open the envelope as she entered the room, and Mr. Thompson took the telegram from her. "Why the devil will people send telegrams like this to save a ha'penny?" he said. Then both Helen and her mother knew that there was something in the message which made Mr. Thompson very anxious.

"Read it, William," said Mrs. Thompson, breathing rather quickly.

"Oh, nothing to be alarmed about. Some explanation, no doubt. Idiotic way to wire. 'Maude not here. Received second wire she was unable come.—NEWTON.'"

"That seems clear enough," said Helen in a low voice. "But you know how casual Maude is, Mother."

Mrs. Thompson said nothing, and there grew a heavy silence in the room. Then it was broken by the sound of

Mrs. Thompson's weeping. "My poor girl! I know something has happened to her. Where is she?"

"Nothing will induce me to believe that she has gone off with that fellow," said Mr. Thompson; and there they had their fear at last put into words.

"No! No!" cried Helen eagerly. "We were not thinking of that, of course. She will be just somewhere enjoying herself and never dreaming how anxious you are. All girls have grown so used to coming, and going, and changing plans at the last moment, just like the men. The war did it, and being on our own at the various jobs. I'm sure there is no need to worry."

"I agree with you," said Mr. Thompson, glancing at his wife. "No doubt we shall be getting a wire from Maude in the course of the day. No good sitting here and imagining all sorts of impossible things. In the meantime, Helen, I will just have the car round and run down to the Hall. I want to speak to Wyndham about a parish matter. If he chances to be at home, that will at any rate give Mrs. Stainton's suspicions the lie."

"Shall I drive, Father?"

"Better stay with your mother. I shall no doubt be back before very long." He put his hand on his wife's shoulder. "Come, come, my dear! Foolish to go on like this, you know, when there is no reason for it."

Then he went out, and was soon seated in the car. Helen wished she could go with him, for he looked old and agitated, and was at no time such an expert driver as herself. "You'll be careful at that bad corner just coming out of the Hall drive, Father?" she said.

"Do you think I don't know how to drive round a corner yet?" said Mr. Thompson, suddenly giving vent to his deep anxiety by a spurt of irritation.

With that he started the engine, and was soon running away down the lane between the Grange and the Hall. As he went, the fresh air and motion began to make him feel as if he were being unduly apprehensive. The whole thing would no doubt turn out to be nothing at all but a foolish freak of some sort on Maude's part. Still, he would have to speak seriously to her. He and her mother could not be treated in this way, whatever other young people might do.

But here he was at the Hall, where he had last stood singing in the rain on Christmas Eve, with Wyndham and Miss Kirke making a tableau in the lighted doorway. He almost laughed now. The thing was unthinkable—unthinkable! So going quite jauntily up the steps, he inquired if Mr. Wyndham were at home; and yet as he listened for the reply, something deep down within, beneath the careless top thoughts, waited with a painful intentness for the answer.

"Mr. Wyndham is not at home, sir."

"Ah!" Mr. Thompson was obliged to pause a moment, though he knew this sensation to be ridiculous. "Then perhaps you can give me his address. I want to communicate with him on a little matter of business."

"We are not forwarding the letters, as we expect Mr. Wyndham home to-day, sir," said the man. "He went to dine and sleep at Mr. Kirke's, and then stopped on for another night, as he does sometimes. Could you leave a message?"

"No, thank you," said Mr. Thompson.

And he walked very soberly back to the car. Of course it was all right. Wyndham would be back in a few hours, most probably. He would go home and tell Mrs. Thompson how foolish she had been. And yet when he got to the corner, he drove on towards Lennington instead of going

home. Better get that parish matter off his mind, while he was about it. He need not go in; a few words with Wyndham at the door would be sufficient; and after all, if Miss Kirke were going to be the lady at the Hall, there would have to be a certain amount of surface intercourse with the family. . . .

He found his hand shaking a little as he rang the Kirke's bell. "Is Mr. Wyndham here? I will not detain him for a moment, but I want to speak to him on a little matter of business."

"No, sir. He has not been here since Sunday," the servant replied.

As Mr. Thompson stood there, not knowing what to do next, Mr. Kirke crossed the hall and caught sight of him. The glances of the men met so directly that they could not even pretend to ignore each other.

"Ah, Mr. Thompson. Good morning," said Mr. Kirke distantly. "Anything I can do for you?"

Suddenly Mr. Thompson took a decision. "Yes, if you will grant me a few minutes."

Mr. Kirke led the way to the library, made a gesture towards a seat, and waited, joining his fingers together lightly at the tips. This irritated Mr. Thompson, but he stilled his annoyance. "I shall be obliged if you can give me Mr. Wyndham's present address. I particularly wish to communicate with him on a little matter of business." And as Mr. Thompson said that last phrase it rang oddly in his mind, as if he had said it some time in a dream.

"I am fraid I can't do that," said Mr. Kirke. "I don't know myself where he is at the present moment."

"But where was he when you last heard?"

"Really, Mr. Thompson——" began Mr. Kirke, all his

deep-rooted dislike of his visitor coming to the top: "I should really prefer to know the reason for this urgency before—— You must forgive my saying that all this appears a little strange."

"I trust"—Mr. Thompson loosened his collar with his fingers—"I trust there is no foundation for the anxiety which impels me to come to you, Mr. Kirke. I think you know I should not do it lightly, and I trust to your honour not to repeat what I am about to say to you." He paused, and said in a low voice, looking at the hat he twisted in his hands: "I'm afraid he and my daughter Maude have gone off together."

"Mr. Thompson!" cried Mr. Kirke, jumping up from his seat. "Are you mad? Do you know that he is to be married to my daughter in less than three weeks hence? Can you suggest that he is so devoid of all affection and decent feeling? I cannot believe it! Kindly tell me on what you base your supposition?"

Mr. Thompson did so, and did so very badly, being anxious to spare Maude, and thus failing to incriminate Wyndham. Mr. Kirke was naturally indignant at such an accusation being made on such slender evidence. "It would take a great deal more than that to destroy my faith in my future son-in-law," he said. "For my daughter's sake, I shall not take the steps which I should otherwise be strongly inclined to take. But I repeat that I have unlimited confidence in Mr. Wyndham, and I can only suppose that chagrin at the failure of certain matrimonial schemes which were obvious to every one has prompted this extraordinary attack on his character. Perhaps in the municipal circles you used to adorn, such notions of honour may——"

"Stop!" cried Mr. Thompson.. "Now you are going too far! Now you are going too far! I can prove to you that

Wyndham is not all you think him. Do you remember the spirit behind the curtain in the library at the Hall?"

"Certainly, I do," said Mr. Kirke in a great rage. "But I am not here to exchange reminiscences with you, sir; and I will therefore bid you good-day." He held the door open, towering over Mr. Thompson and looking exceedingly lean and long.

"I can tell you one item of interest before I go," said Mr. Thompson. "*I* was that spirit. *I* was behind the curtain—and Wyndham knew it. He didn't find out at once, and when he did, he let it go on for fear of making you look a fool. He had better have chanced it, for the letters you wrote to various papers will make you look pretty silly now, I think."

"You are not speaking the truth. You are doing this to discredit my work," said Kirke. "I know you would stop at nothing in your fanatic enmity."

"Ask Wyndham," said Mr. Thompson. "Or Tom Stainton. He knows too. If this gets out, it will certainly throw doubt on your other experiences, of course."

"Mr. Thompson," said Mr. Kirke, after a pause of hard thinking, during which he retreated from the door and closed it again, "I simply put on one side the suggestion that Mr. Wyndham has anything at all to do with your daughter's unexplained absence. But since you seem so anxious to know something of his whereabouts, I will tell you the name of the place from which he wired to say that he would be unable to dine here as arranged. I chance to have it here among some papers. But, on your side, I must ask you to promise that this version you gave me of the manifestation in the Hall library shall go no further. It is a matter of no great moment in itself, but such a story might do great harm to the cause."

Mr. Thompson hesitated, for this was bitter to him. "Very well," he said, "I give you my word."

So Mr. Kirke produced a wire from a heap of papers on the table; but ere he handed it over, he said suspiciously: "I can't think why you said nothing about the affair at the time, if you really were behind the curtain."

"I'll tell you," said Mr. Thompson, looking him straight in the face. "I didn't think it would be fair to give my host away when he was hoping to marry your daughter."

"In that case," said Mr. Kirke slowly, turning red despite his lean sallowness, "I have to ask your pardon, Mr. Thompson. But you will find that your accusations against my future son-in-law are quite unfounded. And unless he prefers to keep quiet in order to spare my daughter's feelings, you will have further to deal with him concerning this matter."

As he spoke, the door opened. Miss Kirke entered, caught sight of Mr. Thompson and bowed with exceeding aloofness. "Oh, I am sorry," she said. "I was going to ask you, Father, if you could see about that case of silver being opened. As I have not heard from Guy this morning, he will of course be coming to-day." And the door closed again.

Mr. Thompson looked at Mr. Kirke. "Then your daughter has not heard from Wyndham either?"

"No. But there is nothing in that, nothing at all. They are not sentimental correspondents. Still, I understand your anxiety." And Mr. Kirke returned to a subject far more important to him than the fate of a flighty young woman whom he considered bound to get into mischief sooner or later. "I cannot understand Wyndham allowing me to be misled in this manner!" Thus it was plain enough the seeds

had been sown in Mr. Kirke's mind which would not be easily destroyed.

Immediately after that Mr. Thompson left the house and drove on again towards Mannerby, which was a longish distance from Lennington. He managed the car badly, being deep in thought and conscious of a sort of bewildering heaviness and oppression in his head; but at last he came in sight of the mean, desolate little public-house which was all the inn which the place boasted, and he knew beforehand that neither alone nor accompanied would Wyndham have stopped there. After a brief inquiry he went to the post office whence the telegram to Mr. Kirke had been dispatched; but the girl there either did not or would not remember having sent it. A good many people stopped their cars to send off wires at that office. It was on the main road to Scarborough, and they had a lot of traffic going past. She could not possibly say, she was sure. . . . And she returned to the perusal of a lady's journal.

So there was nothing for Mr. Thompson to do but to return home, which he did far more slowly than he had come, for he was afraid of facing Mrs. Thompson with the news he had to give her. The early dusk began to fall, and he had eaten nothing since breakfast. By the time he turned into the drive at the Grange, he felt more miserable than he had ever done in all his sheltered prosperous life. Then through the gloom he saw Helen running out of the door. As he stopped the car, she called out: "It's all right! It's all right! There is a wire from Maude. She wires from Scarborough: 'Came on here. Having a splendid time. Will write.' There is no proper address, but she is all right. I knew she would be."

Mr. Thompson rose stiffly from his seat without speaking and Helen looked anxiously at him: then he said in a low

tone: "She doesn't tell us she never went to Wressle at all."

"No!" They heard the wind in the trees for a moment, until Helen said briskly: "You go in, Father; I will take the car round. You will find Mother quite reassured, because we know how casual Maude is, of course."

Mr. Thompson went indoors without speaking, unable at first to shake off that bewildered heaviness, but when he had eaten and rested, he began to be able to agree with Mrs. Thompson and Helen that Maude always *was* casual, and that perhaps he had been unduly anxious about her.

CHAPTER XIX

"For Summer is the time to love,
But Winter is the time to prove
How deeply Love is rooted.
If it can lose its pretty flowers,
And still remain alive and ours—
Ah! then we are well suited!"

Mr. Thompson was only relieved on the surface; actually he was pretending to himself and his wife and Helen, just as they were pretending to themselves and to him. All were conscious, beneath what they allowed themselves to think, of a deep disquietude—for Maude had evidently wanted to deceive them. It went beyond a mere careless failure to let them know that she had changed her plans on the impulse of the moment.

Mr. Thompson took down the Bradshaw and remarked that he should go over to Scarborough in the morning if no letter came from Maude: and Mrs. Thompson said perhaps he might as well; not that she thought—— And she tried to look cheerful.

"Why, Father," said Helen, "it will be like searching for a needle in a bottle of hay." And she also spoke with a gay carelessness. Then Mathilda entered the room to clear away the tea-things. She wore creaking stays that day, but moved with great pains to make no more noise than she could help, as if some one were ill in the house; and when she spoke, it was in a low, solemnly important voice. By this she showed that she was in the midst of the village

sensation and living up to her position. For through the miraculous agency common to Eastern bazaars and small villages, the whole of Muckleby already knew that Maude was supposed to have run off with young Wyndham, and that an injured father had been scouring the country in pursuit of his erring child. The Muckleby public viewed it exactly in the light of those somewhat trite expressions, and felt rather as if they were enjoying a film free of charge. All this, in spite of the fact that Mrs. Stainton had kept her promise of secrecy in the spirit as well as the letter.

As Mathilda cautiously creaked away with the last cup and saucer, the outer bell rang. After a brief murmur outside, she returned, closed the door, and said in the same, even voice as before, with an added tone of intense, respectful consideration: "Here is Mr. Bennett! Shall you wish to see him, sir?"

"No!" flung out Mr. Thompson: his former vague distrust of Bennett coming to the surface once more. "Certainly not. I am engaged. What does he want?"

"He said, if you could spare him a few minutes, he very particularly wished to speak to you, sir," said Mathilda, enjoying herself very much indeed. For here was the other actor in the play; the disconsolate lover, of course. She knew exactly what to expect because of the little Cinema show at Lennington, which absorbed some of her wages on every day out.

"I think you should see him, William," said Mrs. Thompson, who felt very curious. "Don't you, Helen?"

"Yes," said Helen, looking at the fire and exercising all her self-control.

"Well! Well! Show him in," said Mr. Thompson impatiently.

And immediately Bennett entered, it became clear that

he enjoyed the prospect of the interview no more than Mr. Thompson. He looked, indeed, supremely uncomfortable, and said at once, after a brief greeting: "I hear a rumour in the village that Miss Maude has gone off with Wyndham. Is it true?"

"Certainly not. We have just heard that she is staying with friends in Scarborough," said Mr. Thompson, turning very red. "May I ask why you concern yourself in the matter?"

"Surely," exclaimed Mrs. Thompson agitatedly, "there was no understanding between you and Maude, Mr. Bennett?"

Mr. Thompson gave his wife a stern look to be quiet and leave the matter to him: Helen sat quite still, with the blood all rushing to her heart, leaving her hands and feet deathly cold.

"No," she heard Bennett saying from somewhere a long way off. Then her father again—very stiffly: "Perhaps you will tell me why you asked the question, Mr. Bennett?"

"That is what I came for," said Bennett. "At least, I felt I might inadvertently have had something to do with Wyndham's—that is——" His usually steady manner had deserted him and he seemed at a loss for words. "I must begin by telling you something about myself that I had not meant to until next March—when my time with Harbottle is up. I am related to Wyndham. He is my second cousin. My grandmother was a sister of old Mr. Ned Wyndham, just as Guy's grandfather was a brother."

"This is most extraordinary," said Mr. Thompson. "What possible reason could you have for concealing such a simple fact?"

"Well, a lot of the land was left to me, and Wyndham felt he had been defrauded. You see I had practically never

seen the old man, and my cousin had always been looked upon as the sole heir. I don't wonder he was annoyed about it; and when he wrote out to Egypt saying so, I did not feel especially aggrieved. But when I came over to England to take over the property, and decided to learn something about land in order to do this thoroughly, I made up my mind to let him make the first advances. And—well, he didn't make them! He said nothing about the relationship, and I don't fancy he was too keen on people knowing exactly how much of the estate had gone away from him. So I said nothing either."

"But why on earth did you come to Muckleby?" interposed Helen; and Mr. Thompson gave her an impatient look also, for he did so dislike people "butting in" when he was conducting a case.

"I came to Muckleby because Harbottle was the only first-class farmer in this neighbourhood who would take a pupil. And I had to be somewhere about here, because if you want to farm in the East Riding, you want to learn in the East Riding. Soil, climate, and the men you have to deal with vary extraordinarily in different parts of England, so I am told. And I was determined to do the thing well, if I could. I gave up a career I liked because I thought it was my job at the present time to make the most of the land that had been left to me, and I mean to do it. But I have been entirely on my own since I was seventeen, and I am so used to arranging my life without reference to any one, that I never realized what complications might ensue. I simply told the lawyers in Lennington to hold their tongues—and their clerks' tongues—or I should remove my business: and they did. There was another reason why I wanted neither Harbottle nor the men I worked with to know I owned the land we were cultivating, and that was because

I thought I should learn far more if they remained ignorant."

"It all seems rather odd to me," said Mr. Thompson. "But of course you know your own business best."

"I first began to see it would work out unsatisfactorily when I got to know you and your family. Hitherto, I had kept entirely to myself, working in the day and reading in my room at night." Bennett suddenly smiled at Helen. "You remember that first night?"

"Yes! Yes!" said Mr. Thompson, answering for her. "We all remember that evening. And so you felt you had made a mistake. Then why did you not rectify it at once?"

"Well, it would have quite spoilt my training at the Harbottles', for one thing," said Bennett. "Everything must have been on a different footing, of course. I wanted to stay until next March. And also, I could see Wyndham did not want to bother with me, and I felt the longer I kept the relationship to myself the better he would be pleased. I regretted what I had done, but whether I explained then or in the following March did not seem to me to matter." He paused. "I was quite aware already that—that the member of this family whose opinion I valued most would not be influenced by my worldly circumstances one way or another."

Helen could not look his way. Was it Maude he was meaning? Then Mrs. Thompson spoke again.

"Still, I do not quite see what this has to do——"

"I'm coming to that now." Bennett's lean face was flushed and he pushed his hair up from his forehead. "I always knew Wyndham felt I had supplanted him once; and I think he couldn't bear—it maddened him to think——" He stopped short. How the dickens was he to tell these people that Maude had been playing him off against Wynd-

ām, having somehow divined that Wyndham might sacrifice Mildred Kirke and all her money rather than be supplanted ı Maude's affections as he had been in the uncle's will? My cousin thought I wanted to marry Miss Maude, I be-eve," was all Bennett could find to say finally. "He knew often came to the Grange."

Here Helen suddenly interposed, looking straight at him or the first time. "Whose property was the Grange? It ras bought through the executors, of course. But whose ras it?"

"Mine, before I sold it. I wanted capital to farm on the ıtest improved lines."

"Then when you showed Father over, and pointed out ıe disadvantages, it was your own place you were run-ing down?"

"Oh, I didn't run it down. I just saw he knew nothing bout such property, and I wanted to deal fairly by him, ecause I saw he was likely to deal fairly by me."

"There, you see, William!" exclaimed Mrs. Thompson, eeling, despite all her anxiety, the satisfaction every good ife of nearly thirty years' standing must feel in such a ıoment. "I told you so. After we once got to know Mr. ennett, I felt *sure* he had not been trying to 'do' us."

And this time Mr. Thompson had every reason to resent ıe interruption, for it obliged him to offer explanations. H—hem!" he said. "Naturally, one lives in a business orld, and one judges things on business lines. The fact is, e—er—rather fancied you might be crabbing the Grange ecause you wanted to buy it yourself."

"Well, I'm blest!" commented Bennett; then he smiled or the second time during the whole business. "I don't now, though, that I might not have thought the same

thing in your place. After all, as you say, this is a business world. Doesn't do to trust anybody, I suppose."

"But I still think it funny," continued Mrs. Thompson, "that Mr. Wyndham did not give us a hint when we spoke to him about you, Mr. Bennett."

"Oh, by that time it had become an understood thing that nothing was to be said about the relationship while I remained with Harbottle. Wyndham would not feel at liberty to say anything," answered Bennett. "I can't blame him for that."

"But even so, he might have taken a different tone," said Mrs. Thompson. "I must own, I don't think it was quite——" She paused. "But anyway, we all know where we are now. That is one comfort."

"Well," said Bennett, rising, "if I can go anywhere or do anything, I am at your service, you know."

Mrs. Thompson, however, assured him that they would be quite certain to have a letter from Maude in the morning; so he shook hands with his hostess and Helen, and was escorted by Mr. Thompson to the door.

As soon as he was out of earshot Mrs. Thompson exclaimed: "How extraordinary! But he seems quite upset, poor man! I never saw him so upset. He is generally so very steady and calm. I am afraid he is very much in love with Maude."

"Why afraid?" said Helen, without looking round. "He is all right."

"I don't think she would have him. She would want somebody gayer and more——" She paused. "I don't think he has any chance, though I liked him more to-night than I ever have done. Didn't you, Helen?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Helen.

"I am sorry about him and Maude. And there was poor

Tom Stainton. But she can't help their falling in love with her. I am sure poor Bennett has no chance," said Mrs. Thompson.

"She seemed keen enough on him," said Helen.

"Well, she did," acknowledged Mrs. Thompson: then something in her elder daughter's voice arrested her attention. "You sound tired, Helen."

"Oh, I'm all right," said Helen shortly.

And with that Mr. Thompson came back into the room, where he and Mrs. Thompson continued to wonder at intervals about what they had heard until it was time to go to bed.

Though Mrs. Thompson was troubled, she fell asleep quickly, but Mr. Thompson lay awake until past one with all he had done during the day passing like a chaotic panorama through his mind. At last he dropped off into an uneasy slumber; but he awakened again about half-past three to find his anxieties and pricking annoyances accentuated, as they are wont to be at that hour. All sorts of past irritations and wounds to his vanity kept springing up from nowhere in his memory, and from that he passed into that curious state of mind in which a man views himself from the outside, not as the neighbours see him, or as he is used to seeing himself, but as he really is. And this made Mr. Thompson afraid; because no man can look on that grotesque nakedness without feeling it to be abnormal—something human eyes were not meant to see. He put out his hand to touch Mrs. Thompson, for the instinct of self-preservation drove him to get back at once, somehow, that merciful haze of human kindness with which all men clothe themselves and their fellows—the haze that has a rainbow promise in it of what may be. Mrs. Thompson woke easily at her husband's touch, for she too had been full of trouble

before she fell asleep. "Can't you get off, William? Why, it must be very late." And she pressed the bulb of the flash-light to look at the time. "After half-past three!"

"I slept a little while." As he spoke, he was already free from the terror, though feeling the effect of it still. "But I am worrying about Maude. I never ought to have dragged you and the girls away from all your friends to a remote country place like this."

"You meant it for the best," said Mrs. Thompson.

There was a silence, then Mr. Thompson blurted out: "I blame myself. I wanted to get away from Wressle. Everything I do turns out wrong."

"How can you say so?" answered Mrs. Thompson. "Look at the good you did there. And it has been just the same since you came to Muckleby. You are always trying to make people better and happier."

"Yes. I think I can't do it in the right way, though. There must be something wrong. I don't know what it is, I'm sure." And he lay staring miserably into the darkness; but his soul, oddly enough, was for the first time dimly seeing a doorway into the light. He might never reach it, but his soul was looking that way. "Perhaps I think of myself most—I don't know."

"It's not your fault if your efforts are not appreciated," urged Mrs. Thompson. "People have always been the same about not wanting to be improved. Why, even in the Bible——"

Mr. Thompson said nothing, and his wife continued once more: "Think what a splendid testimonial the Wressle people gave you when we left. I shall never forget that presentation meeting as long as I live. I saw two ladies crying, and I'm sure I had all I could do—— Don't you

remember what the editor said in the Wressle paper next day?"

"Didn't recall the exact words," muttered Mr. Thompson, only because he wanted to hear them spoken aloud.

"Why, he said that few living men had ever received such a spontaneous tribute from all classes of their fellow-townspeople," quoted Mrs. Thompson.

"Ah, I remember now," said Mr. Thompson. "But those newspaper fellows have to talk like that, you know." Then he sought and found her hand. "I suppose we had better get off to sleep, if we can."

No words of affection had passed between these two, but they were both deeply aware of having found comfort in each other: Mr. Thompson because he received consolation, and Mrs. Thompson because she was able to give it.

CHAPTER XX

"Oh! Spring is but a Faithless Jade,
She called out 'Coming!' and has stayed;
Then sends Old Winter back again
To plague us with his wind and rain."

Mathilda Bain arrived very early next morning, in spite of the fact that she had been up later than usual the night before, entertaining a considerable number of callers. Indeed, her sister's little house, where she made her home, was quite unpleasantly thronged at one hour of the evening with acquaintances who came just to borrow a reel of cotton, or ask for a recipe, or beg a bit of dried sage. And to all of them Mathilda said the same thing, though in different phraseology; she did not go to folk's houses and then come away and repeat what she heard. The Bains never had been that sort, and never would be, she trusted; and thus she enhanced her own reputation and prevented the people of Muckleby from finding out that she knew no more than they did about the romantic flight which was supposed to have taken place.

This morning she preserved the same demeanour with Mrs. Kerman, looking as if she knew volumes, but with a mouth as tight as a button, the while she prepared Mr. and Mrs. Thompson's morning tea with a sort of confidential gravity, as if she knew the worst and was doing her best to help them to bear it. She even declined to say whether the back passage should be cleaned, inferring that she left

it in solemn abeyance until she should be at liberty to say whether the family would be equal to the clinking of buckets or not. And the moment the postman appeared in sight, she was out like a flash and off down the drive to meet him, forestalling Helen, who had run out on the same errand. She delivered up the letters at once, but not before her gimlet eye had remarked the absence of any envelope directed in Maude's handwriting, and her manner became more portentously sympathetic than ever.

"Have they heard anything?" asked Mrs. Kerman when she went back into the kitchen.

"I'm sure I can't say," replied Mathilda, pursing up her mouth and looking as if she knew volumes.

It was a lovely day such as comes sometimes at the turn of the year, quite mild and still, and when the butcher's young man came, Mathilda stood in the sunshine talking to him at the back door. "I expect," he said, "you'll have heard the news?"

"I mostly do," said Mathilda. "What bit, do you think, have you got hold of now?"

"Why, about Mr. Wyndham's wedding being all off," said the butcher. "Seems Miss Kirke sent word down to the Hall late last night that they were to return some curtains and things she had sent, at once, as she was going away and Kirke's house would be closed. A girl I know goes with the young feller that brought the message, and he said there had been a rare old row at Kirke's."

"I wonder," said Mrs. Kerman over Mathilda's shoulder, "if it has anything to do with all these tales about Miss Maude and——" She broke off, her jaw dropping before the sudden vindictive intensity of Mathilda's gaze. "No offence meant, I'm sure," she murmured, not knowing in the least what she did mean.

"Well, I must be off!" said the butcher, and before the two women could forget their differences in the desire to retain him, he was away on his bicycle, going swiftly down the road.

Mathilda denied Mrs. Kerman the pleasures of discussion as a punishment, and walked straight past her to the front of the house. There Mr. Thompson was pottering restlessly about the lawn, waiting until it was time to go to the train and start his depressing journey. If Maude were all right, she would be intensely annoyed at his following her and making all this fuss after her wire of the previous day; and if not—— Mr. Thompson began to stub weeds in the lawn with a sort of miserable energy. Then he saw Mathilda before him, wearing a look of discreet solicitude, but unable to hide a sense of enjoyment so keen that it quivered in the very hairs of her head. "Butcher's boy has just been," she said, speaking with artificial calm, as though to intimate she did not wish to intrude into any family secrets whatever, and Mr. Thompson might take it or leave it. "He says the wedding at the Hall is off. The Kirkes is going away at once."

"What!" cried Mr. Thompson, startled out of his discretion. "There was no idea of such a thing when I saw them yesterday." Then he recovered himself. "Nonsense, Mathilda! What sort of ridiculous stuff will you get hold of next? Who told you, did you say?"

"Butcher's boy. And he had it from the messenger Miss Kirke sent to the Hall to fetch some of her curtains and things back that she had there ready for when she was married," said Mathilda, all in a breath.

"Oh! Some ridiculous mistake!" said Mr. Thompson; but all the same he threw down his spud and hastened towards the house.

Mrs. Thompson was in the sitting-room, but just as he began his tale Mathilda was there again, rather breathless, holding a telegram in her hand. "Tell the boy to wait, Mathilda," said Mr. Thompson hastily. "There may be a reply." And with intense reluctance Mathilda was forced to withdraw as he tore open the envelope. "It is from her," he said, turning first purple and then quite pale. "She's married to Wyndham! They were married this morning!"

Mrs. Thompson stared for a moment; then her face began to work and she burst into tears. "Married! And none of us there! Oh, my poor little girl! My poor little girl! To think she was married all alone with none of us there!"

But though Mr. Thompson loved his daughter he was not a mother, and he could not go quite as far as that. "I don't pity her at all," he said. "It was her own doing. She has behaved abominably to us, Henrietta. She ought not to have caused us all the anxiety we have gone through during the last few days. And Wyndham, too! The whole proceeding has been most unpleasant—most unpleasant! What about that poor girl who was to have been married to the scoundrel in three weeks' time? I don't like her: and I dislike Kirke intensely. But I am sorry this has happened. I deeply regret it. Surely Maude could have found a husband without behaving in this fashion."

"But if she loves him!" sobbed Mrs. Thompson.

"Well, we can only hope she may go on doing so," said Mr. Thompson heavily. "But it is a bad start. A bad start!"

Then Helen came in, alarmed to see her mother in tears, and they told her that her sister was married to Wyndham.

"Married!" She sat down on a chair near the table and looked at them with startled eyes: then her face softened.

"Dear old Maude! I can't realize it. Married! Oh, I do hope she will be happy!"

"She was wrong," sobbed Mrs. Thompson. "I know she ought not to have gone as she did. But when people are in love——"

"People in love can still exercise common sense," said Mr. Thompson; who had forgotten.

Helen smiled at him, trying to conciliate him and so make things easier for her sister. "Why, Father! 'None are ever wise in love, this doth every courting prove.' You remember that, don't you?"

"I am perfectly certain——" began Mr. Thompson rather blusteringly.

Then Mrs. Thompson glanced at him through her tears, and it queerly became plain that she had once been a girl: a fact not often realizable. "Why, William, don't you remember that time when you would walk home in the rain without a hat and coat, rather than come in the carriage, because you thought I had cut a dance with you?"

"Can't say I do!" he answered. But perhaps that or some other memory did come back to him, though faintly; for he added after a pause, in a different voice: "Well, if they are as happy as we have been, my dear, they will do very well." But he immediately went on to say in a very matter-of-fact voice: "Bless my soul, that telegraph boy has been waiting here all this time!" And so bustled out.

Mrs. Thompson turned to Helen. "I wonder if Bennett knows. Don't you think we ought to tell him? I am afraid he will feel it dreadfully."

"I don't know," Helen paused. "I suppose so." And the thought went through her: How would he take it? Would he be very unhappy?

"You might just run across and let him know, I think,"

pursued Mrs. Thompson. "Or perhaps he will come here. Shall we wait a little and see?"

"Oh, I'll go," said Helen: for she would not let him run the risk of being told by a stranger and taken at a disadvantage. "I saw him in that field across the road half an hour ago, and I daresay he is there still."

She went out, taking her old hat and coat from the hall as she passed, and trying to get words ready in which she could convey the news to him. But when she came up to him at the edge of the field, she blurted out: "We have heard from Maude. She and Wyndham are married."

"You don't mean it!" he said. "Well, I hope they'll be very happy. Poor luck for Miss Kirke, of course, but I don't fancy she will break her heart over him." Then he began to look anxious and rather excited. "I say, *you* didn't think I came to the Grange to see your sister, did you?"

"Oh, I don't know! Yes, I did. Not at first, but I did afterwards."

He put his hand on her arm, and, to her surprise, she noticed it was trembling. "Surely you couldn't seriously believe I should bother my head about Maude with you there?"

Helen laughed nervously; but she looked him straight in the face and would not allow herself to feel "silly." "If you had done, there was nothing to be surprised at. Men always did admire Maude, and I never was very attractive to them."

"No," agreed Bennett, and though Helen meant what she said, his ready acquiescence made her feel nettled.

"I didn't want to!" she said defiantly, throwing up her chin.

"No. I'm glad of it. I should hate that kind for a wife," he said.

"A wife! What's that to do with it?" said Helen.

"A great deal, I hope." He paused, and though she pretended not to notice his hand on her arm, she could feel its trembling. "Come, Helen; haven't you been unkind to me long enough to satisfy even your pride? I have been very patient, because I thought you needed rope; but I couldn't have done it if I had not thought all the time you cared for me at the bottom. Have I been deceiving myself all the time?"

"Then it was always me?" breathed Helen.

"Always. I'm not going to say I fell in love with you directly I saw you, because I didn't. When we walked home from Muckleby Hill that night in the moonlight, I thought you a nice girl, but I wanted to get home to my pipe and go to bed. There's nothing of the wildly romantic about the affair, but I love you now, and there's an end of it. You are the wife I want."

She did not speak, and he began again in a different tone. "Then I've been wrong: you don't care for me? I don't know why I thought you did; I daresay I was a conceited fool. You never gave me any real cause to think so."

Then he felt her other hand on the one of his that held her arm, and he saw she could not speak because she was trying not to cry. Suddenly, he bent to kiss that tremulous mouth; and with an ardour that surprised his inexperienced sweetheart.

But it is wonderful how soon lovers get used to love; and even as they walked back to the Grange together those kisses no longer seemed strange to Helen. She was fine enough to take it all quite simply, and she only had a sense—growing stronger every moment—of something that was already hedging her round and keeping her safe against all that could happen in the world. The worries and troubles would

come, but they would be outside. Already she was conscious of that deepest thought of men and women who are happy in their marriage—"so long as we have each other." And the day was like spring, and the sun shone on the greenish trunks of the trees. . . .

They met Mr. Thompson as they went across the garden, but Bennett would not loose his grasp of Helen's arm, and called out at once, in a boyish, excited tone quite unlike any Mr. Thompson had ever heard from him: "Helen is trying to run away from me; but she can't! I've got her for life."

"What?" Poor Mr. Thompson put his hand to his head, which was understandable; for he really was having rather a lot of shocks in one short morning. "Do you mean that you and Helen are engaged to be married?"

He was answered in detail, and the news was also conveyed to Mrs. Thompson; and when she had adjusted her mind to the fact of a man having preferred Helen to Maude, both parents began to feel pleased about the marriage, though still a little bewildered by these quick happenings in their family, which deprived them of both daughters at a blow. But after Bennett had gone away and they had time to settle down to the new conditions, Mr. Thompson so regained his normal spirits that by the time he sat down to supper with his future son-in-law, he was able to say quite gaily: "Then you're going to be a farmer's wife, Helen, as well as a farmer's daughter?" And he threw out his chest in quite the old splendid style as he added to Bennett: "Can't follow a better trade! Adam delved and Eve span, you know; only you'll have to be content to let your Eve employ the spanner—ha! ha! Excellent hand with a car, isn't she, Mother?"

They all laughed, and it is a fact—so potent is love to work all sorts of little miracles as well as the one big one—

that Bennett's laugh was actually genuine, and he considered this an excellent jest.

But the thoughts of Mr. and Mrs. Thompson kept turning to Maude, despite their preoccupation with the couple seated at the table, and Helen somehow felt nearer to her sister in her new-found happiness than she had ever done before. "Dear old Maude—if only she might be as happy!" And she looked at her own lover with shining eyes.

Next day, however, Bennett and Helen entered upon a different phase of their courtship, and they began to enjoy the quiet happiness which comes to steadfast natures who love worthily and can be certain of each other. Three days after that, Mr. and Mrs. Wyndham suddenly turned up to answer in person a strongly-worded letter from Mr. Thompson.

But Mathilda Bain and the Muckleby audience behind her never witnessed a more disappointing close to any performance. The runaway couple did not return to the ancestral home in an agitated and remorseful manner, to go down on their knees before Mr. Thompson's arm-chair; quite the contrary. They seemed in excellent spirits and very well pleased with themselves, announcing that they had already taken a flat in London vacated by a friend of Wyndham's who was leaving unexpectedly for India, and that they intended to let the Hall for a term of years.

"Can't afford both," said Maude gaily, "and I don't see myself stuck down here in Muckleby from one year's end to the other. We both love dancing. I expect we shall have great times."

"Never saw such a dancer as Maude," said Wyndham. "We went to a club the night before last, and there wasn't a girl in the place to touch her at it, though some of them had

come on from the variety shows." And it was obvious that he was greatly enamoured of his bride.

This preoccupation prevented Wyndham from objecting to Helen's engagement as acutely as he might have done, though he did not like it, of course; while Maude had already explained to her husband—and firmly believed—that Bennett had proposed to Helen out of pique because she herself had gone off with another man.

So next morning they "trapsed about the village"—to quote Granny Wilson—"as bold as brass": and Mrs. Stainton, who saw them from the window of a cottage, felt some natural bitterness. She had not exactly wanted Maude to come to a bad end; but she did not wish her to come to such a good end as all that. But perhaps Mrs. Stainton assumed a little too soon that Mr. and Mrs. Wyndham's future together would be quite so victoriously triumphant as it appeared when they went down the village street that morning, for it was not entirely unlikely that the bridegroom might sooner or later regret at odd moments the loss of a safe income and a perfectly safe wife, and he was not one to keep this feeling hidden within his own heart.

However, all was roses now; and the Thompsons' anxieties on Maude's behalf were set at rest. But a further matrimonial surprise awaited them. Mathilda came in one morning with every bow and feather about her declaring she'd got him!—even before she delivered her news. The wedding was to take place about Lady Day when the farmer's foreman went into a new cottage, and she would be glad if they would look out for a fresh servant at once.

Helen had not the heart to be sorry when she was so happily bent on marriage herself, but she did wish this had happened at some other time, because her own wedding was

[redacted]

"A bishop would not have a cook who couldn't cook," said Mr. Thompson.

"The 'something cold' would never flap in their faces, at any rate," said Helen. "It wouldn't dare."

"Well, we can but try," said Mrs. Thompson.

"I think Helen ought to write by return," said Mr. Thompson.

"Whatever shall we do without Helen?" said Mrs. Thompson. For she began to realize that Maude's marriage would not have made a very great difference in her life if she could have kept Helen. The daughter who had always taken the second place in her thoughts—though she loved them both—was the one whom she would miss the most.

Helen went to write the letter, but turned to say reassuringly: "Don't you worry about servants, Mother. If we can only get the ghost-proof pair to stay for a couple of months, you will find others to follow. It was those two leaving the way they did that gave the place a bad name."

"Rare joke," chuckled Mr. Thompson, "if we can manage to clear the Grange of its ghostly reputation through one of Kirke's crack-brained articles."

"Things always work out right for people who try their best," replied Mrs. Thompson comfortably. "At least, you think so when they *do* do; when they don't——" And she left it at that. "I can't help wondering about poor Tom Stainton."

"Oh, Mrs. Stainton heard from him yesterday," said Helen. "Didn't I tell you? And he seems to like both the people and the job he has found."

"Well, he is young and full of spirit," said Mr. Thompson. "He is suited to a young nation." But a vague discomfort remained in the back of his mind as he thought of Mr. and Mrs. Stainton. "I wish the Vicar were not such an impossible man to help," he said irritably.

"Oh, Jim will find a way somehow," said Helen. "There's nobody like Jim for anything of that sort."

"Oh, Jim!" said Mrs. Thompson. "He'll do all we leave undone." Then she and Mr. Thompson smiled at each

other in an amused manner as their daughter went out; but beneath that amusement was a deeper feeling.

"I'm glad she has got such a good man for a husband, at any rate," said Mrs. Thompson.

"Yes. Always liked him! Didn't quite understand him at first, but always said he was above the average," said Mr. Thompson. "I flatter myself I am a pretty fair judge of character, as a rule."

Mrs. Thompson stared at her husband. After what he had always said about Bennett! She opened her lips to say this, closed them again, and went on with her knitting. For, though she was not what is called a clever woman, she had accomplished what many cleverer women seem unable to do: she had learned some of the more obvious lessons of married life.

CHAPTER XXI

"No Girle her Wedding Day forgets,
So we will gather Violets,
That Thou and I and they may be
Part of her sweetest Memory."

The two new servants arrived on the day appointed, and though they obviously felt that their present situation was a great come-down after being the handmaids of a bishop, they seemed content to regard it as a sort of retreat which they had agreed to enter before leaving domestic service altogether at the end of the summer, when they intended to take over a small cake and confectionery business at Boltingsea. In the meantime, they did their work exceedingly well, though creating an atmosphere in the back premises which Mrs. Kerman found exceedingly difficult to breathe with any comfort. So she became first crushed and then defiant, only remaining because they would be gone in four or five months and she had a family to consither.

Mr. Thompson was feeling a little lonely at this time, because Helen and Mrs. Thompson always seemed to be occupied about clothes, or going over to Scarborough for the night for fittings, or otherwise so engaged that they had no attention to spare for him. He was displaced from his stand as a pivot on which the family circle revolved, and he did not like it, though he said nothing about it. At least, he told his wife and family several times a day that he said nothing about the manner in which he was inconvenienced,

and of course he ought to know. But a certain good action brought its own reward, though the other-way-on preachers now say that never happens. For Mr. Thompson took some tea to Granny Wilson, when she began to talk about old times, as usual, telling him how well she remembered the grand doings there were when she was a lass, after the Squire and his wife of those days had ridden away in a carriage and pair on their honeymoon.

"Aye, there was grand doings in the country in them times, not like now," she grumbled. . . . And here was the germ of a new idea; and a new idea was all Mr. Thompson needed to make him forget his grievances, so that he could be eager and happy again.

"*After* they had gone, did you say?" he asked, falling on the suggestion like a dog on a bone.

"Yes," said Granny. "I can just see 'em now——"

"But what did you *do*?" interrupted Mr. Thompson. "What form did the rejoicings take at a country wedding? I agree with you that it is a duty for people like ourselves to make such times an occasion for providing a little change and festivity in village life. But how was it done?"

Thus asked, with a pistol at her ear, as it were, Granny Wilson seemed unable to give a definite description. "I don't know. It wasn't here in Muckleby. It was when I lived servant in the North Riding. The lads run for the bride's garter, for one thing, I remember."

"Ran races, you mean?" said Mr. Thompson eagerly. "And what did the winner receive?"

"Oh, only the ribbon and the luck. He was to be the one to be married next. But that's a long time ago—a long time ago——" And she sat looking at the fire. Then she roused herself. "Folks is different now, Mr. Thompson."

"I don't know. I don't know, Granny," said Mr. Thomp-

son cheerfully. "Perhaps you may see another race like that before you die. You never know."

She glanced at him shrewdly out of her keen old eyes. "It's no use you trying to get one up at Miss Helen's wedding. The lads wouldn't race for a bit of ribbon now: and they're in no hurry to know when they'll be married."

"Come! Come!" smiled Mr. Thompson. "Love remains the same, you know, however the world changes."

"Does it?" said Granny. "Nay; it was different when I was young." And she looked again into the fire.

All the same, Mr. Thompson stepped quite buoyantly down the village street when he came away, for he was filled with the glow of a quickening idea, which is more exhilarating to some natures than any other stimulant. But Helen and Bennett were absolutely bent on having a quiet wedding at nine o'clock in the morning, after which they would drive straight away in the car to start their honeymoon; so he determined to say nothing about his plans for the present, for he felt sure Mrs. Thompson would try to put obstacles in the way, besides being too busy to attend to him. He therefore cast about for another female assistant—because a wedding seemed somehow to be almost entirely a feminine affair—and he turned his steps towards the Vicarage. But on second thoughts he felt there was a want of breadth and festiveness about Mrs. Stainton which would be fatal to anything rollicking: and he saw already in his own mind a jolly picture of the young Squire's wedding, which was gaining colour and detail every minute. No matter if the young Squire had already married Maude sordidly at a registrar's office, Bennett was the next of kin, and that would do just as well. Then the idea of jollity naturally suggested Mrs. Harbottle, and he turned that way at once, feeling glad Harbottle would be at market. That

good lady proved to be as comfortable and sympathetic as Mr. Thompson expected, but she was not encouraging about the race. "You see, Mr. Thompson," she said frankly, "everybody wears suspenders in these days, and that somehow seems to make as if there wouldn't be much *in* it, if you know what I mean."

But Mr. Thompson was not going to subscribe to this unconsciously propounded theory that old customs should cease to be kept up because they have no direct bearing upon the present conditions of life, and he also felt that Mrs. Harbottle was a little more than necessarily frank. "I fail to see what difference it makes that the—er—attachments you mention are generally worn," he said. "The spirit of the thing is our main concern, of course."

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Harbottle jovially, "I'm always in for a bit of fun, you know. And it does seem a pity for two young ladies to be married in the place and nobody get any fun out of it at all. I agree with you about that."

"I thought of giving a tea in the barn to everybody after the race was over," continued Mr. Thompson.

"Now that's something like!" said Mrs. Harbottle. "Oh, any of the lads'll run to oblige if you're going to give a tea afterwards. You get the garter and I'll see to the food all right."

Mr. Thompson looked thoughtful. "I am rather anxious to prevent Mrs. Thompson from being worried with this," he said. "She seems to have enough on her hands. So perhaps you—— I hardly know how I could procure one. It ought to be rather ornamental, I suppose?"

"I know!" cried Mrs. Harbottle, who was rapidly getting into her stride. "There's a draper's catalogue with pictures I was looking over last night, and I wondered to myself who could want gathered blue satin garters with little pink

roses on. They'll be very——" She paused, seeing Bennett at the door, and concluded gaily: "Now, Mr. Bennett, you find me and Mr. Thompson just choosing garters. He likes those with roses on best."

Bennett glanced at his father-in-law with such natural surprise that Mr. Thompson felt reluctantly bound to relate the purpose of his quest, explaining with dignity that his motive was to continue that brightening of rural conditions which had been one of his prime objects ever since he came to Muckleby. Bennett replied at once that it was a splendid idea, but Mrs. Harbottle and Mr. Thompson saw clearly enough that he would have forgotten all about it before he got half-way across the garden. For he saw Muckleby as an abode of bliss, at this time, which needed no brightening whatever.

Helen heard rumours about a treat of some sort that was to take place on her wedding day; but she also was too much engrossed in her own happiness to feel much interest in what would be done on that wonderful day, after she and Jim had left for Paradise. Mrs. Thompson was even more vague in her ideas. If William liked to do something for the villagers, of course he could please himself, but she asked no questions because she had enough to do already, and did not wish to have any hand in the preparation of a tea in the barn for the entire population of Muckleby. Unlike her husband, she was glad that Helen insisted on a very quiet wedding, because it saved such a lot of trouble: and as the Thompsons had no relations nearer than cousins, the matter was not difficult to arrange without offending any one.

So on a lovely April morning, immediately after breakfast, Helen walked across the garden and down the lane to the village church, with the birds singing and singing

were scattered about the v
ton had adorned the alta
the light fell most beauti
window. The service wa
husband went to sign the r
but rather grave. The s
vestry, feeling, without kn
each other now than they
every year the tie would
apart and how different the
son cried a little, yet was p
were married comfortably a
Mr. Thompson became rat
Wyndham and Bennett mad

Then it was all over. M
in the car from the church
Wyndhams hurried away to
—as Maude explained—po
business to attend to that d
speak to Mrs. Thompson,
Thompson stood silent on th
rather blank

He swung round, and there was Betsy staring up at him, wide eyed. "Granny says I was to tell you garters in them days didn't have no 'lastic in. You didn't ought to have no 'lastic in."

Before he could answer her, Mrs. Harbottle had touched him on the arm. "I wondered if you could spare a minute. I wasn't sure about cutting up those hams——"

And immediately Mr. Thompson was himself again, first escorting Mrs. Thompson and Mrs. Stainton to the house, and then bustling away to the barn as if the fate of England depended on it.

A shower fell about twelve, and he endured intense anxiety: the sun came out again at three, and his spirits went up with a run—as if he were a thermometer, and the merry sun had a finger on the bulb. But the race for the bride's garter was a disappointment, because the few young men who sheepishly "obliged" were not in the least keen, and a rather lumbering fellow who could not run at all came in first. The spectators who had listlessly gathered to watch the race on their way to the tea, thought it was "a lot o' silliness," and blamed Mr. Thompson's urban upbringing. But when Mr. Thompson presented a handsome silver cream-jug with the despised garter, the affair took on a different aspect. Young men were reproached by friends and relatives for not having run for a cream-jug which they might so easily have won: and though they replied that *they* didn't want no silver cream-jugs, many an eligible Mucklebyite felt a private inclination to kick himself.

Then came the tea; and here at least was no misunderstanding. With Mr. Thompson and Mrs. Harbottle in charge, everybody was sure of a good meal; and if they did have to listen to a speech from Mr. Thompson, it would be well worth it. The entire population of Muckleby was two

... his plain, hearty, good-fel
rose to respond. He said
goodness and his son-in-law'
them that Mr. Bennett would
for the future.

"It may be thought," he c
hand to the plough and look
he is too old to learn to plo
he is wiser to find somebody
the audience beginning to tak
at last.) "I have taken a furr
I have practically decided to
occupy the Grange permanent
Muckleby, and I flatter myself
to understand each other. V
mered together——" He pau
smiled. "I think I may add—
mas Eve'd together." (Imme
faithful carol-singers.) The
dropped several notes. "But
ences may make men truer
course. I shall"

Then Mr. Thompson sat down, amid long and continued applause, mingled with a ripple of laughter which he could not quite understand, until somebody whispered that the winner had been "walking out" with a young woman for eleven years, always hovering on the brink of matrimony, but afraid to make the final plunge.

After tea the company went away, partly because it was time for the children to be in bed, and partly because the tables were so closely packed that nothing could be cleared until the revellers were out of the place. Mrs. Harbottle had enlisted a band of willing workers under her, and the stately assistance of the bishop's late cook and housemaid was also given. They said they were quite used to charitable affairs of this kind; which remark was about to produce a rupture between themselves and Mrs. Kerman which no "consitheration" for her family could prevent, when fortunately Mrs. Harbottle came up to her with a large cake under a piece of newspaper, pressed it into her hands with a mysterious: "Hush! Don't name it!" and so postponed the inevitable for the time being.

Mr. Thompson returned home, tired but triumphant, and the next day he and his wife went off to Boltingsea, leaving the efficient pair—who remained as ghost-proof as Helen hoped—to clean the Grange in readiness for the return of the bride and bridegroom. The departure was early and hurried, and Mr. Thompson stuffed his letters in his pocket to read on the way. After perusing one of them, he looked across at Mrs. Thompson with a beaming eye. "Rather gratifying," he said, with pretended carelessness. "They want to place me on the Boltingsea Improvement Committee. They seem to think my experience will be useful to them. But things appear to be in a very bad way there at present. A very bad way! Band; Pier; Gardens; Sanitary

...ing—— She paused
hard, dear."

Mr. Thompson did nc
in the thought of an en
he saw stretching out th
at that rising seaside res
neying; and the glory o
knowledge that it would
rate-payers.